

PRACTICE NOTE

Challenging how Danger is Understood: A Research Practitioners' Note on Migration in Africa

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A significant increase in research on movement in and from Africa, much of which has been commissioned, conducted or promoted by international humanitarian and development agencies, has resulted in a disproportionate focus on the dangers of migration. It has helped to generate a policy narrative dominated by the harms associated with movement that is strongly influenced by a Euro-centric lens. This distorts both the true nature of migration across Africa and the risks involved. Movement is extremely dangerous for some. But this practice note argues that this is by no means the whole story, or even a predominant part of it. Drawing on two empirical research studies on movement within and from Africa, this note seeks to better locate issues of harm and danger in the experience of movement. The analysis provides an alternative story of migration in which many move safely, or at least with relative safety; in which migrants have agency and understand the risks of movement but make complex choices and decisions; and in which not moving is often the least safe option. We use this evidence to call for those commissioning and conducting research on migration intended to influence policies and programmes to be more objective in how their research is framed, more transparent in how it is presented, and more realistic about the recommendations that should follow.

Introduction and Background

The global discussion on migration has evolved rapidly over the past few years. The arrival of over one million asylum seekers, refugees, and non-refugee migrants¹ into Europe during 2015 (UNHCR and MMC 2015) meant that migration, particularly movement that involved irregular and/or

dangerous means, became much more visible. This visibility sent political shock-waves through many global north countries and led to a somewhat contradictory response. On the one hand, it encouraged a renewed international commitment towards making movement safer, as expressed in the Global Compacts on Refugees and Migration respectively. On the other hand, it generated increased pressure on governments of wealthier countries to do more to prevent migrants reaching their shores. As a result, there has been a significant increase in resources and activity focused on reducing

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movement in places that are viewed as source or transit countries for migrants seeking to reach Europe, in particular through securing borders (IRRI, SOAS and SIHA 2017).

Correspondingly, there has been a significant increase in research on movement in and from Africa, much of which has been commissioned, conducted or promoted by international humanitarian and development agencies, and much of which emphasises the *dangers* associated with migration. For instance, a UNICEF/IOM study, *Harrowing Journeys*, based on surveys with approximately 11,000 respondents (aged between 14 and 24 years), found that 77 per cent of those who had travelled to Europe through the Central Mediterranean Route reported exploitation of some type (UNICEF and IOM 2017, p.8). These are alarming figures. When broken down, they show that three in five were held against their will, just under half were forced to perform work or other activities, and a similar proportion were forced to work without the expected payment. However, the research also revealed that these forms of exploitation were significantly more relevant for those on the Central Mediterranean route (with many travelling through Libya) and were not a good representation of those who arrived in Europe through other routes. Indeed, this focus on journeys to Europe, in which harm and danger are highlighted, primarily shines a light on conditions in Libya but not necessarily on the other stages of the route. For instance, a Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) North Africa 4Mi Snapshot analysed data from surveys of 5,658 refugees and migrants in Libya between May 2017 and October 2019 and found that 44 per cent of respondents encountered one or more protection incidents during their journey (MMC 2020). However, as this research was conducted in Libya and the findings also showed that 79 per cent of the reported protection incidents happened within Libya, it highlights dangers specific to that country that speak to only a minority experience of migration.

There has also been a strong focus in research on smuggling and trafficking of migrants moving – or trying to move – to Europe (IRRI, SOAS and SIHA 2017; UNICEF 2019). Smuggling and trafficking within and from Africa have become highly sophisticated, lucrative and responsive to changes in the policy context. The increased emphasis on border control and restrictions on movement as a result of international policy responses such as EU funding through the Khartoum Process² has meant that migrants moving irregularly have had an increasing need to use smugglers. Previous research has also indicated that children and young people engaged in migration are particularly vulnerable to smuggling and trafficking.³ Research focusing on the journeys of migrants, therefore, has highlighted the many harms disproportionately associated with smuggling.

