How Eritreans plan, fund and manage irregular migration, and the extent of involvement of 'organised crime'

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Abstract

The increased government, media and public focus on migration from Africa to the EU in the past few years has led to an explosion in reporting from governments, NGOs, academics and quasi-academia. Within this context, there are a number of basic assumptions and discourses in relation to these migratory processes from Africa. The first assumption, often put forward by the media, is that migrants from Africa intend to cross the Mediterranean Sea in an effort to reach Western European countries. The second assumption is that in their effort to cross the Mediterranean, African migrants are facilitated by 'criminal networks'. The third (and extremely popular in the last few years) assumption, is that Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have been instrumental in the planning of irregular migration and identifying smugglers to facilitate migration. The final assumption, which has also garnered increasing attention in recent years, is that understanding human smuggling finances can inform policies specifically targeting migrant smuggling. This article, which is based on in-depth interviews with Eritreans, who have migrated illegally in Egypt, aims to add to the understanding about how Eritrean people plan, fund and manage irregular migration journeys. In the process, it will attempt to contribute to the debunking of some of the common assumptions around irregular migration.

Keywords: Eritrea; Africa; irregular migration; human smuggling; 'organised crime'

Introduction

The arrival in Europe of hundreds of thousands of migrants via boats across the Mediterranean has received sustained political, public and media focus since the 'first'[3] waves began in 2014. In that time EU states, NGOs, multilaterals and others have poured in money, resources and political capital to try and better 'manage' the flows. The EU alone is spending 3.3 billion euros on its 'Trust Fund for Africa' while individual countries, particularly Italy and Germany, have invested heavily[4]. Various interventions under these

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[3] First of the current spate of migrant boats crossing the Mediterranean. Migrants and refugees crossing the Mediterranean is not a new phenomenon but 2014 marked the beginning of sustained cross-EU focus.

[4] For example, see the January 2017 Italian 200m Euro deal with Libya to 'secure' the southern border or the announcement in May 2017 of Germany's 'Marshall Plan for Africa'

funding streams (optimistically) aim to augment border security capabilities, address the root causes of migration or enhance protection of migrants[5] in North and East Africa.

In late 2015, the Italian and other EU governments were at a loss to understand how almost 39,000 Eritreans[6] had arrived in Italy (UNHCR 2015), mainly through boats departing Egyptian and Libyan shores. Considering that Eritrea is home to a total 4.7m people (World Bank 2018), this was the equivalent of 0.8% of their population crossing to Italy alone. Equally significant and of concern to EU countries where migration is currently such a toxic political issue, is that statistics showed that 93% of Eritreans who applied received protection status in 2015 (Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat, 2016; see also Belloni, 2016; Frouws, 2017). This means that once they arrived on EU shores, Eritreans were highly likely to be able to remain. Although Eritrean numbers arriving have subsequently declined (2016 = 20,700 (IOM, 2017); 2017 = 7100 (UNHCR, 2017)) Eritreans were still the second largest nationality in terms of arrivals in Italy in 2018 (UNHCR, 2019).

The increased government, media and public focus on migration from Africa to the EU in the past few years has led to an explosion in reporting from governments, NGOs, academics and quasi-academia[7] (see, for example, Europol and Interpol, 2016; Tinti and Reitano, 2017).[8] Within this context, and in light of the fact that "empirical work on human smuggling and its facilitators has remained scant" (Zhang et al., 2018: 10), there are a number of basic assumptions and discourses in relation to these migratory processes from Africa. The first assumption, often put forward by the media, is that migrants from Africa intend to cross the Mediterranean Sea in an effort to reach Western European countries (see, for example, Daily Mail, 2017).

The second assumption is that in their effort to cross the Mediterranean, African migrants are facilitated by 'criminal networks'. Governments and the UN frequently suggest that vulnerable migrants are exploited by 'organised crime groups', which facilitate irregular migration from Africa to the EU (see for example, UNODC, 2017; EU, 2015; UK Government, 2015). A joint Europol-Interpol report stated that the migration of more than 90% of those coming to the EU is facilitated, mostly by members of *a criminal network* (Europol and Interpol, 2016). In this context 'organised crime' provides a convenient answer to two extremely complex problems: firstly, why people migrate and, secondly, how to stop them. In short, that people migrate, at least in part, because 'organised crime' facilitates them to do so; the response to stem irregular flows thus being to tackle the organised crime groups that facilitate migration. This paradigm overlooks the hugely complex nature of mixed migration flows[9] and the fact that for decades, migrant labour from Sub-Saharan Africa has filled EU labour market gaps (Andersson, 2016; see also Papanicolaou and Antonopoulos, 2010). While legal routes to work in the EU have reduced (EU, 2015a), there is still demand for labour. In addition, as other research has concluded, smuggling across the Mediterranean is driven by *demand* for smuggling services, as opposed to *supply* of illicit services (Campana, 2017). Therefore, as in other contexts, 'organised crime' provides a convenient

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[5] 'Root causes' is a contested term but often refers to economic or other development activity, which aims to reduce supposed incentives for people to leave; for example, by creating jobs.

