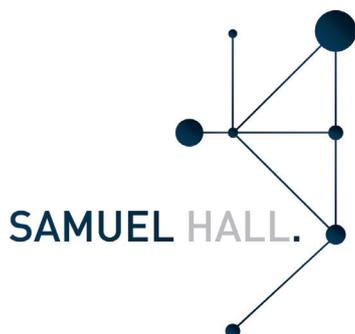# Journeys on hold

How policy influences the migration decisions of Eritreans in Ethiopia

Richard Mallett, Jessica Hagen-Zanker, Nassim Majidi and Clare Cummings
with Georgina Sturge, Kourtnie Schaefer and Pauline Vidal

February 2017

SAMUEL HALL.

Cover photo: Tesfay, 24, writing poetry and short stories in the Adi Harush refugee camp, Ethiopia

Executive summary

Around 5,000 Eritreans leave their country every month. Evidence suggests they go for a range of reasons, including compulsory National Service, political persecution, and a restricted economy that offers few opportunities for the population.

A large number of these travel directly to neighbouring Ethiopia, where there is an open-asylum policy for refugees. Once in Ethiopia, many receive support in refugee camps, where interventions exist that are designed to both better people's livelihoods and deter irregular secondary migration. But despite this humanitarian and development assistance, for many people, their journey doesn't end in Ethiopia. Reports suggest that huge numbers of Eritreans not only aspire to move on, they actually do so: in 2015, for example, estimates from Amnesty International (2016) show that around two-thirds of the Eritrean population residing in Ethiopia at the time pursued secondary migration.

Why, then, do so many people continue to plan onward movement from Ethiopia? And how do policies and programmes play a part?

In this study, we set out to better understand whether, by providing alternative options, it is possible for policy-makers to prevent or reduce irregular migration. We look at two measures in particular: in-country livelihood support (including vocational training, loans, and initiatives designed to afford refugees greater mobility outside camps) and refugee resettlement programming (which provides a safe and legal migration channel to those meeting certain criteria). We selected these measures based on 63 interviews with Eritreans in Ethiopia, which took place in both the northern province of Tigray as well as the country's capital, Addis Ababa, in September 2016. These measures were specifically cited and discussed far more

than any others, highlighting their particular relevance in this setting. As such, the overarching research question driving this study is:

> To *what extent, and in which ways, do in-country livelihood support measures and refugee resettlement shape the choices, plans and behaviours of Eritreans currently living in Ethiopia?*

This question is important, and holds wider relevance, for two main reasons. First, policy-makers seeking to address Europe's ongoing 'migration crisis' are increasingly engaging with its underlying drivers – that is, with the factors that compel people to move in the first place – rather than simply managing flows once they have reached European territory. This new focus includes attempts to improve the circumstances of 'would-be' movers currently residing in countries- and regions-of-origin, of which livelihood support is a core element. As such, we are starting to see implementation of some major job creation initiatives in high-priority countries, with Ethiopia's proposed 'Jobs Compact' – designed to generate 30,000 new jobs for refugees, and co-funded by the United Kingdom, the European Union and the World Bank – sitting alongside similar schemes in other 'hotspots' such as Jordan. But second, for all the interest in this approach, knowledge is lacking about the links between migration policies and migration decision-making. Despite some important empirical advances in recent years, the evidence base remains limited at best.

This study contributes three sets of findings to the broader debate, from which a series of specific policy recommendations follow:

In recent years **400,000** Eritreans have fled the country.

That's almost **10%** of the population.
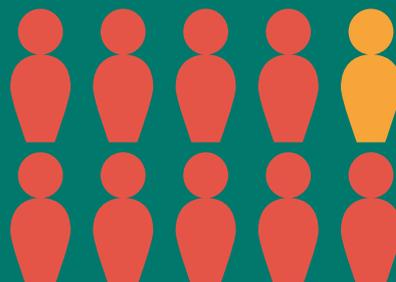
Ethiopia is a vital country of asylum