In part, this emphasis on harm reflects the fact that journeys generally become increasingly dangerous as migrants move out of their country or region of origin and move further afield (for instance, when crossing into Libya and then Europe, or when moving to the Middle East), and many of these studies have focused on the minority who have reached or tried to reach Europe (IRRI, SOAS and SIHA 2017). It also reflects the fact that using a smuggler makes migrants vulnerable to other types of harm, including trafficking and modern-day slavery (ibid.) Without a doubt, therefore, many of those engaged in migration suffer serious harms when smuggling turns into trafficking. However, this has created a somewhat one-sided picture: while there has been some recognition in the literature of the benefit of using smugglers (ibid.) these benefits have generally been obstructed by the negatives associated with harm further along the routes.

While not denying the terrible harms that some migrants face, there is a danger that these studies are being used to define the lived experience of *all* migrants simply because other accounts are lacking. It gives a skewed understanding of the nature of migration in Africa that misses the wider

story of migration that is deeply embedded in patterns and means of movement, much of it safe, that has evolved over centuries. The emphasis on the few who try to reach Europe obscures the reality that the highest levels of current migration on the continent are represented by rural to urban migration within countries; followed by a significant number who cross borders to neighbouring states in search of jobs, which sometimes correlates with pre-colonial alignments in language and culture and often happens without any legal or administrative barriers; followed by a smaller but still significant number who travel between regions within the continent, often to wealthier states in north Africa or to South Africa. Only a relatively small number move out of the continent, either taking advantage of legal pathways or moving 'irregularly' primarily to the Gulf states and Europe. The forced movement of people is grafted onto these wider patterns of movement, as conflict and other drivers have created additional factors that have led to people leaving their homes. However, even for those who are forcibly displaced, the majority stay in their home country, while others move across borders seeking asylum but remain within their region of origin. Only a few make the decision to move further afield, often when they have given up hope that their current circumstances will offer them opportunities for livelihoods and/or safety.

The research on dangerous routes to Europe exists alongside a growing body of work (particularly from within Africa) that highlights the more positive aspects of migration within Africa, seeing movement as an opportunity to fulfil aspirations and as an investment in a better future (Moyo 2020; Blaser and Landau 2014; De Haas 2014), and recognising that people move with both agency and intent. In these studies, those who move are shown as taking calculated decisions based on their circumstances and therefore, while they clearly deserve protection, they also do so in the context of their right to exercise agency to the extent that their capacities allow (Crock and Benson 2018).

However, this broader understanding of why and how people move has yet to permeate many of the responses to migration. In response, we argue that research needs to move on from a somewhat simplistic 'measurement' of harms and risk. If the narrative on the *dangers* of migration continues to dominate and override other aspects of migration at a policy level, it will continue to lead to approaches and responses to migration that are both misplaced and counterproductive.

Challenging narratives of danger

In this practice note we rely on two major empirical studies to challenge the predominance of danger as the main narrative of migration. We were centrally involved in the development of both studies and therefore have intimate knowledge of the design, data, and analysis. Detailed methodologies are included in the respective studies.

The first, *Scaling Fences* (UNDP 2019), is a study of 1,390 African migrants (from 39 countries in Africa) living across 13 European countries who first arrived in the continent by irregular means. This study therefore provides an excellent evidence base for understanding the experiences and perceptions of those who often did travel on some of the most dangerous migration routes. The second study, *Reimagining Migration Responses* (UNICEF 2021) is a study of 1,290 older children and young people (aged 14–24 years) who were either 'on the move' or recent returnees living in Ethiopia, Puntland, Somaliland or Sudan when they were interviewed. This study provides a different perspective covering the experiences of young people who are often more at risk of harm, but who in this case were not necessarily trying to move on dangerous routes to Europe. It was commissioned under the umbrella of a 'child protection' remit and therefore was specifically designed to provide insights into the harms, dangers and risks that young migrants face. Nevertheless, in order to ensure that the research was objective and impartial, we designed the research instruments to provide as wide a perspective as

possible on the actual experiences of those that moved.

