

# “Don’t forget, you’re the responsible person.”

## Opportunities, Obligations, and Challenges Experienced by Young Adult Eritrean Migrants in Kampala

A FEINSTEIN INTERNATIONAL CENTER BRIEF 

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### Key Messages

- For Eritrean migrants who are still in Africa, Kampala is seen as the best of bad options in terms of political freedom and safety. However, most migrants have failed to meet their goals, and they consider their stay in Uganda to be temporary while they attempt to reach the west.
- Eritrean migrants in Kampala are largely remittance receivers. Most respondents who do not own a small business have found it nearly impossible to make enough income to cover their expenses.
- The most commonly cited challenge by respondents is the difficulty of receiving refugee status in Uganda, and corresponding services and livelihood opportunities, without paying bribes.
- Migrants’ decisions are often part of a bigger strategy within a household to gradually move an entire family to safety and better opportunities outside of Eritrea.
- Some migrants in the sample are more vulnerable than others. These include people born in rural areas, “pioneering siblings” (i.e., the first in a family to emigrate), females, survivors of torture, and people without refugee status or documentation. These populations often have the highest needs and protection risks, yet in this study they also have the hardest time accessing non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and services.

### Research Overview

This paper summarizes findings from one of four studies on youth, migration, and resilience that emerged from a collaboration between Save the Children Federation, Inc. and the Feinstein International Center, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University. This study

focuses on young Eritrean migrants to Kampala, Uganda. The other projects researched i) young men from rural areas working in the platform economy in Bengaluru, India; ii) young rural-urban migrants to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; and iii) protected persons in Vienna, Austria who arrived as minors. The research team produced a synthesis report that discusses

common themes and practical implications across all four contexts. In addition to these materials, the virtual repository (<https://fic.tufts.edu/research-item/partnership-on-youth-migration-and-resilience/>) houses the full final capstone documents, the final presentations, and the data collection tools.

### Research objective

This study explores how young adult Eritreans who live in Kampala develop livelihood and protection strategies and access informal and formal institutions. It further examines what factors in migrants' lives and backgrounds prior to arrival influence their ability to successfully develop these strategies and respond to shocks and stresses. The research specifically considers two categories of variables in migrant experiences prior to arrival in Kampala: 1) the migration journey and transit countries prior to Uganda; and 2) migrants' lives, situations, and family structures prior to departure from Eritrea.

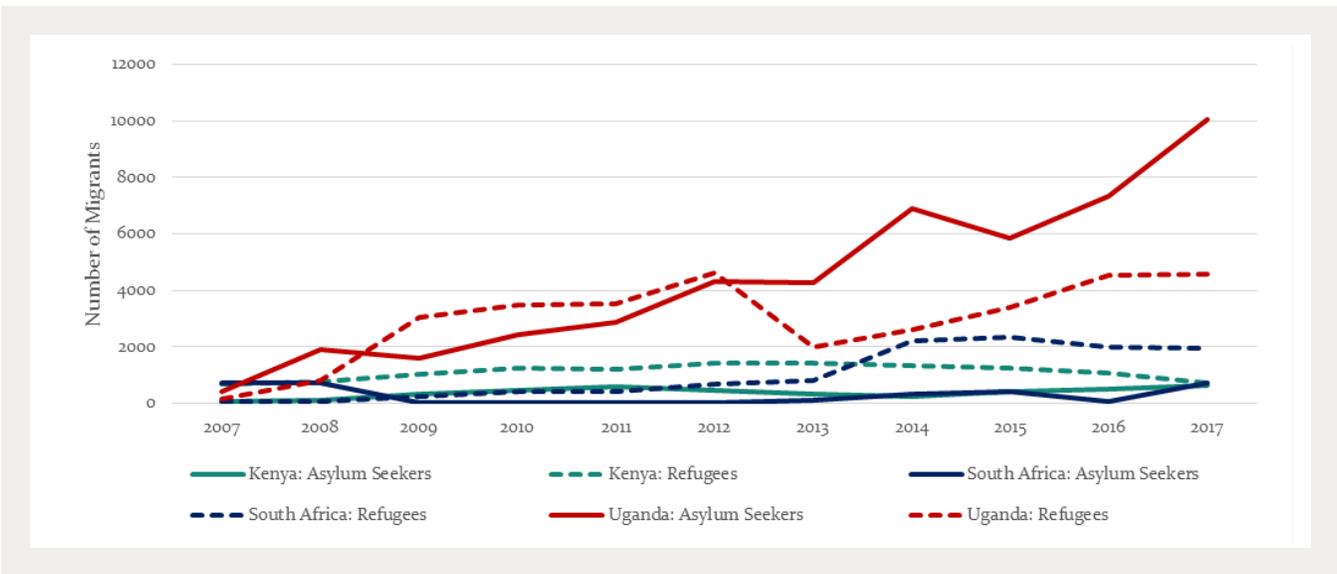
This study is valuable to the international community, and Eritreans themselves, for three reasons. First, it can help humanitarian actors develop relevant services and policies for young