[6] It should be noted that questions have been raised around whether these were all actually Eritreans. It was suggested that some Ethiopians or other nationalities may have claimed to be Eritrean to aid asylum claims.

[7] The authors term this to be some Think Tank reporting, which is written with a more journalistic style and is not academically rigorous but is of use.

[8] Of course, the issue of irregular migration from Africa is not only a European concern. In June 2019, for example, the United States law enforcement agencies stopped a record number of African migrants at its southern border. These migrants embarked on journeys to South America either by boat or plane and then, on foot, through Colombia and Panama made their way to the United States (Sur, 2019).

[9] For descriptions of what constitutes 'mixed migration' see: http://www.mixedmigrationhub.org/member-agencies/what-mixed-migration-is/

(and amorphous) 'folk devil' (Cohen 2002) on which states can focus their efforts to tackle a challenging issue; in this case migration. 'Organised crime' is a 'known threat' to which states have a readily available range of security or law enforcement resources that can be deployed, in a highly visible way, to 'demonstrate' to the populace it is dealing with the problem. For example, the UK Government's response to the flows of migrants through the Mediterranean in 2016 was the creation of the 'Organised Immigration Crime Taskforce'. In this migration/organised crime paradigm, the default seems to be to classify all those undertaking irregular journeys as 'victims'; while smugglers or facilitators are presented as nodes in shadowy 'transnational organised crime networks' the callous business methods of which are linked with grave abuses and deaths of migrants (e.g., Tinti and Reitano, 2017; Clarke-Billings, 2017).

The third (and extremely popular in the last few years) assumption, is that Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have been instrumental in the planning of irregular migration and identifying smugglers to facilitate migration. ICT appears as a tool that adds to the versatility and reach of the smuggling business, with smugglers supposedly using the Internet, apps and social media to recruit customers and arrange various smuggling services. Conversely, the use of ICT by migrants may not only heighten the risk that they are exposed to the deceptive and predatory activity of the smugglers, but also that other users inadvertently become facilitators of the latter's business (see Europol, 2017). In relation to Eritrean migrants in particular, Van Reisen and Mawere (2017) have suggested that the use of ICT is not only key to the 'new' modus operandi of criminal entrepreneurs but is also "found to further facilitate widespread collective trauma amongst Eritreans, who witness the abuse of their family members and fellow nationals through digital networks" (Van Reisen and Mawere, 2017: back cover).

The final assumption, which has also gained currency in recent years, is that "understanding [human smuggling] financing can inform policies specifically targeting migrant smuggling, by transforming it from a 'low risk, high return' operation for smugglers into a 'high risk, low return' one" (Koser, 2008: 5). Depriving smugglers of their profits is a key tenet of the EU Action Plan Against Migrant Smuggling 2015-20 (EU, 2015c) but there has been no evidence to suggest it has been successful.

This article aims to add to the understanding about how Eritrean people plan, fund and manage irregular migration[10] journeys. Based on in-depth interviews with Eritreans who have migrated illegally[11], the paper seeks to show how Eritrean migrants undertake and manage irregular migration. In doing so, it will highlight the amount of 'agency' it could be said migrants have, and shed light on who facilitates irregular migration. In the process, it will attempt to debunk some of the common assumptions around irregular migration noted above.

Before we move onto offering an account of the methodology and the findings of the research study, a note on terminology is warranted. One of the most significant and recurring misunderstandings in literature on migration is the difference between human smuggling and trafficking. Even sources which should be accurate, such as Government Press releases, confuse the two issues (for example, see UK Government, 2015; EU, 2015a). The media have also contributed to the confusion surrounding this issue by frequently using the terms *smuggling* and *trafficking* interchangeably (Laczko and Thompson, 2000). This article follows the definition outlined in Article 3 of the UN Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air: *"Smuggling of migrants shall mean the procurement, in*

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[10] 'Irregular migration' is termed here as being a journey which does not follow legal channels – similar to the IOM description - https://www.iom.int/key-migration-terms

[11] For the purposes of this article, 'migrate illegally' means crossing a border otherwise in accordance with one or more countries legal frameworks

order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident" (UN, 2000: art.3). While it has been argued that the delineation is not always clear (see Antonopoulos and Papanicolaou, 2018), this is the distinction used for the purposes of this article.