Given that the UNDP research focused on those who reached Europe irregularly and the UNICEF research focused on dangers and harms, it was perhaps expected that ‘danger’ would be one of the narratives in both these studies even if was not a pre-eminent one. However, rigorous and fair analysis of the data revealed otherwise, and it was the process of analysing these data sets that motivated us to write this article.

The findings provide an alternative story of migration in which many move safely, or at least with relative safety; in which many migrants have agency and understand the risks of movement but make complex choices and decisions; and in which *not* moving is often the least safe option. In presenting this alternative story, we call

for those commissioning and conducting research on migration intended to influence policies and programmes to be more objective in how their research is framed, more transparent in how it is presented and more realistic about the recommendations that should follow.

The majority do not experience danger and harm

The UNICEF research demonstrates that many people move safely and only a minority experience actual harm. While some experience horrific incidents and more face real risks, these were not typical of the majority. Respondents in the UNICEF study were read out a list of harms that they might have encountered in their current location since they had moved from their home area. The results are illustrated in **Figure 1**.



Figure 1: Experience of harm.
Source: UNICEF (2021), 1,290 14–24-year-olds experiencing migration interviewed in Ethiopia, Somalia or Sudan.

The most common type of harm suffered was having felt scared of other people: just over one in four (27 per cent) said that they had experienced this. Fewer than one in five had been physically hurt by someone they did not know, felt scared of wild animals or been physically hurt by someone they knew. While we certainly do not downplay the impact that either fear or actual harm – particularly physical harm or detention – may have on an individual, the results from this survey make clear that these experiences are not common for the majority who move within the region.⁴

Danger is often reduced rather than increased because of migration

Furthermore, the UNICEF research suggests that migration may reduce danger. There was a dramatic increase in perceptions of safety from before and since they began moving⁵ – from 55 per cent who felt safe in their home area before they moved to 81 per cent who felt safe in the current location (during the daytime), representing around a 50 per cent increase.⁶

It is worth highlighting here that a number of key differences were found in perceptions of safety depending on whether the respondent said that they had initially left their home area as a result of insecurity (as defined by the respondent) or not. Not surprisingly, among those who moved due to insecurity, there was a dramatic change in perceptions of safety. Only 28 per cent of this group felt safe in their home area, but this rose to 77 per cent who felt safe in their current location. What is more surprising, however, was that among those who did not move due to insecurity, perceptions of safety had also increased as a result of moving – from 70 per cent who felt safe in their home area to 82 per cent who felt safe in their present location. This is a significant increase and demonstrates the role that movement can play in improving a sense of safety.

This data on perceptions of safety was confirmed when comparing experiences of harms before and after movement. Respondents in the UNICEF research reported similar levels

of experience of harm in their home area (prior to migration) and in the area in which they were interviewed (after they had left their home area). To some extent this may be explained by the nature of different forms of harm. For instance, while fewer faced being forced to join the military after they left their home area, more were forced to work after they left. In both cases the differences in reported harm were not significant enough to explain the much bigger differences in overall perceptions of safety. A further explanation may be that some had moved because of concerns for their safety, and that the act of moving itself had provided them with a greater sense or perception of safety.

These findings suggest, therefore, that movement often improves perceptions of safety for migrants regardless of their reasons for moving in the first place. Whilst, unsurprisingly, this is especially the case for those who moved because of insecurity (often categorised as ‘forced migrants’), it also shows that movement can be an effective coping strategy for those who move for other reasons. Any blanket view of migration as dangerous, therefore, may be counterproductive and misses a key point, namely that migration is often about safety, and not moving is where the danger lies.

The *Scaling Fences* report also provides useful insights into how migrants view safety and danger. Despite the fact that 13 per cent said they had been a victim of crime in Europe in the last six months (most often verbal assault), and as many as two in five said that they often felt unsafe in their home or accommodation, 83 per cent of the same respondents said that their personal safety was better in Europe than in their home area, with just 6 per cent who felt it was worse and 9 per cent no different.