Drawing on data from both camps and urban centres, we first ask what life is like for an Eritrean in Ethiopia. Three points stand out. First, Ethiopia offers the prospect of freedom and security, particularly when compared with life in Eritrea. This is critical given that so many report leaving out of fear, persecution and sometimes indefinite conscription. Second, despite better prospects, those who cross the border continue to find it difficult to pursue decent, fulfilling and relevant livelihoods. And third, these challenging circumstances induce different responses: while some seem willing to accept a 'good enough' improvement on life in Eritrea, others aspire to move on.
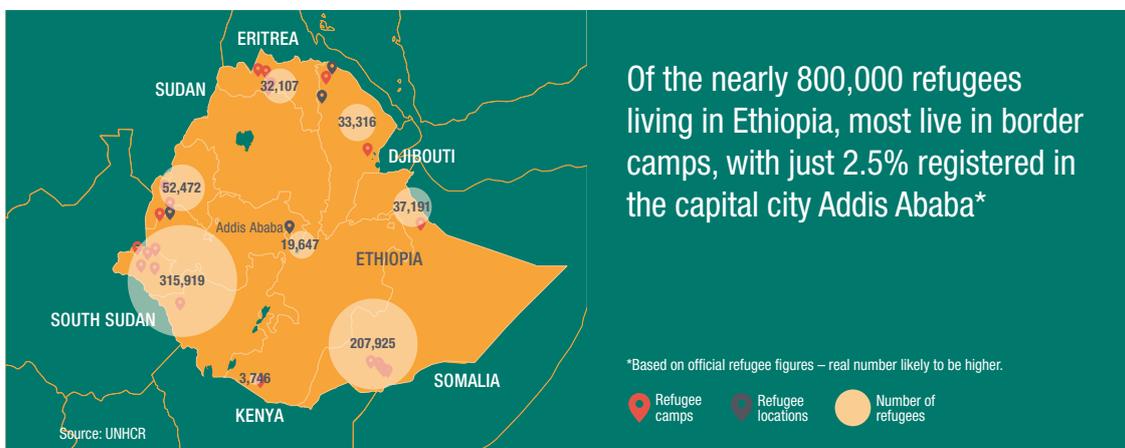
We have two key recommendations:

1. **Ethiopia's open-asylum policy should be supported and maintained.** The country is serving a critical humanitarian function by allowing refugees from the region to freely enter Ethiopia and reside there. At a minimum, the Ethiopian Government should be supported in hosting these refugee populations. International agencies should continue to assist in refugee camps, but measures to protect refugees living outside camps are also important. This includes providing safe housing, supporting access to education and healthcare, and assisting to the most vulnerable groups and individuals.

2. **Policy measures should recognise the diversity of Eritreans living in Ethiopia.** There is no singular 'Eritrean community', but groups stratified by geography, education levels, social status, eligibility for assistance, and plans for the future. As such, we cannot expect policy measures to produce universal effects and interventions should be tailored to different groups.

Livelihood support is being offset by deeper economic constraints

Against this backdrop, a range of policy measures are being implemented to reduce or prevent secondary migration, particularly via irregular means. Although in-country livelihood support is helping people get by and meet basic survival needs, potential impacts are being undermined by the fact that refugees living in Ethiopia are denied the right to work. Newly acquired skills and capital cannot be put to good use, and many Eritreans are forced into insecure, precarious and possibly illegal economic arrangements.

We have two recommendations from this evidence, following on from our first set:

3. **Programming should be adapted according to local needs and realities.** More could be done to better align interventions with both the intended beneficiaries' needs and the dynamics of the local context. When designing interventions, policy-makers should i) (re)evaluate the local relevance of skills training currently on offer, and ii) expand the range of vocations permitted to Eritreans, in order to diversify livelihood options and mitigate market saturation.

4. **Refugee labour rights should be enhanced.** A fundamental problem is that Eritreans are prevented from legally accessing the labour market in Ethiopia. This underpins both the challenge of survival, as well as the compulsion (amongst many) to move on. While there is no guarantee that addressing this problem (e.g. through the proposed Jobs Compact) will generate a blanket preventive effect, the evidence suggests that many people will be more inclined to stay in Ethiopia as a result.

