UN/ MASKING NARRATIVES: AN ALTERNATIVE ACCOUNT OF HORN OF AFRICA MIGRATION

SAMSON A. BEZABEH









MIGRATION & CRISES

UNU-GCM

Policy Report 04/03



This is a report of the United Nations University Institute on Globalization, Culture and Mobility. It forms part of the series, *Migration and Crises*. It should be cited as:

Bezabeh, Samson A. *UN/Masking Narratives: An Alternative Account of Horn of Africa Migration*, Policy Report No. 04/03. Barcelona: United Nations University Institute on Globalization, Culture and Mobility (UNU-GCM), 2017.

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At a time of unprecedented mass displacements across the world, migrants and refugees have come to occupy a central place on the international agenda, as well as in the media and public sphere. This research programme focuses on the relationship between migration and crises, both in terms of conflict and disaster-induced displacements that are occurring in the short and long-term; as well as the crises that have been newly introduced by particular migration, border and integration policies that have fallen short in terms of protecting the human rights and dignity of those on the move. The project focuses on displacement in different geographical regions across the world, with an understanding that these contemporary crises have not emerged out of a vacuum, but are located within particular historical, geopolitical, environmental and cultural contexts. The programme examines the human costs of these crises, as well as the new forms of solidarity that have developed.

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Samson A. Bezabeh

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Summary

Migration has become a defining feature of our era. In this wave of migration, people from the Horn of Africa have been one of the major groups attempting to reach Europe via the Mediterranean, or oil-rich Gulf countries by crossing the Red Sea. The European Union and its African partners' narrative that was developed as a result of the migration of Africans, focuses on the figure of the people smugglers. This narrative portrays the smugglers as criminals who are responsible for the increased flow of migration, while the migrants are portrayed as vulnerable human beings who are tricked into leaving their homeland. This narrative, while being instrumental in the project of reinforcing borders, masks complex historical and contemporary social and political dynamics. In doing so, it contributes to the reinforcement of social boundaries and the emergence of racial and religious boundaries. To achieve long-term peaceful interaction, Europe and its African partners should engage in the development of an alternative narrative that unmasks the different complexities that the current narrative conceals. This policy brief outlines some of the ways of developing an alternative account of migration and what should be included and considered for developing a narrative that better reflects migrants' realities.

1. See for example the report of Amnesty International (2015)

on the situation of

migrants in Libva

2. Before the adoption of the agenda, Europe has certainly been engaged in developing various policies that aimed at tackling issues related to migration. The 2015 agenda however, formed a watershed moment as it prescribed an EU level strategy. For an analysis and description of the various polices followed by the European Union, see Cortinovis (2015).

Introduction

The Horn of Africa is one of the most volatile and economically underdeveloped areas in Africa. This volatility is reflected in the number of people moving out from this corner of Africa to major migration destination areas such as Europe and the Middle East. According to the International Organisation of Migration (IOM), one of the biggest groups of migrants who travel to Europe, are migrants from the Horn of Africa. In 2014, Europe saw the arrival of 210,000 migrants and a year later, this number increased by 382% as Europe saw the arrival of some 1,011,712 migrants. Out of this, 65 % were migrants arriving from the Horn of Africa (International Organisation of Migration, 2015). Often forced to undertake hazardous journeys through the Sahara desert, mainly via Sudan and Libya, migrants from the Horn of Africa are also among those who lost their life while attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea. In 2015, out of the 3297 migrants who died in the Mediterranean Sea, 359 were from the Horn of Africa (International Organisation of Migration, 2015).

Reports from human rights organisations often point out that the experiences of these migrants are negative. Migrants face indefinite detentions, extortions and various forms of cruelties in transit zones such as Libya. The experiences of migrants within the European Union are also far from being rosy. In its 2011 report entitled 'The EU's Dirty Hands: Frontex Involvement in Ill-Treatment of Migrants in Greece', Human Rights Watch asserted that migrants live in deplorable conditions in Greece as a result of the European Union policy that focuses on reinforcing its border. On the other hand, the campaign group United Against Racism asserts that the restrictive policies of Fortress Europe have led to the death of 22, 394 migrants since 1993 (United Against Racism, 2015). Similarly, the International Organisation of Migration asserts that some 22, 400 migrants died while trying to reach Europe since the beginning of the millennium (International Organisation of Migration, 2014: 20).

In view of this situation, the European Union policy responses and actions are increasingly geared to finding other solutions to the 'problem' of migration than just enforcing its immediate physical boarders. In 2015, the European Commission for the first time adopted a European Agenda on Migration.² In addition to the establishment of centres that will become key in monitoring migration trends in key African states such as Mali and Niger, the Commission in its agenda pledged for the deepening of re-

gional development programmes, as well as for opening more legal avenues that will enable people to come to Europe (European Commission, 2015a).