Dangerous experiences are not always seen as harmful: the case of smuggling

A common view is that using smugglers is dangerous and that policy makers should do all that they can to reduce migrants’ reliance

on them. This is based on assumptions that smugglers can harm those who use their services and that use of smugglers increases the risks of being trafficked, which could lead to serious harm, abuse or even death (Ayalew, Aduugna and Deshingkar 2018).

Without a doubt, many have encountered considerable harm as a result of using a smuggler. Yet, smugglers continue to be used, and not only as a last resort or in cases of desperation. In the UNICEF research, 17 per cent of respondents said that they had received help from a smuggler to plan their journey, which was the third most likely source of help after family and friends. Although some of those interviewed may have used a smuggler because they felt compelled to do so, it also points to a significant majority that choose to engage with a smuggler because of potential benefits from doing so. In fact, when those who had used a smuggler were asked about their attitude towards them, they were split in terms of whether they saw the smuggler they used as a good person (42 per cent) or a bad person (48 per cent). It is also worth noting that smugglers were regarded more positively than government officials and police.

Of course, there were also types of harm associated with smuggling that should be highlighted. A significant proportion of children and young people who used a smuggler said that the smuggler either hurt them (18 per cent) or threatened to hurt them (25 per cent). On the other hand, and bearing in mind that this research focused on the Horn of Africa, the majority experienced neither of these. Among those who were hurt or threatened by their smuggler, 82 per cent described the smuggler as a bad person; among those who were *not* harmed or threatened by their smuggler, only 21 per cent described the person as bad. Furthermore, smugglers were not viewed simply from the perspective of the potential harm they might bring. Many smugglers are typically embedded within communities known to family members and friends and are not necessarily regarded as part of criminal enterprises intent on doing

harm. In many ways, this can be seen in *how* migrants use smugglers.

In the UNICEF research, smugglers were primarily used to help migrants cross borders (62 per cent offered to do so), but it was by no means the sole or only service being provided. Around two in five respondents said that their smuggler offered to help with accommodation (39 per cent) and transport (37 per cent), and around a third were offered help with information and/or connections (35 per cent) and food and water (34 per cent). In other words, they were offering a wide range of services somewhat akin to those offered by a travel agent.

When comparing the number who actually received each of these types of support and services, slightly fewer received each of these services than were offered them. This was particularly true of accommodation (39 per cent offered vs. 26 per cent received) and a job/money (25 per cent offered vs. 10 per cent received). However, for the most part, the gaps between the proportion offered versus that received were fairly small, which demonstrates that to an extent those who had used a smuggler received the support or help that was offered. While our research did not ascertain what happened to those who sought onward travel outside of the region where, as outlined above, smuggling may become trafficking, it creates a picture of smuggling within the region that is significantly different to studies with those who have reached Europe and/or the Middle East.

In summary, while one in five people who used a smuggler were hurt by that smuggler, many more received positive benefits from doing so. Therefore, policy and programmes that view smuggling simply as dangerous fail to properly understand the actual role that smugglers are seen to play in supporting migrants. In consequence, while recognising that smuggling always constitutes criminal activity, we should understand that the way in which smugglers are perceived and utilised by migrants themselves is less binary.

Danger is assessed by those who move: the role of agency and choice

Thus, it is vital to understand *perceptions* of danger, as illustrated by the UNDP research. When interviewed in Europe, only half (56 per cent) of respondents said that they expected that their journey would be dangerous. The report notes that this is surprising given the wide coverage and amount of money spent on highlighting the risks associated with irregular journeys to Europe. It reflects, in our view, the reality that many migrants or potential migrants either do not believe what they hear or read about the dangers of migration (possibly because they do not trust the source of information in the first place), or that they put the potential risks in the context of other factors. In the case of the latter, the fact that more than half expected the journey to be dangerous shows that some of the messaging is getting through, but that it is not effective at stopping people from trying. As the report notes, 'for those individuals who do travel, the perceived opportunity to transform life through emigration to Europe, scaling the fences of constrained aspiration at home, and even the fences erected ever higher against their arrival and that of others to Europe, is the deciding factor – trumping risk and uncertainty' (UNDP 2019: p.49).