Methods and data

This article is based on in-depth interviews with 30 Eritreans who have undertaken irregular migration since 2014. This was to ensure that the experiences of those who have moved in recent years since significant EU focus on the migration agenda started, are highlighted. The sample was taken from within the Eritrean community in Egypt which has been described by Cuttitta (2017: 1) as "Europe's other North African border" and was, with Libya, one of the two main routes into Europe for Eritreans.

Given the sensitivity of the subject matter and the language skills required, it was not possible for the authors to conduct the interviews. Utilising personal connections in the country, a native-speaking researcher was recruited through a trusted third-party to conduct the interviews. Undocumented migrants often have extremely negative experiences with interviewers and interpreters working for the local authorities. Van Liempt and Bilger (2018: 271) note that their research participants, after learning the language of the context they migrated to, *"were shocked about how their interviews were translated. Issues that were of real importance to them were communicated as if they were minor details, while other things were blown out of proportion so that they themselves sensed that they had lost control over presenting their own lives"* and their experiences of the migration process. By using a native-speaking researcher, we avoided a similar interview experience for our participants, and, simultaneously, we avoided a situation in which the interviewees might think that they are being interviewed by the authorities, therefore, providing limited or less useful information. To ensure interviewees felt comfortable discussing what is a sensitive subject and enable them to speak freely, participants' identities were concealed.

The native-speaking researcher started with acquaintances from his community and relied on referrals from these participants to generate additional participants. The advantages of this method of sampling are lowered search costs and an 'informal' identification of participants, who are 'hard to reach' because of their status (see Atkinson and Flint, 2001). An additional benefit of this 'multistage technique' (Lawrence Neuman, 2003) of sampling is the geographic proximity of the participants, a factor that helps to reduce administrative problems, especially in research contexts that require face-to-face contact – such as our interviews with the Eritrean migrants.

All interviews took place in March and April 2018. One of the authors was in the country and thus able to work directly with the researcher and supervise (indirectly) how the interviews were conducted. The authors discussed interview content and approach with the researcher both face-to-face and via email. The approach that the authors and the native researcher adopted also drew upon the prior experience and knowledge of the authors; specifically, on irregular migration and human smuggling in the Mediterranean basin as well as in the UK. The first author has also spent the past two years working on migration issues in the region engaging with hundreds of migrants from across Sub-Saharan and North Africa.

An interview guide was used during all of the interviews conducted as part of this research. Apart from a section on background data, the interview guide included several questions on motivations to migrate, intended destinations, obtaining information about irregular migration methods, funding and planning the trip etc. Thematic analysis was then

conducted on the data. This analysis primarily summarised and described patterned meaning in the data. The themes were induced from the information the participants disclosed.

It is recognised that our study possesses an important limitation: There are disadvantages associated with snowball sampling. There may have been gatekeeper bias, whereby initial participants referred us to additional participants holding largely similar or, even virtually identical viewpoints.

Why people undertake irregular migration from Eritrea

Generally, the arrival of migrants is often compared to unstoppable natural phenomena, their numbers have traditionally been described as a 'crisis' (Sams, 2002), and their presence is discussed in terms of socio-cultural and economic burdens, problems of integration, unemployment and, importantly, manifestations of (organised) crime. One may recall the so called "Trump Hypothesis" on migration: that migrants are responsible for higher levels of violent and drug-related crime in the United States, as asserted by Donald Trump in his 2015 presidential campaign announcement (Green, 2016). Despite the fact that there are two sociological/criminological orientations when it comes to the social problems associated with migration, a) the problems migrants cause, and b) the problems that migrants face, the second orientation is (usually) neglected. The same applies to Eritrean irregular migrants. The relevant discourses do not place adequate emphasis on 'push factors' of Eritrean migration.

There can be no doubt as to the main reason why people leave Eritrea. As highlighted elsewhere (Belloni, 2016; and Hirt and Mohammad, 2013) and reinforced by this research, the open-ended national service is the main driver for people leaving Eritrea. Conscription is major component of the Eritrean Government's policy under the 1999 National Service Proclamation, which was extended in 2002 and, according to which, even high school children must undertake one year of military training in order to complete their studies (Humphris, 2013). The open-ended (and unpaid) military service has "enabled the government to keep thousands Eritreans in a state of perpetual control and exploitation" (Kibreab, 2013: 636), even in commercial projects (Africa News 2019), and has been the context for many of them to become victims of torture and sexual violence (Kibreab, 2017). Twenty-four (both male and female) of the thirty respondents confirmed that national service, whether for them personally or linked to a family member, was their motivation to leave;

"Get out of military service - I was serving my national service with the Ministry of Agriculture in Eritrea, it was a never ending service with no human rights, I was used as a free labour, and above all these my direct supervisor was acting against me because I refused to give him my body. My mother had cancer but my supervisor refused to give me permission to take care of my mother, I couldn't desert my service and take care of my mother because they would come and take me. All these reasons made me decide to leave my home country with my sick mother" (Female, aged 26).