In 2016, based on the 2015 European Agenda on Migration, the Commission further pledged to engage in what it says is a 'new migration partnership' that takes into account the specific needs of the various countries touched by the inflow of migration.³ Viewing migration as the 'new normal' and as part of a 'global displacement crisis', the European Union envisioned to deploy some eight billion Euros over the next five years for assisting the needs of different countries. It also further pledged to strengthen the trust fund for Africa with one billion Euros. Moreover, it envisioned to mobilise some 3.1 billion Euros, which the Commission hopes will further catalyse an investment of 31 billion within the context of developing countries. Through these investments, the Commission envisioned to curb the migration of people to Europe. For those who still find themselves en route to Europe, the Commission aimed to create 'greater humanitarian reception capacities closer to their place of origin' (European Commission, 2016).

In coming up with this policy response, the European Union not only asserted the presence of a crisis of migration that has a global character but also engaged in a narrative that becomes important in framing the worldwide surge in migration in general, and the mobility of people from the Horn of Africa in particular. In this narrative, the European Commission characterises migrants as vulnerable people who are tricked by criminal smugglers and it seeks to break the smugglers' networks. In the New Migration Partnership framework, the Commission asserts that migration is 'fuelled by unscrupulous smugglers who seek to benefit from the desperation of the vulnerable' (European Commission, 2016: 2). The European Agenda on Migration, which served as a base for the new partnership that the European Commission is envisioning, makes a similar assertion when it affirmed that 'the criminal networks which exploit vulnerable migrants must be targeted' (European Commission, 2015: 4).

This narrative of 'vulnerable migrants, criminal smugglers' is however, not only confined to statements of the European Commission, but forms an integral part of the other European Union institutions which are increasingly playing an important role in dealing with migrants, such as Europol. In a recent report on migrants, which Europol issued with Interpol, Rob Waingwrith, the Europol Director, states the presence 'of criminal networks that exploit desperate migrants seeking to escape armed conflict,

3. On the new partnership and the action plan described in this paragraph, see European Commission (2016)

4. On the agreements and dialogues between the European Commission and its African partners, see European Commission (2014a, 2014b, 2015b)

5. See Bezabeh (2016 a)

persecution and deprivation'; he characterised the smuggling of migrants as an enterprise, albeit a criminal one that generated five to six billion USD in 2015 alone (Europol/Interpol, 2016: 2).

This narrative that stems from Europe is replicated among the European Union's Horn of Africa partners, who are regarded as being important in stamping out migration at its source. Their approach for solving this problem also replicates the EU initiative as they speak of combating criminal smugglers who trick vulnerable migrants. And core transit countries, for example, Sudan, have already started to take measures, including reinforcing borders, the arrest of migrants and the extradition of suspected smugglers to Europe-an affair that will in all likelihood continue for years as a result of the agreements made with Europe.4

Via these countries, the narratives and the militarised responses that Europe has provided are also extended to the Red Sea spaces. The European Union, other Western nations and regional organisations such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) have engaged in assisting these countries through the provision of equipment and the latest technologies. The role of countries bordering the Red Sea, such as Diibouti, Sudan and Yemen, has been deemed particularly important in fighting the smugglers. To this effect the coast guard and security apparatuses of these nations have been bolstered.⁵

While the narrative of 'vulnerable migrant, criminal smugglers' has become instrumental for the hardening of EU internal and external borders, the narrative presents a simplified explanation that masks silent elements of the current migration crisis, some of which are discussed in the following sections.

Beyond the Dangerous Places Narratives

To begin with, the dominant narrative masks the downsides of the European Union's policy of fortifying borders. Despite the seemingly humanitarian language that the European Union and its partners have adopted, the fight against so-called smugglers has meant the hardening of border controls and hence the hindering of migrants' mobility. In this, the policy infringes on people's mobility right as well as on their right of seeking asylum in a third country. The cooperation between the EU and partners in the south has also entailed the confinement of migrants in detention

and prison centres in countries such as Libya and Yemen.⁶ It has also entailed the forceful removal of migrants to countries where they would in the first place expect to be exposed to abuse and further detention. The European Union narrative masks how the human rights of the migrants have been violated by the strategy that it has opted for, including the outsourcing of border control to countries such as Libya. The European strategy of closing borders through the deployment of technology and the strategy of fighting the so-called smugglers force the migrants to enlist the help of the smugglers, thereby making them vulnerable. As the narrative does not focus on how the European Union and partner countries' policy produces the actual vulnerability of the migrant, the narrative masks the drawbacks of the EU policy.

