



## From the Horn of Africa to Sweden Smuggling, informal networks, and diaspora engagement

This report identifies how people fleeing the Horn of Africa orient themselves on their way to Europe. The report is based on an ethnographic study that focuses on the social relationships that make the journey possible – including human traffickers, and relatives and friends who have previously emigrated to Europe. The report was authored by Tekalign Ayalew Mengiste, Ph.D., and Professor Erik Olsson, both affiliated with the Department of Social Anthropology, Stockholm University, and based on Dr. Ayalew Mengiste’s award-winning doctoral dissertation *“Struggle for Mobility: Risk, Hope and Community of Knowledge in Eritrean and Ethiopian Migration Pathways Towards Sweden”*

### Background

Over the past 25 years, many migrant arrivals in Sweden have come from Somalia, Ethiopia, and Eritrea – also known as the Horn of Africa. For many of those people, the journey to the Scandinavian countries represented their last hope for a better future. The present study focuses on how those who flee, particularly from Eritrea, mobilize financial and social resources that allow them to handle the journey northward. The report details the hazardous journey through the Sahara Desert, across the Mediterranean Sea, and northward up through Europe.

Legal migration pathways to countries such as Sweden are limited, and journeys such as these have therefore become the norm and are now socially acceptable in Eritrea.

The flight is a result of a lack of decent living conditions. Eritrea’s neighboring countries offer only very limited accommodations for displaced peoples’ needs for protection and a secure existence. The moment people seeking protection decide to leave their home country illegally, they step into a “criminalized” world where, early on, they must rely on support and help from within their own networks and the immigration industry that is flourishing along the refugee pathways. Moreover, European countries have put in place an extensive border control apparatus, which in practice means that people are prevented from seeking protection legally. People in search for refuge therefore embark on journeys outside the regular or legal pathways and systems of protection.

## The road to Sweden

The individual biographies on which the study is based describe fragmented journeys under unpredictable conditions. Traveling all the way to Sweden might take from one month to several years. Since the migration occurs informally through countries in political and economic turmoil, the outcome is uncertain. Experiences from Sudan, Libya, and Italy bear witness to immense difficulties, risk-taking, uncertainty and – most of all – highlight how exposed those who flee are. The countries along the route seldom have functioning systems that can provide sufficient protection to people in transit. Their testimonies reinforce prior reports of difficult conditions along a route where kidnappings and demands for ransom, sexual abuse, and labor exploitation have become commonplace.

Migration pathways are permeated by complex social relationships. For example, the relationships between those fleeing and the “smugglers”, and between those who have already fled and recent arrivals, are concurrently supportive and exploitative. Translocal and transnational social connections with smugglers, helpful locals, and those who have fled previously – along the route and/or in the diaspora – are critical to generating the requisite information and also for the financial and physical resources needed at various places and times throughout the journey. The report shows how migrants rely on existing networks (family, relatives, and friends) but also how they expand those networks throughout their journey as a strategy to get ahead. The same strategic maneuvers are also applied when settling in the destination country. Diasporic practices and traditional forms of community and social support are central to the ability to cope with the difficulties associated with both fleeing and establishing oneself.

The study shows how those arriving in Sweden use their traditional forms of community, for example *lqub* and church, to manage their daily lives in the new country. These institutions are adapted to the surrounding societal structures and supplement the reception and welfare of refugees in the host society. By mobilizing the Eritrean community, those who have fled can take care of such matters as remittances, i.e. sending funds back to the country of origin. But the diasporic connection is also an important source for continued mobility, since migrants and refugees from Eritrea can find both financial and social support in that community.

## Conclusions and recommendations

Only a small portion of aspiring asylum seekers in the Horn of Africa go to Europe; most stay behind. In this study, the authors focus on those who complete the journey. The study also casts a spotlight on the often very difficult circumstances of those in Eritrea’s neighboring countries, who are also in need of protection. Many countries along the migratory route to Europe do not prioritize protection of human rights for fleeing Eritreans. Poorly equipped, dangerous refugee camps and a journey beset by actors such as human traffickers are part of these people’s daily lives. The following four recommendations should be taken into consideration for future development and immigration policies.

- **Local help**

Providing protection locally is justifiable on humanitarian grounds. By providing aid to transit and receiving countries near the Horn of Africa, the international community can help displaced persons rebuild their lives locally. Many of those seeking protection are currently forced to spend long periods of time in dangerous refugee camps.

They are seldom provided with opportunities to live outside the camp and are therefore also excluded from local communities. Kidnapping, sexual abuse, and human rights violations are common occurrences in camps. The European Union should therefore bolster its current aid efforts to integrate these displaced people into the local communities. Moreover, existing refugee camps must be better equipped if they are expected to meet their mission of safeguarding fundamental needs and ensuring that individuals fleeing violence can feel safer and live in dignity.

- **Protection against abuse along the route**

People fleeing from Eritrea are at constant risk of various types of abuse on their way to Europe. Human traffickers, kidnappers, robbers, and different kinds of local militia and extremist groups are all threats to the lives and well-being of the refugees. Refugees need protection, but countries such as Sudan and Libya lack the necessary resources to guarantee their fundamental human rights. To mitigate the hazards encountered by people in flight, measures to combat human smuggling need improvement. Even though the protection of refugees is already regulated by existing human rights initiatives, it is important to identify and apply the right tools to have the countries near the Horn of Africa and in North Africa also live up to these measures.

- **Legal pathways into Europe**

This report shows how hazardous journeys can be for those who depart the Horn of Africa via transit countries and who end up in Northern Europe. But the refugees' needs or the dangers that await them along migratory routes are unlikely to disappear by bolting shut the doors leading into Europe. If other measures are not taken, people will continue to flee repression at the same time

as others will attempt to exploit their vulnerability. An alternative, which might help prospective refugees avoid a hazardous journey, would be to provide provisional/temporary residence permits for study and work. By increasing the availability of legal options to enter Europe, the informal – and often dangerous – pathways would become less attractive, which would curb human smuggling.

These provisional residence permits would provide not just temporary protection but also function as a long-term development strategy where both education and work experience might be seen as important investments and resources in rebuilding conflict-ravaged countries.

- **Partnering with civil society and diaspora groups**

The Swedish government needs to better capitalize on the diaspora groups' knowhow and commitment to integration and development.

**Integration:** The Eritrean diaspora, of political activists, church groups, and organizations of various kinds, might gainfully become more incorporated into Swedish civil society. If considered as just another *Swedish* civil society group they would be able to act more easily as partners and a link to new arrivals who have been granted residence permits. The diaspora might for example be able to speed up the introduction to the Swedish system and thus expedite the integration process in Sweden.

**Humanitarian and development work:** The Eritrean diaspora is the link to Eritreans from across the world. It is a group that has unparalleled knowledge of the region and, most of all, well-established channels to reach people in need – this should be a focus of Swedish immigration policy. Through dialogue with diaspora representatives, Sweden could contribute to rebuilding Eritrea now that there are signs that the country is becoming more democratic.



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