"I worked as personnel in my Division, my high rank officer ordered me to bring back a colleague who deserted the Division, this wasn't part of my duties but I agreed and then when I went to Asmara, I lied and told them I couldn't find him, they ordered me to bring back anyone from his family member. I refused and they detained me, they started to act against me after I was released. Also, the military in Eritrea is indefinite, all these reasons made me decide to escape from military and from Eritrea" (Male, aged 40).

"My husband was in the military and he died during the war with Ethiopia, my eldest son is 19 years old and he received a letter from the Tesseney administration ordering him to enlist

for military training. I know what happens in the military and that's why I rejected the order and decided to border cross to Sudan with my 3 children" (Female, aged 39).

A further four of our interviewees left due to corruption and/or persecution from the state that, until July 2018, was still fully mobilised for war with Ethiopia.

The number of migrants crossing the Mediterranean remains comparatively small compared to worldwide flows where 60 million people are forcibly displaced (Andersson, 2016). Public perceptions of migration trends internationally can though be skewed by sensationalist media reporting. A simple google search relating to migration from Africa to the EU will reveal numerous articles but to cite just one as an example, the UK's Daily Mail (2017) writes of a 'biblical exodus' from Africa to Europe taking place, if action is not taken. Our research, however, found that only seven of the thirty people interviewed had intended to go to Europe; the vast-majority were focussed simply on escaping Eritrea and getting to another country in the region in search of safety for themselves and members of their families.

"No - I had no intended destination, I just wanted to run away from my husband's division and the easiest route for me was to border cross to Sudan. Life in Khartoum was very hard for me and my daughters, I couldn't work because I had nobody to take care of my daughters, I heard that many Eritreans go to Egypt and ask the protection of UNHCR of Egypt, I also heard that UNHCR of Egypt protect single mothers with children, therefore I decided to come to Egypt" (Female, aged 34).

"No real idea - but life in Sudan hard as no family or other connections. Heard UNHCR would protect people in Egypt" (Female aged 27).

"My intended destination was Khartoum, after staying in Khartoum…I heard and saw that the life in Khartoum was very dangerous and difficult, I heard about many kidnappings, Eritreans were ravished, arrested and deported back to Eritrea, I heard from a smuggler who's my cousin that many Eritreans go to Egypt and ask the protection of UNHCR there, I also heard that UNHCR of Egypt protect single mothers with children, therefore I decided to come to Egypt" (Female aged 50).

The influence of media reporting on public perceptions could be the focus of a separate paper but for the purposes of this research, what is important to note is that most of those interviewed had no plans beyond getting out of Eritrea to elsewhere in the region. This is important given that it undermines some of the sensationalist media rhetoric, but also for the argument that vast 'organised crime networks' facilitate end-to-end services transporting migrants from their doorstep to Europe. As Campana (2017) notes, illegal migration is a demand driven business so, if the demand is for shorter journeys within the region, that is what facilitators will need to deliver to remain competitive.

Preparing for the journey: knowledge of the process, obtaining information and planning
The common starting point, of governments, the media and NGOs is that migrants often do not realise the risks and dangers involved in their journeys (Pecoud, 2010). This is despite

evidence that migrants often know about the extreme risks involved in being smuggled[12]. Here, the rationale is believed to be that, if they were aware of the risks, they would not undertake the journeys. However, this approach assumes that migrants make a 'rational choice' and the migrants' decision making is a generic thought process as opposed to taking into account national, regional and cultural characteristics (on top, of course, of individuals circumstances that act as push factors for irregular migration). It is commonly held that some of the major drivers of migration are escaping conflict, insecurity and poverty (see IOM, 2018). Respondents in this research reinforce this point with those migrating seeking to escape hardship, political repression, violence and insecurity. Any of these factors could be said to influence the decision making of a person. It is revealing that when asked if they were worried about their journey before they left, over two-thirds of respondents stated they were concerned (and in fact worried) as they *knew* the possible risks involved in irregular migratory process. A response from one respondent was representative of what many said: *"Yes, I knew that in advance, they say there are traffickers in the road that wait to kidnap you, you could have an accident or even killed"* (Female, aged 33). Another commented: *"Yes, I was very worried because I heard many people die or have accidents during the journey, and because I had children with me the stories stressed me a lot…"* (Female, aged 39). It is clear then that the majority of people, including those with families, are aware of the risks involved, which can include death, before they depart.