The emphasis placed on the figure of the smuggler and the characterisation of the mobility of migrants as a multibillion-dollar criminal enterprise also masks the actual social, historical, ethnic and religious relations that exist between the migrants who are characterized as victims and the smugglers who are portrayed as criminals. In the migration process, ethnic and religious-based moral value systems that bring migrants together are pervasive. The migrants' paths are not only characterised by economic relations that revolve around extortion, but are also marked by moral relations that bond migrants who share the same ethnicity and religion.8

The smugglers who are portrayed as criminals who exploit vulnerable migrants are also part of these relations of morality. In the dominant narrative, this religious and ethnic-based relation of morality that exists between the migrant and the smuggler is obscured as the narrative focuses only on extortion and portrays the relation as being part of a big business. Although migrants are victimised in the process of migration and issues of extortion are realities, the smuggler is not necessarily a person that is part of a well-established secretive smuggling network. In most cases "the smugglers" are in fact ordinary men and women who live ordinary lives but who happen to have connections in Europe or in an Arab country either as a result of being there themselves, or having relatives there. The so-called criminal smugglers that in the narratives are portrayed as distinct from the migrants are in fact people who are either migrants or who have been migrants at one point in time. Gender aspects are also masked in this narrative as smugglers are often portrayed as being male rather than female, while in reality the "smuggling business" is also undertaken by females who in the narratives are regarded as the victimized/innocent rather that the victimiser/criminal.

- 6. For a detailed account see Carr (2015).
- 7. On Human Rights violations that resulted from the European policy on migration see Amnesty International. (2014).
- 8. See Bezabeh(2016 b).

9. A historical term employed to describe people from northern Ethiopian present day Eritrea.

10. Interview, Helen (Psudonym), Paris, 20 March 2013.

The story of a smuggler, Helen, illustrates the point that is made here. Based in France, Helen left Ethiopia when she was eighteen. She came to France through Greece as her mother was already in Greece. In France, Helen managed to obtain asylum status and just two years ago, she became a French citizen. This was signalled by a letter that she received, signed by the president of the Republic himself according to her account, which she narrated with pride. In France, Helen is employed in one of the biggest supermarkets in Paris. Helen's work however is not limited to that; she is also engaged according to her account in "helping" migrants from Ethiopia:

Many Ethiopian migrants who have managed to come to Europe and have reached particularly Greece have to pass through my house. I also help them in going to Calais by contacting other migrants who are engaged in facilitating the entry of new migrants to the United Kingdom ... The people who are engaged in this business are also migrants themselves but their asylum requests have been rejected both in Britain and France and they have sort of lost hope and don't obviously want to go back to their country. There are a number of them in Calais. Sudanese, Afghanis and our people [Ethiopian and Eritrean]. In my case I contact the Ethiopians or the Eritreans as they are habeshas⁹ and hence more trustworthy for me. For new migrants the journey is not easy as the police constantly abuse and chase them. It is particularly difficult for a girl because the chance of being raped is high. This is particularly true in Calais. Our friends in Calais try usually to give one tent to the women so that two or three of them sleep together. But sometimes a rape can occur because usually the girl who has stayed for a long period of time and has lost hope will make a deal with other migrants who want to be with the girl and she will let in the male migrants in the middle of the night while the new girl is sleeping. 10

The above story reveals the problematic of understanding smuggling by using organised crime as a framework or model. Helen and the people in her networks are ordinary migrants whose smuggling activities are shaped and helped by virtue of having a shared common identity. Beyond questioning the organised crime model that is used to understand migrant smuggling, the story also destabilises the image of the figure of the smuggler by inserting gender dynamics. Here Helen and those who victimise others are not male but female—a figure that does not fit into the narrative of 'vulnerable migrant, criminal smugglers' as in this narrative, females are always characterised as being the figure of the victim migrant rather than the criminal smuggler who is almost invariably portrayed as male.

Free Will vs. Structure-Induced Decisions

The narrative of 'vulnerable migrant, criminal smugglers' masks not only the complexity that surrounds the figures of smugglers and migrants and their relationships, but also the deep political and economic problems that are responsible for generating the migration in the first place. With the exception of fleeing from regimes such as the one in Eritrea, whose animosity with the 'West' has led to not only condemnation but also isolation through the implementation of various forms of sanctions, migration from friendly African countries is by and large described as consisting of economic migrants. Despite the acknowledgment in some of the major EU documents of the presence of poverty and lack of good governance, the European Union does not indulge in criticising the political malice and political repression that exists in the partner countries. Instead of giving a political-economic reason that ties migrants' economic vulnerability to the malice in the political structure, the dominant narrative gives a reductionist explanation that focuses on the migrants' choice.