Eritrean migrants. Second, by exploring the links between Eritrean migrants' origins, their different journeys to Kampala, and their ongoing livelihood strategies, those invested in their well-being can better understand their decision-making processes and the factors that increase resilience. Finally, this study can provide useful and potentially generalizable information on urban youth migrant resilience strategies and challenges.

## Background

Eritrean migration is one of largest contributors to global irregular migration.<sup>1</sup> Roughly 5,000 people flee Eritrea a month, leading the country to be known as "the world's fastest emptying nation."<sup>2</sup> Due to Eritrea's policy of forced military conscription, many of these migrants are youth traveling on their own to avoid indefinite service. There is substantial literature regarding Eritrean migrants who traveled north to Israel or west and onward to Europe, the most popular long-distance routes to date. Much less has been written about those who journeyed south. Since migration from Eritrea is not slowing and shifting geopolitical realities in the west have made the northern and western routes more fraught and inaccessible, more Eritreans are heading south, and to Uganda specifically (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers residing in Kenya, South Africa, and Uganda: 2007–2017 (UN Persons of Concern Data).



<sup>1</sup> The International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines irregular migration as the "movement of persons that takes place outside the laws, regulations, or international agreements governing the entry into or exit from the State of origin, transit or destination." See [www.iom.int/key-migration-terms](http://www.iom.int/key-migration-terms).

<sup>2</sup> Mark Anderson, "Trapped and Bereft in the World's 'Fastest Emptying Country,'" *Guardian*, September 28, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/28/eritrea-military-service-life-people-left-behind> (accessed June 20, 2018).

The reasons respondents cited for leaving Eritrea align with those in existing literature: 1) avoidance of forced indefinite military conscription; 2) persecution of born-again Christians; 3) pursuit of financial opportunities and a better life; and 4) attempting to reunite with relatives who already left Eritrea. However, three unique phenomena led Eritreans to migrate to Kampala specifically. First, some Eritreans arrived in Kampala through their participation in Israel's (continuing) "voluntary departure" program, in which Eritrean and Sudanese asylum seekers are given a plane ticket and a United States dollar (USD) 3,500 cash transfer to relocate to Uganda or Rwanda through a quasi-formalized but unacknowledged process.<sup>3</sup> Second, Eritreans who had established livelihoods in Juba, South Sudan left for Kampala following sustained violence in Juba and the devaluation of the South Sudanese pound. Finally, although the 2018 peace agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia brought hope to the Horn of Africa, it also created concerns for Eritreans living in Ethiopia. Multiple respondents who are political activists or who are wanted by the Eritrean government came to Kampala from Addis Ababa following the peace agreement out of a fear that Eritrean security forces and spies would soon be able to operate freely in Ethiopia.