Given the amount of evidence available on the risks associated with travel to Europe, especially for those who travel through Libya and/or attempt to cross into Europe by sea, it is not surprising that as many as 93 per cent described their journey as dangerous. But again, and reinforcing the points above, this is only one element to how migrants viewed their journey. It is striking in the research that, when asked what factors would have changed their minds about travelling to Europe, only two per cent answered that they would have changed their minds 'if [they] knew how dangerous the journey would be' (ibid: p.48). Many more would have been deterred if there were better economic conditions (24 per cent) or improved governance/service provision (15 per cent)

in their home country. Yet still two in five felt nothing would have stopped them from trying to get to Europe.

This data clearly illustrates that many migrants consider danger through multiple lenses. This critical evaluation and the role of choice are also evident in the UNICEF study. In this survey, the vast majority (77 per cent) said it was their choice to leave their home area and nearly all (93 per cent) said it would be their choice as to whether to stay in their current location or move elsewhere in the next few months. Even a majority of those who moved primarily for security reasons said it was their choice to leave (55 per cent). This demonstrates the extent to which children and young people are not just passive participants in their movement, and their agency is a key factor in understanding their motivations, decisions and attitudes to risk. Of course, there is a risk here that our analysis over-compensates and romanticises the notion of agency. That is not our intention, and we fully recognise that, without a sufficient enabling environment and adequate resources, reliance on agency can obscure or undermine ongoing protection concerns (Omata 2017). However, the findings highlight that those who move weigh the risks of moving against the dangers of not moving. And, in line with the UNDP research, official sources highlighting dangers of moving are of very little value – just one in fifty (2 per cent) of the children and young people interviewed by UNICEF said they trusted government or official communications about the dangers of moving. What might look like ill-informed or bad choices to policy makers is actually often complex and calculated risk-taking.

Danger is not just about physical harm: deprivation of core essentials is often of more concern

We have tried so far to show that highlighting danger and harm associated with migration is valid and vitally important. We have also provided evidence to support our argument that viewing migration as only harmful or

dangerous is limiting and fails to recognise the complex realities of those who move. Furthermore, there are other challenges and deprivations that migrants encounter that are likely to impact them more negatively than the risk of, or actual experience of, physical harm. Therefore, it is imperative that any programmes or policies that aim to improve people's safety view it holistically. It is important to broaden any discussion on harm and danger to incorporate where and how physical safety fits within a broader context of the challenges people face and the factors that underpin their wellbeing. Both the UNDP and UNICEF data provide useful insights.

In the UNICEF study, when asked about their current circumstances as many as three in ten (32 per cent) of the respondents did not have access to clean water, half did not have a mobile phone, 70 per cent lacked internet access and 75 per cent did not have sufficient money for day-to-day living. In many respects, therefore, while migrants were more likely to feel – and be – safe from violence and abuse, what they lacked were basic necessities to help them live a 'decent' life.

It was revealing that when asked about the services or support they felt they needed but could not access, the biggest gap was 'employment services', with as many as 43 per cent saying they were excluded from these. This question was asked of those aged 14–24 years, so when the data is filtered to those aged 18–24 years, as many as half felt excluded from being able to access a job. Furthermore, when asked about what support they felt they most needed, they prioritised services such as education, or support such as a job or money, so that they would have the skills and means to improve their own lives and those of their families.