As noted earlier, there is a propensity for migrants to be badged as 'victims', who are exploited by 'criminal organisations' (Van Reisen et al., 2012). In this paradigm, naïve migrants are preyed upon and find themselves in vulnerable situations. By its nature, irregular migration, whereby a person crosses borders otherwise in accordance with the law or immigration rules of that country or the one they are departing, will involve an element of vulnerability for the person committing the act; whether vulnerability to recourse from that country, or vulnerability from lack of legal redress due to their illegal status during or after their journey. Vulnerability in irregular migration can then be assumed. What is key to understand is, firstly, the extent to which migrants were aware of the vulnerability, and, secondly, how they identified the facilitators to assist them in their migration. Through examining these areas, we can better understand the individual agency involved. What is important to note here is that, as well as having an awareness of the risks involved, migrants obtained information about their journeys from family and friends (see also Mengiste, 2018). In fact, twenty two of the thirty people interviewed obtained information about migration from friends or family. A further six said it was either 'common knowledge' in their locality.

"Everybody talks about it…the most popular topic that everyone talks about is border crossing. Before it used to be something confidential because nobody trusted anybody, we would be scared not to be handed over to the government, but now this topic became normal and everybody talks about it without being scared" (Male, aged 25).

Some of the participants' friends and family were based abroad and so had been through a migration journey of some description themselves.

"In Eritrea every family member wants to leave...I had got information from my friends and others who were migrating legally or illegally. Also, as I was working in garden I heard many people were migrating and passing by this way. So, that I have full information at that time" (Male, aged 25).

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[12] It has been reported that women have taken contraceptive pills before and during travel as they know they will most-likely be subject to rape (Amnesty International, 2016).

It is of note that not one interviewee obtained information from (someone s/he would define as) a 'smuggler', a 'trafficker' or a 'criminal'. The source of most information was from what could be termed 'reliable' (i.e. friends / family) sources. This fundamentally undermines the argument, adopted in much of the NGO and media discourse, that migrants are somehow tricked or duped into undertaking illegal journeys by nefarious 'organised criminals'.

Importantly, our respondents were also asked how they identified those who facilitated their irregular journey. A simple numerical breakdown is not possible as some people were assisted by multiple facilitators during different stages of their journey from Eritrea. A number of participants proceeded into the most crucial part of the journey i.e. getting out of Eritrea without anyone facilitating their journey, although at a later stage of the journey some facilitation was essential. The case below is indicative here where the initial journey from Eritrea was independent and almost ad-hoc in terms of planning:

"I was with the military when they took us for unknown journey on foot, on our way several youth were ill due to inadequate food and water and many were bitten by snakes in the desert. Then, I decided to escape to Sudan with my friend, the journey was life threatening, several attempts were made by soldiers to capture us, we lost hope by losing direction during our journey but fortunately we entered to Sudan peacefully. Life was difficult in Sudan there was several round ups by soldiers and no freedom this all made me to escape to Egypt. With support of smugglers I crossed Sahara by a car and entered to Egypt by paying money to smugglers" (Male, aged 25).

However, almost three-quarters of the journeys outlined by respondents were with facilitators identified through friends and family. In some cases, the facilitator was actually a friend or family member. Only in a handful of cases were migrants approached directly by facilitators and most of these were in the Shagarab Refugee camp in Sudan.

The findings of this research in relation to recommending irregular migration facilitators to others suggest somewhat of a paradox. While over half of respondents (n=16) would recommend their facilitators to others, family, friends and acquaintances, a large minority would not (n=13). This is interesting given that, firstly, the vast-majority of people were connected to their facilitator through a family or friend, or what would seem to be a 'reliable' and 'trustworthy' source. A possible explanation is that there is a distinct difference between, on the one hand, the migrants' low expectation of their irregular migration process and what this entails in terms of *their* safety, and, on the other hand, what they would be willing to subject family members and friends to (Slack and Martínez, 2018). Indeed, a number were explicit that the facilitators themselves were the problem with comments about migrants being assaulted, dangerous transport methods and lack of regard for those they were transporting:

"No, I wouldn't because the smugglers who were taking us to Egypt were treating us bad, they were pushing us around, shouting at us, when one female replied back and told him to be polite, he slapped her" (Male 43 years old).

Secondly, it calls into question how the human smuggling business model operates. It has been suggested that human smugglers rely on word of mouth and recommendations and referrals from clients to get further business (see, for example, Zhang 2008; Kleemans et al. 2010; Slack and Martínez, 2018). Just under half of the respondents (n=13) would seemingly not provide this recommendation so it suggests perhaps a more limited reliance on word of mouth than suggested elsewhere.