By moving across borders, migrants might endeavour to change their economic situations. This characterisation however, does not explain how their poverty came about in the first place. It does not tell the public how a lack of democracy and good governance, repression and a neoliberal economic system that serves only the elite become complicit in the poverty of the migrants in the first place. Emphasising only the migrant motive, and hence engaging in a reductionist explanation, the narrative masks not only how the partner countries in the south have structural political malice but also how the West, out of strategic considerations such as the war on terror, reinforces these nations and thereby becomes complicit in the production of the vulnerability of the migrants.11

Presentism and the Masking of History

The European Union narrative, by virtue of presenting a limitedhistorical version of events, also masks the long historical interactions that have occurred between Europe, Africa and the Middle East. In history, both the Mediterranean and the Red Sea were arenas in which intercultural exchanges occurred. The ecosys11. On the effect of the strategic consideration of the west, see Amnesty International (2014) Bezabeh (2016: 68-76), Carr (2015)

- 12. On the historical interconnections that occurred in the Mediterranean and the Red Sea region, see Braudel (1972), Wick (2016).
- 13. See for example, Rajaram(2016)
- 14. Human Rights Watch, "Refugees, Asylum Seekers, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons," https://www.hrw.org/ legacy/campaigns/ race/refugeepresskit.

tem of the two seas also provided integration and transnational exchanges. Their respective hinterlands were connected to the sea and the areas beyond. And since antiquity, the history of the Mediterranean and the Red Sea blurred the distinction between Africa, Europe and the Middle East. 12

The fact that the past in the Mediterranean and the Red Sea has been described only in terms of the recent past, that is, the colonial invasion, and the fact that history has been described in terms of national state history and not in terms of a transactional history, has masked this long process of human interaction. It is this presentism and the containerization of history in the national state that the European Union narratives of migration continue to present. The narrative presents a distinct and bounded Europe that is set apart from Africa and Arabia. Despite the long history of contact between Europe, Africa and Arabia, European leaders and their political parties on both the right and left not only speak of this difference in terms of boundaries but also in terms of a presence of a distinct and undiluted European identity.¹³ Their conceptualization calls for the defence of Europe from the migrants who are understood not only in terms of the language of legality/illegality but also through their foreignness, which signifies incompatible culture and religion. The narrative solution so far has been geared toward fortifying Europe.

This containerization of history into nation states and the emphasis on the presence of a bounded Europe that is defendable from the migrants through various strategies has had a direct bearing on the Horn of Africa migrants. Their foreignness has made them liable to xenophobic attack. A rigid social boundary is also being constructed between Christians and Muslims, an affair which has also become salient within the African context, and which, given the international nature of the two religions, has become instrumental in further creating cleavages at the international level.¹⁴

Conclusion and Recommendations

The way the European Union and its African partners have opted to respond to human mobility seems to have focused on short-term solutions that do not reflect contemporary complexities or historical realties. So far, Europe and its African partners have opted to secure borders and in this, the 'vulnerable migrant, criminal smugglers' narrative has been instrumental. In addition to masking the complexity of the current migration crisis, the implications of this

narrative are far-reaching and potentially create lasting damage as the narratives become instrumental in strengthening social boundaries and the insider/outsider narratives that become important for racial or religious-based exclusions.

To counter what the narrative masks and the negative elements that it generates, the European Union and its partners should be engaged in developing alternative narratives that reassess the figure of the smuggler by taking into account gender and the interchangeability between the figure of the migrant and the smuggler. In addition, the relationship between 'migrants' and 'smugglers' should also be conceived as going beyond extortion and in a manner that takes into account the migrants' moral relationships that emanate from having deep historical, religious and ethnic connections.

The alternative narrative should also refocus its attention from providing a reductionist account of migrants' precariousness and engage in a political-economic explanation that takes into account the world structure and problems of governance and human rights that exist in partner countries, which members of the European Union have so far been hesitant to firmly mention or address. Rather than developing an ahistorical perspective that tends to locate long-term human history in the nation state and within European borders, the European Union and its partners should engage in developing narratives that take into account the transnational history and connections that have long existed between Europe, Africa and Arabia. It is through such mechanisms that a more lasting solution can be obtained to the current migration crisis-related problems. In order to concretely engage in the development of an alternative narrative, the European Commission should engage in fulfilling the following specific recommendations:

- Engage in dialogues with academics and historians concerned with transnational interaction of societies and culture by allocating funds for such a purpose.
- Organise workshops on migrant smuggling in order to develop an understanding that goes beyond the 'criminal model' currently at work.
- Engage in dialogues with migrants by allocating more funds for such a purpose.

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ISSN 2521-1102

United Nations University
Institute on Globalization, Culture and Mobility
Sant Pau Art Nouveau Site - Sant Manuel Pavilion
C/ Sant Antoni Maria Claret, 167
08025 Barcelona, Spain

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