In the UNDP research, as noted above, the vast majority of migrants in Europe felt that their safety had improved since leaving their home area. However, in other respects the respondents were more negative. For example, just 49 per cent said they were better off socially in Europe; and just 43 per cent felt better off overall. In addition, three

quarters of those interviewed said that they often or sometimes went without earning enough money, and that unmet demand for support from employment agencies was six times higher than unmet support from the police. All this evidence clearly demonstrates that understanding the lived experience of migrants – even those migrants who travelled irregularly through the very dangerous routes to Europe – should not just focus on the danger and risk element of moving. Their experiences, and the difficulties and/or opportunities they face, are considerably broader than this.

Why is this important?

Downplaying the dangers faced by a minority of those who move is neither helpful nor ethically sound. However, it needs to be placed in a broader context of migration. Too often research on migration in and from Africa concludes with recommendations that advocate for the implementation of the Global Compacts, for strengthening domestic legislation, for requesting that more resources be spent on protective and social services, and on demanding that people be treated equitably regardless of their background or status. All of these types of recommendation are worthy and important, but they do not tell the full story. There is also a danger that research that is used to generate alarming headlines may promote the agenda of a particular international organisation or pressure group, but can fail to add much to the policy or programmatic debate, or, more worryingly, does a disservice to those whom the research purports to represent.

The existing policy approaches in Europe have had a direct impact on migrants, including those moving within and from the Horn of Africa region. The long-established migration routes to Gulf States and South Africa – the other two dominant routes out of the region – while numerically more significant, have had significantly less impact on global policy discussions. Instead, much of the international migration and refugee policy response has been driven by the desire to prevent and/or

regulate movement into Europe by making movement increasingly dangerous through toughened internal and cross-border controls. In other words, it has been driven largely by the few who reach Europe irregularly. At the same time, encampment policies within the region have further restricted movement for refugees, many of whom are living in protracted situations of displacement. Refugee populations have remained sorely neglected in proportion to the response targeted at those who leave, or try to leave, the continent, and this neglect has led some to opt to move onwards, often using irregular means.

The net impact of these policies has created an environment in which many of those who leave their homes to seek safety and better livelihoods elsewhere do so *against* the policy grain rather than with it. As a result, their movement becomes labelled as 'irregular' inasmuch as their movement has not been officially sanctioned by national and international policy norms. They are then at risk of harm associated with their irregularity, exacerbated by the fact that many deploy invisibility as a strategy to survive: they are unlikely to access formal protection services that might be seen as a threat to their safety or autonomy, or both.

The growing policy and academic interest in drivers of migration frequently takes as its starting point the policy objective of stopping it, and the narrative of danger becomes the rationale for doing so as a point of humanitarian concern. In response, we advocate that policy-makers and programme actors should reconsider how they both commission research on migration and present findings in relation to danger. A paradigm shift is required: from danger as the central theme describing migration journeys to one that understands that danger is one element in the lived experience of those who move; and from danger being regarded as something that must be stopped at all costs, to a practical understanding that dangers will always be present and that those who move need support when they weigh up risks and benefits of staying or going.

We believe a recalibration is important. Without it, policymakers will not appreciate the complexity of movement, and their approaches could make migration more, rather than less, dangerous. In situations in which this happens, actors mandated to *protect* migrants risk being seen by migrants as obstacles to migration rather than as mechanisms for support.

Notes

- ¹ The term 'migrants' is used to cover all of these categories in the rest of this practice note.
- ² The Khartoum Process is a policy platform designed to strengthen cooperation and create a sustainable regional dialogue on mobility and migration with a specific focus on smuggling and trafficking.
- ³ Children make up a quarter of all detected trafficking cases globally and 64 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa (UNICEF and IOM 2017).
- ⁴ The same question was also asked about their journey 'from after leaving your home area to before you arrived here'. Results were similar to the results presented in **Figure 1**.
- ⁵ The findings are similar to the perceptions of safety of rural to urban migrant children in Southern Africa, 78 per cent of whom reported feeling safe after they migrated (Save the Children 2015).
- ⁶ The question about perceptions of safety in the home area did not ask the respondent to differentiate between how safe they felt in the daytime or at night.

Competing Interests

Both authors were paid consultants for the UNICEF and UNDP projects cited in this article.

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