The journey: Routes, methods of transport and payment

As noted above, the main preoccupation for all participants initially was getting out of Eritrea. While the destination for thousands of Eritrean migrants is Europe (or Israel), many others remain or are in transit in the surrounding countries (Sudan and Ethiopia) or across North Africa (Libya and Egypt); there they heavily depend on local network for subsistence, employment and information about 'facilitators' that can assist them with their (further) irregular journey (see also Humphris, 2013; Kibreab, 2013; Mengiste, 2018). The route used by the vast majority of the participants involved migrating from Eritrea into Sudan and then into Egypt. Some also entered Libya before entering Egypt, whereas in one case a migrant crossed over to Ethiopia before travelling to Sudan and subsequently Egypt. There were however, a couple of cases in which an irregular migratory journey involved a much more complicated route. For example, one 19-year-old male, initially travelled from Eritrea to Sudan; however, during the journey, he was kidnapped and his mother paid 3,500 dollars in ransom. The kidnappers left him at the border between Egypt and Israel, and then the Israeli government transported him (along with others) to Rwanda. From Rwanda, he then crossed over to Uganda before continuing his trip northbound to Egypt.

Transportation, especially from Eritrea to Sudan, can be on foot through unguarded passages in the borders, and also by trucks, vans and cars although it is important to note that this process is incredibly fragmented and slow, and by no means resembles the smoothness of regular migration processes. In this process, a series of facilitators are involved in the smuggling process in a variety of localities at important transit points. At these points often one facilitator will take over the next part of the journey. Again, the case of the 19-year-old male above is indicative of how fragmented and diverse migratory process can be in terms of routes and means of transportation:

"I met with the smuggler in Asmara bus station, he told me to follow him when we reach Akurdet, he took me to a hotel and told me to hide there and not to leave the hotel, at night he came back again and took me to the border lines of Akurdet and handed me over to another smuggler, there were also other Eritreans with him, we travelled on foot for 7 days…..we entered the land of Sudan, then a Toyota pickup came and took us to an isolated house, we waited there until the rest of the money was paid and the next day early morning another Toyota pickup came and took us to Khartoum. In Khartoum, the smuggler called me and told me to meet him in one tea shop that is very popular to Eritreans, I went there the next morning and he took me to a house that was very near from the tea shop, we waited there until others were collected. At night a bus came and took us all, we travelled for some hours until we reached an isolated area, in that place a big truck was waiting for us, we climbed on it and travelled for one whole day, the next day we switched to a Toyota pickup car and travelled by it for two days, then we switched to another car and the next day at night we entered Aswan (Egypt)…" (Male, aged 19).

"…I asked permission to go to our area hospital but instead I went to the bus station where my boyfriend was waiting for me, we went and spent the night in Asmara, the next day morning we took a bus to Keren…we reached the Keren bus station and the smuggler received us and took us to a house, 4 others joined us in that house later on….a private land cruiser came and took us all to a place called Keru, from there we started our journey of border crossing on foot, we travelled only at nights and during the daytimes we were hiding…it took us 5 days to reach the land of Sudan, after we entered Sudan we spent one

night and then different human smugglers came and took us to Khartoum by car" (Female, aged 25).

This research suggests that when it comes to the smuggling of Eritrean migrants, all smuggling 'entities' and/or individuals 'cooperate' (without even considering it) in an attempt to bring migrants from Eritrea to Egypt. This takes place via a smuggler-to-smuggler approach that does not allow migrants to be lost (see also Içduygu and Toktas, 2002; Antonopoulos and Winterdyk, 2006). However, this chain is sometimes broken during the journey (for example, due to policing operations or seasonal weather inclement), and other individuals, groups and networks, who have no connection with the smugglers of the initial stage, take over in the smuggling migrants. This also resembles accounts from other contexts, which suggest that human smuggling activities are segmented and localised, and that smugglers are largely independent and autonomous (see Campana, 2018).

With regard to funding the trip, 26 out of 30 participants secured funding from members of their (extended) family and friends often based abroad (e.g. United States, Canada, Saudi Arabia, and Denmark). This is most probably an unintended consequence of the fact that, because "the conflict in Eritrea is the oldest in the Horn of Africa" (Abdel Aziz et al., 2015: 55), there are higher chances for our participants to have resettled family members in other, more stable and affluent parts of the world. One participant secured funding through his own work in agriculture. Interestingly, two of the participants did not have to secure any funding for the trip as the smuggling service was provided to them for free (n=1) or they were assisted by members of their extended social network as a favour (n=1). These two cases are prime examples of smuggling facilitators who *"break away from commonly accepted social mores and codes of conduct for profit and self-preservation, especially in the face of hostile social settings"* (Zhang et al., 2018: 14), and who are completely ignored by official and media discourses. It is also interesting to note that one of the interviewees paid in kind by getting involved in smuggling by bringing potential clients from the Eritrean community to the smugglers:

"On both journeys I didn't pay money to the smugglers, I worked with them as their broker and brought to them people that wanted to cross the border" (Male, aged 25).

