

# Mobility dynamics in protracted displacement: Eritreans and Congolese on the move

Carolien Jacobs and Markus Rudolf

**Millions of Eritreans and Congolese find themselves in situations of protracted displacement. A more nuanced understanding of how physical and social mobility affects their daily lives is crucial to developing more effective tailor-made interventions.**

The most widely used definition of protracted displacement is UNHCR's term for people who are 'stuck' in a particular place for at least five years. This stresses the static elements of protracted displacement but when such displacement is examined more closely, different patterns of mobility and immobility of individuals become visible. This article draws on empirical findings relating to Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in order to explore different physical and social mobilities.

Protracted conflict and insecurity in both Eritrea and DRC have caused

long-term and large-scale displacement of millions of people. For decades, Eritreans have been crossing international borders to seek protection, establishing diaspora communities across the world. Connections with members of this diaspora facilitate the onward mobility of Eritreans over long distances. In contrast, most displaced Congolese flee within their own country, often maintaining direct connections with their communities of origin. The following examples underline that protracted displacement cannot always be equated with confinement, with immobility while in transit, or with individuals stuck in a particular place.<sup>1</sup>

November 2021

[www.fmreview.org/externalisation](http://www.fmreview.org/externalisation)

### Long-distance or onward-oriented mobility

When refugees are able to move legally to Europe or North America it is often either through a family reunification programme, or through a sponsor. Relatively little is known, however, about those who have not been able to resort to an international network or international organisations for support. They may nevertheless display high levels of mobility. Hassan is a good example. Now a married father of three children, he fled Eritrea during the war in 1987, remaining an irregular migrant for 15 years. He has been a recognised refugee now for 20 years and lives in an Ethiopian refugee camp with his family. His trajectory illustrates long-distance and long-term mobility and shows that this mobility is not necessarily reflected in legal and policy frameworks.

Hassan worked in a number of different jobs throughout his years of displacement: as a fisherman in Port Sudan, a charcoal maker in Puntland, a camel herder in Oman, a shopkeeper in Saudi Arabia, a ship cleaner in Dubai, and a day labourer in Yemen. He hid in a cargo ship headed to Australia and was discovered in Mombasa, Kenya. After being deported back to Somalia multiple times from the countries to which he had moved, he stopped pretending to be a Somali and was put on a plane to be deported to Eritrea in 2001. "I told them I was from Eritrea, because I was tired. [Before this] I always said I am Somali because I was afraid of Eritrea." After serving six months in the Eritrean army he escaped to Sudan, where he moved to a refugee camp and married another Eritrean refugee. "We left in 2008. It was not secure there. Eritrean forces took anyone [Eritreans] from the refugee camp [in Sudan]." He travelled with his family to the camp in Tigray where he has stayed since then. Throughout his irregular journeys Hassan was quite mobile, despite the lack of formal support or status, but each time he entered a camp he faced formal rules that impeded his mobility and that made him feel stuck. Mobility, on the other hand, provided him access to a wide range of livelihoods that enabled him to survive despite the lack of any formal assistance.

### Medium- to short-distance, locally oriented mobility

Hassan's case shows that displaced persons on the one hand often succeed in mitigating risks and vulnerabilities by increasing their mobility. The fact that his mobility was often hampered by restrictive refugee policies illustrates on the other hand the de facto negative impact of such restraints. The recent liberalisation of Ethiopia's once restrictive policy, for example, now allows refugees to live outside the camps, which strengthened the position of refugees wishing to live outside the camps. It indeed expanded advantages where there already was a degree of informal flexibility at local level as the next case shows. Muhammed, an unmarried Eritrean from a family of fishermen, who is now in his early twenties, fled from Eritrea as a school student. At his first attempt to cross the border he was imprisoned but released after a few months thanks to his student status. He reached Afar state in Ethiopia on his second attempt with the help of nomads, where he settled in Loggia, a busy market town on the crossroads of regional trade routes.

Upon arrival, Muhammed made friends with other ethnic Afar who directed him to the Aysaita refugee camp. "[But] in the camp you do not get enough [food]", he explained. In Loggia by contrast, "... you have Ethiopian friends. You eat with them. They [Ethiopian Afar] even let me continue my studies [here]." Thanks to a high level of local solidarity, Muhammed has been able to enrol in a management studies course at the local university without any need for identity documents. After the new out-of-camp policy came into effect in Ethiopia he now has both a student and a refugee identity card. He can officially live and study in Loggia and get his monthly food rations in the camp without fear of being punished or caught for his prior irregular status. Muhammed shares the regular food rations from the camp with his hosts outside the camp, and the hosts do not have to worry about possible reprisals for sheltering him. Being a recognised refugee living out of camp,

on the contrary, made it possible to secure a reduction of his student fees. Muhammed benefits from the mobility options that are provided to him through his formal student status, but he is only able to take advantage of these options thanks to his embeddedness in an informal support network.

### Backward-oriented mobility

Dewis is a Congolese man in his fifties, a married father of eight children. He originates from one of the rural areas in South Kivu province in the conflict-affected east of DRC. In 2012, when armed forces raped his sister-in-law and killed her husband, Dewis decided to flee to Bukavu, the provincial capital, located some 80km from Dewis' village. Upon arrival, Dewis noted that there was a high and often unmet demand for charcoal in the city so he decided to start a business in charcoal production in his area of origin, where forest resources are abundant. He transports the charcoal to the urban market, where his wife sells it. The business requires Dewis to return to his village about three times a month, enabling him to keep growing and harvesting crops while making a living from trade in the city.

