

The role of community in refugee journeys to Europe

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For Eritreans and Syrians coming to Europe, community networks both encourage the initial decision to go and provide elements of support along the way.

We have long known that people's social connections and networks often facilitate their migrations in some way – through financing the upfront costs or receiving people upon arrival, for example. But these same networks also have a role to play in promoting migration as a viable option in the first place. For a study for the Overseas Development Institute,¹ we interviewed 52 people from three countries – Eritrea, Senegal and Syria – who had recently 'made it' to three European countries: Germany, Spain and the UK. For many people it was often the advice and actions of people they knew which helped them make up their minds to move. Much of the time, these influences came through personal contacts who had already made the journey. Almost every Syrian we interviewed, for example, knew someone personally who had made the trip through the Balkans previously. This reality, together with the sharing of these people's specific pathways through online social communities, are part of what normalises the idea of crossing borders.

Media coverage of the 'refugee crisis' has tended to depict refugees and migrants as passive victims subject to the whims of evil people smugglers. But it is inaccurate to view these people as having no control over their fate. Despite the vulnerability that underlies many refugees' and migrants' journeys (stemming in turn from their undocumented status, desperation, fear and unfamiliarity with new places and rules), refugees negotiate, join forces and fight back.

Part of what has defined the 'refugee crisis' so far is the role of community in facilitating migrations and protecting vulnerable individuals. The most visible examples have tended to come in the form of European citizens stepping in but migrants and refugees themselves provide vital aspects of support for each other. A brief

story of one Syrian woman's journey offers a single yet far from atypical illustration:

After crossing over from Turkey, Fatima and her two children ended up travelling from Greece to Germany with a group of four Iraqi men she met on the boat from Turkey to Greece. They stood up for Fatima when threats were encountered, paid her share of expenses when her money ran out and carried the children when they walked for days. When the group of travelling companions arrived in Munich, everyone moved to different towns where they had friends. Fatima was stuck at Munich train station, with no money. Again, Fatima was lucky. She met a German who told her there was a supermarket close by run by an Iraqi, who might be able to help. She went there and the Iraqi man bought her train tickets, gave her children biscuits and gave her 50 Euros for them. Later that day they got on a train to Berlin.

So, far from being the product of purely individualistic, rational-actor behaviour, we see that migration is instead an example of collective action. As Fatima's case shows, this collective action is lubricated by a shared identity – which might be joint participation in the journey itself – and ultimately by membership of a community, however loose or temporary that might be. We see this in relation to financing, decision making, and facilitation more broadly. The same can be said of the way in which migrants and refugees strive to secure protection along the way; these collective actions, far from being singular occurrences, are seen repeatedly.

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1. Hagen-Zanker J and Mallett R (2016) *Journeys to Europe: the role of policy in migrant decision-making*, Insights Report, Overseas Development Institute <http://bit.ly/ODI-JourneysToEurope>