The vast majority of the participants, who paid a smuggling fee, paid that fee on arrival to the agreed (with the smuggler) destination. Only one of the migrants interviewed paid the fee in advance.[13] This is strikingly different to findings from research on human smuggling in other contexts. International research generally shows that irregular migrants (or their families who very often see the facilitation of their migration as an investment) pay the full or at least 50% of the total smuggling fee in advance. This 50% is in most occasions used towards paying important actors of the journey before the actual journey starts. The rest of the fee is paid upon the migrants' arrival in the destination country. On many occasions, advance payments are made to an intermediary, usually a trusted and prominent member of the local community, who then forwards the payment to the organiser upon the end of the migrants' facilitated journey (see Antonopoulos and Winterdyk, 2006; Koser, 2008). None of these instances, however, were identified in our interviews. In addition, in our interviews, we did not come across any cases in which prospective smuggled migrants borrowed money from local moneylenders with interest, as is identified in other research on human smuggling (see, for example, Koser, 2008). Even in those cases in which migrants borrowed money from

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[13] This *may* be attributed to the fact that an official of the Eritrean army, and the interviewee's cousin, was involved in the smuggling process and as such *perhaps* additional funds would buy other officials' loyalty.

others (n=7), there was no interest at all, and the provision of the loan appears to be a convenience for someone in their social network. Finally, in our interviews, there were no occasions in which Eritrean migrants entered into debt bondage with the smuggler promising that they will pay back the debt once work is found at the country of destination.

Eritrean irregular migrants also receive money *en route*, something that allows them to continue their journey as well as cover living expenses when in transit. In a small number of instances, money was simply sent by a migrant's family to the migrant via a trusted friend (n=2). The crucial difference here in relation to the methods of money transfer is the migrants' ability and right to have a residence permit. In Sudan, for instance, because of the ease for an Eritrean migrant to get a residence permit, official money transfer channels such as Western Union have been used. The illegal (and/or semi-legal) status of Eritrean migrants in other contexts including Egypt, and the resultant inability to use official channels, make *hawala* (also known as 'underground banking' and a traditional system in Arab countries) by which legitimate remittances from diasporic communities are routinely transferred, a popular method of transferring money from abroad for the largest number of our interviewees (n=21):

"Yes, there is an informal system…if you want to send money from USA to Khartoum, you try to find someone who transfer money to that location, he would give him the money and then that person calls his connections in Khartoum and they give you the money. Their profit is cutting percentage from the money, if you want to transfer 100 dollars then it would cost you 5 dollars, if it's 200 dollars it cost 10 dollars and it continues and rises that way" (Male, aged 31).

"There is an informal system, channels or links, and they are always in contact, a person in Khartoum would have contacts in many countries and they share equally the profit, for example if someone from Europe wants to send money to someone who's in Khartoum then he would give it to someone who has contacts there and that person would call and give him the amount of money, receivers full name, and his number" (Male, aged 25).

The smuggling fees paid by our interviewees to the facilitators of their irregular journey vary considerably for virtually identical smuggling processes and and/or comparable distances travelled, as well as corresponding complexities of the journey. For example, there have been cases in which migrants, paid absolutely nothing, paid in kind (acting as a broker between smugglers and other potential irregular migrants), or paid as much as US$ 17,000 for crossing one border (Eritrea to Sudan) by truck. This is in compelling contrast to the international research on the topic, which illustrates that generally smugglers have different prices for the services they offer dependent on variables such as: distance, modes of transportation, complexity of the journey, duration, the availability of a visa, the guarantees included and levels of safety and comfort (see Mahler, 1995; Sladkova, 2016) as well as, in some contexts, the ethnicity of the smuggled migrant (see Antonopoulos and Winterdyk, 2006).

There is, however, one salient point that needs to be made in relation to the smuggling fees. In these cases in which a smuggling fee was paid, due the very tight exit controls (and the extremely militarised borders) in Eritrea since its establishment, the smuggling fees from Eritrea to Sudan were considerably higher than the smuggling fees from Sudan to Egypt. One of our interviewees whose case is indicative of the whole group, paid US$ 5000 to cross the border between Eritrea to Sudan and only US$400 from Sudan to Egypt.