Our research revealed that many IDPs like Dewis and his family frequently return to their respective places of origin despite the continuing insecurity there. It does not necessarily mean that they would return permanently if there was more stability. Our research showed that IDPs' livelihood strategies in displacement depend to a large extent on regular returns to their community of origin: for instance, to benefit from rural-urban trading opportunities, to harvest crops for the household's daily consumption, or to check on property. For many displaced people, it is essential to maintain mobility and assets in order both to cope with their present situation and to allow for a possible return in the future.

### Immobility

While many displaced people rely on onward or backward mobility to rebuild their lives in displacement, there is a group of people that can neither make return visits to their community of origin, nor move elsewhere. For some, moving within the host country

or onward might be impeded by legal and policy frameworks that limit their freedom of movement. In circumstances where refugees lack the right to move freely, mobility usually entails illegality and loss of entitlement to formal support. There is a large number of people who have been driven into illegality because of this.

Apart from formal limitations, the dividing line between mobility and immobility is often determined by individual circumstances that are related to pre-displacement experiences. Kazi, for example, is very outspoken about the impossibility of returning to his home community in DRC.<sup>2</sup> Some years ago he was forcibly recruited into an armed group in his area of origin. After about six months in the bush, he managed to escape and flee to Bukavu. He then found that his relatives had taken him for dead, and that his wife had built a life without him, not knowing whether he would ever return. Not having a family to return to, combined with the stigma of having been part of an armed group (and the fear of being recruited again), makes return an unrealistic option for Kazi. He therefore remains in the city, where he is at least able to benefit from his brother's connections to make a living.

Kazi's case is not uncommon. In many cases, the displaced people we met could not return to their community of origin because they had lost all their assets in the community. This could be as a result of looting, or because relatives had appropriated everything in their absence. Relatives often refuse to return property or to compensate returnees, arguing that those who did not suffer the hardships of the war had lost their claim to assets in the village. There is also often a fear of stigmatisation prevalent among a particular group of displaced persons: namely women – and sometimes men – who have been raped. After this traumatic experience, they prefer the anonymity of their place of refuge to the prospect of discrimination upon return to their community of origin. This means that they also cannot turn to former contacts for support.

### Fourth durable solution?

In the above, we have set out four different types of mobility that characterise everyday

November 2021

[www.fmreview.org/externalisation](http://www.fmreview.org/externalisation)

experiences of protracted displacement. Our empirical results show that mobility is an important part of displaced persons' livelihood strategies. In many cases, this mobility is made possible by virtue of informal connections, and happens despite formal policies. Impediments to mobility also impede people's livelihood opportunities. To categorise displaced persons as stuck has unintended negative impacts in practice. Those eligible to receive assistance as displaced people hide their mobility strategies in order not to jeopardise their access to assistance; coping mechanisms that are based on a degree of mobility remain unrecognised and are often hindered by regulations on aid provision; and mobile individuals must take risks associated with moving under the radar. There is always a risk of losing one's legal status, of extortion at road blocks or by smugglers, of losing belongings or merchandise, or of being kidnapped. All these factors make mobility a risky and costly endeavour. Displaced people have to weigh the costs and benefits when taking the decision to move.

According to our observations it is evident that the risks and vulnerabilities of those requiring protection may be heightened by aid policies that fail to acknowledge, assess and react to such realities. A lack of awareness that displaced people may need access to other options (such as enabling access to their fields or home communities while staying in camps) may lead not only to a failure of interventions but also to counterproductive effects, for instance by causing irregularity. In contrast, policies that support or at least do not inhibit the mobility patterns of displaced people – mobility patterns which they have established themselves and which have contributed to their livelihoods – were observed to be an effective and more sustainable way to overcome protracted displacement situations.



Bada Admagug, in Afar State, Ethiopia. This is a central transport hub close to an irregular border crossing point with Eritrea. From here, goods and people move across the border and within the region.

Measures to foster self-help mechanisms and to mitigate risks need to be tailor-made and needs-based. In the case of Dewis and Kazi, this would entail support for making a living in the city. Dewis could also benefit from improved and more secure road infrastructure. In Muhammed's and Hassan's cases, the benefits of legalising and supporting out-of-camp options for refugees are clear: legal status and continued access to aid improved their economic and social position, and resulted in less exploitation and discrimination. This, in sum, shows that putting people and the solutions they find for themselves before politics and top-down prescriptions could be a hybrid yet realistic fourth durable solution.

**Carolien Jacobs** [c.i.m.jacobs@law.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:c.i.m.jacobs@law.leidenuniv.nl)  
Assistant Professor, Van Vollenhoven Institute for Law, Governance and Society, Leiden University

**Markus Rudolf** [markus.rudolf@bicc.de](mailto:markus.rudolf@bicc.de)  
Senior Researcher, Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies (BICC)

1. Tufa et al (2021) 'Figurations of Displacement in and beyond Ethiopia', TRAFIG Working Paper No 5, BICC [bit.ly/TRAFIG-WP5](http://bit.ly/TRAFIG-WP5)
2. For more detail about his case, see Jacobs et al (2020) 'Figurations of Displacement in the DRC', TRAFIG Working Paper No 4, BICC [bit.ly/TRAFIG-WP4](http://bit.ly/TRAFIG-WP4)