ERITREA
SUDAN
32,107
33,316
DJIBOUTI
52,472
Addis Ababa
37,191
19,647
ETHIOPIA
315,919
207,925
SOUTH SUDAN
3,746
SOMALIA
KENYA
Source: UNHCR

Of the nearly 800,000 refugees living in Ethiopia, most live in border camps, with just 2.5% registered in the capital city Addis Ababa*

*Based on official refugee figures – real number likely to be higher.

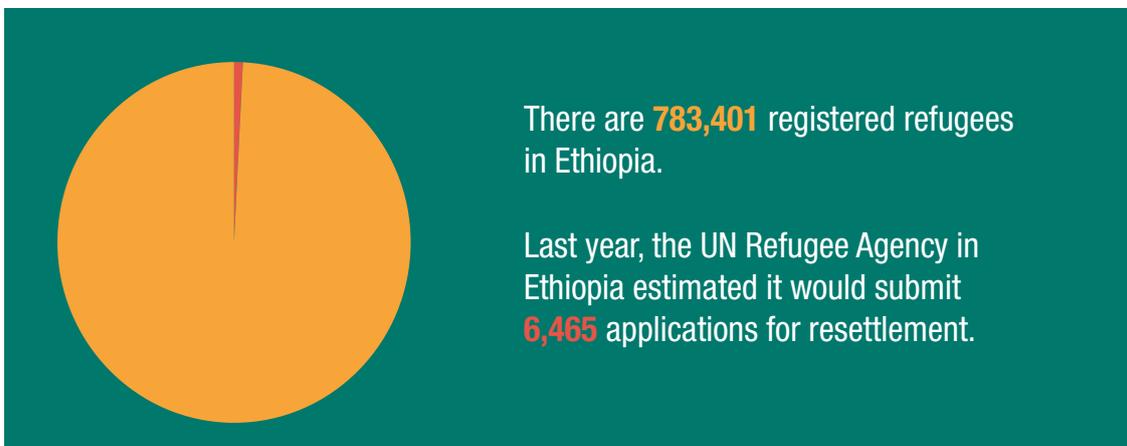Refugee camps   Refugee locations   Number of refugees

Resettlement is slowing irregular migration down

Refugee resettlement serves a vital protection function, but it is also designed to deter irregular migration by offering the prospect of safe and legal travel. Our analysis reveals three findings. First, resettlement seems linked to people's geographical preferences: countries often identified by respondents as favoured destinations also tend to be those that resettle the highest numbers of Eritreans. Second, by providing an opportunity for safe and legal migration, resettlement often produces an initial preventive effect, linked to people knowing how dangerous and expensive the irregular alternative is. Third, however, is that this effect appears to dissipate over time. Essentially, as faith in accessing formal channels declines, the risks of irregular transit become more tolerable.

Again, two key recommendations emerge from this evidence, following our other key recommendations:

5. **Information about resettlement should be clearer and more accessible.** People are often uncertain how resettlement works, particularly in relation to timeframes and general likelihood of acceptance. By creating a more transparent process, and making information about procedures and applications more accessible, people could make more informed decisions about the options available to them. In turn, this would help minimise the mental stress often caused by the experience of 'life in limbo'.

6. **Legal pathways should be developed and expanded.** Many of those who want to migrate, initially aspire to do so through formal rather than informal means; the danger and cost of the latter often acts as a serious deterrent. But where people feel the formal migration system is not working for them, evidence suggests they gradually 'deflect' into irregularity. Development of legal pathways does not have to mean open borders; rather, it should be about finding ways of better managing migration. Expanding and diversifying these channels – for example, through humanitarian visas, guest-worker schemes, quota enlargements, study scholarships – is key to building people's trust in the formal policy apparatus. Or, in other words, to ensuring that there are genuinely viable and credible alternatives to irregular migration.

There are **783,401** registered refugees in Ethiopia.

Last year, the UN Refugee Agency in Ethiopia estimated it would submit **6,465** applications for resettlement.

Overseas Development Institute
203 Blackfriars Road
London SE1 8NJ
Tel +44 (0)20 7922 0300
Fax +44 (0)20 7922 0399

odi.org