Conclusion

From the provision of data in this article a number of interesting observations can be made. It is obvious that reaching Western Europe is not main concern of irregular migrants from Eritrea; most of those interviewed had no plans beyond getting out of Eritrea to elsewhere in the region. This is important given that it undermines some of the sensationalist media rhetoric, but also for the argument that vast 'criminal networks' facilitate end-to-end services transporting migrants "from their doorstep into Europe".

In this research we do not, of course, suggest that smuggling from Africa into Europe does not take place. We merely wish to highlight that facilitated irregular migration from Africa is a diverse phenomenon and common perceptions and discourses of western media, law enforcement, government and often academic sources are based on a purely Western view of the phenomenon and the realities of the experiences of those actually migrating or their facilitators. Our research supports that of others (see Campana 2017), who discredit the idea that the 'entities' smuggling migrants across the Mediterranean are mafia-type, organised criminal organisations. In fact, the crucial role played by family members, friends and acquaintances from the migrants' social network is a sign of un/dis-organised criminal involvement although it is imperative to remember that "when it comes to illegal border-crossing, (organised) criminal involvement is certainly not a *condition sine qua non*". (Vermeulen et al., 2010: 266).

The presence of cases (even a small number of those) in which is there is absolutely no financial (or other) transaction, or even the wide range of fees required for the facilitation of irregular migration from Eritrea to Sudan also underscores that human smuggling is an extremely diverse terrain, which does *not* always involve 'human smugglers' in the strict, Western, sense: namely, as criminals exposing irregular migrants to a wide range of risks and conditions of vulnerability (see Shelley, 2014), and who - at best - take financial advantage of the misery of (prospective) irregular migrants. Although this *may* be relevant to human smuggling in specific geographic contexts, what is obvious in our study is that simply transforming smuggling of Eritreans into a 'high risk/low return' activity might not be the solution when relationships between 'smugglers' and 'smuggled' may be grounded in local community connections and "local notions of morality" (Achilli, 2018: 77; Majidi, 2018; Siegel, 2019) and strategies, and very often outside the context of profitable illegal enterprises. Mengiste (2018: 63) has introduced the term 'community of knowledge' to refer to these *"diverse and dynamic strategies collectively devised and mobilized by migrants, their co-travelers, families and friends settled en route and in the diaspora, and…diverse facilitators to reduce risks in clandestine journeys and who allow for successful transits, while not discounting the violence and suffering encountered by migrants… on their path"*.

Our research also exhibits that in this context often migrants do not consider themselves 'victims' or those that facilitate them as 'organised criminals'. While many migrants undergo incredible hardship, and by western standards would be considered as 'victims', they themselves often have a different perspective. Our interviewees were indeed aware of the risks and hardships, and can exercise a degree of choice (see also Campana and Varese, 2016). As Belloni (2016) noted, Eritrean decision making is based on a mind-set like that of a gambler; in which they are willing to take extensive risks to hit the 'jackpot' of the apparent 'good life' outside Eritrea. Such motivations may struggle to be understood by a detached Western observer.

With regards to the role of ICT in the smuggling process, none of the migrants interviewed suggested that it played a significant part. Given that Internet penetration is extremely low in the developing countries and even more so in Eritrea (World Bank, 2016) as well as those who choose to migrate irregularly tend to be 'digitally disadvantaged' (Sanchez, 2017), this should not come as a surprise. Our data also indicates that human smugglers, who facilitate irregular migration of Eritreans, get involved in small-scale smuggling operations

that do not require sophisticated use of ICT (which is not used by their potential clients either) but, quite simply, knowledge of the harsh local terrain and borderlands as well as purely practical skills (see Diba et al., 2019).

Research scrutinising Western conceptions of human trafficking have cautioned against imposing/accepting Western paradigms when it clearly conflicts with the expressed thinking and mind-set of the migrants involved (see, for example, Mai 2009, Chin and Finckenauer, 2012). Our case study of Eritrean irregular migrants is based on a relatively small sub-set from a geographically contained group and suggests that there may be localised exceptions to some of the research on human smuggling from Africa. The experiences and objectives of our participants may be markedly different from other African migrants such as, for instance, Nigerians or other Western Africans (see, for example, Carling, 2006; Unicef, 2014; Antonopoulos et al., 2019). However, it is equally important to ensure Western conceptions of what 'must' be happening in relation to human smuggling do not overwrite the views of those who are actually taking part. This perspective is often lost in agenda-driven political or emotive reporting/coverage, which in turn skews understanding of how human smuggling operates and how community safety can be enhanced.

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