## Methods

This descriptive study utilized a mixed-methods approach by employing qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys in addition to a literature review. These instruments enabled the triangulation of data, strengthening its validity and providing a more comprehensive picture of life in Kampala among Eritrean migrants. In total, the study included 8 key informants, 32 open-ended interview respondents, and 71 survey respondents. Nearly all the 32 qualitative respondents first completed the quantitative survey (93%). In addition, the lead researcher took field notes regarding her observations. These proved valuable when she observed people's homes, had informal conversations, or reconnected with respondents at

later dates. The following inclusion criteria were used for the study:

- i. Born in Eritrea
- ii. Between the ages of 18–35
- iii. Lived in Kampala for less than five years

Informants were recruited using snowball sampling, with three distinct snowballs. The research team also frequented places popular with the Eritrean population, primarily cafes, pubs, and stores along Ggaba Road (a central artery through an area where many migrants live). The team approached random individuals to see if they met the inclusion criteria and would be interested in participating.

### Limitations

This study worked on a tight timeframe and involved only 73 informants and 8 key informants; therefore, findings should be confirmed through further research. It relied on snowball sampling, which could contribute to selection bias. Translation also presented challenges. Finally, since many study questions are similar to those asked by the Office of Prime Minister Refugee Office (OPM) officials or consulate officers migrant responses might have been further biased to influence their application for refugee status.

## Key Findings

While nearly every respondent found Kampala to be preferable to Eritrea, they expressed two major obstacles to success: lack of financial capital and lack of political status.

### *"Without money you are garbage:" Reliance on remittances*

One respondent shared, "Before I came to Kampala, I got advice from people who were already here."<sup>4</sup> They told me almost all Eritreans staying in Kampala have people who give them financial support from abroad. When I told them I didn't have anyone who could help me like that, they warned me that I would have a very difficult time here." This

<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed explanation of this topic, please see the full report or Sigal Rozen, "Deported to the Unknown," (The Hotline for Refugees and Migrants in Israel, December 2015) and Amnesty International, "Forced and Unlawful: Israel's Forced Deportation of Eritrean and Sudanese Asylum-Seekers to Uganda" (June 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Respondent Interview 022. Kampala. August 8, 2018.

sentiment encompasses the importance of receiving remittances from relatives in the west to develop livelihoods and make ends meet. Just under half of respondents reported receiving remittances while only three respondents reported sending them. This finding complicates traditional notions that remittances only flow from migrants to the country of origin.

Outside of remittances, the most lucrative source of income is opening small businesses. Business owners were significantly more likely to have more money available to them each month compared to other respondents within the study population. This creates a challenging catch-22: migrants need financial capital to start a business but need a business to generate capital. Remittances are essential, as they enable respondents to have a steady stream of income to use in developing a sustainable livelihood, surviving unemployment, or receiving low wages.

#### *“Refugee status should be free:” Corruption and desperation in the asylum-seeking process*

A larger concern for young Eritrean migrants in Kampala is the pervasiveness of corruption in the asylum process. Eritreans reported that they are expected to pay bribes when they report to the police station, when they apply for asylum at OPM, and when they appeal if their first application is rejected. For example, of the 13 respondents who are currently applying for asylum, 10 reported paying bribes at the police station to the Eritrean fixer, and most did not feel they had a choice about whether to pay a bribe.

With migrants sometimes paying hundreds of USD in bribes, those who are most poor feel that this avenue is unavailable to them. Without refugee status, migrants cannot access formal employment or services from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees or InterAid (the primary NGO for urban refugees in Uganda), or apply for asylum in many western countries. These factors increase their vulnerability. The system also appears to prey on vulnerable individuals. Whereas the average amount respondents reported paying in bribes at the police station is USD 22, a young woman traveling alone and migrants who came via

Israel reported being demanded to pay as much as USD 70. It is not surprising that migrants’ most frequently cited desired form of support is access to a free and fair asylum-seeking system.

Although these challenges were crosscutting among migrants who took different migration routes and who came from different backgrounds, some respondents had compounding difficulties that made these shocks and stresses harder to overcome. The most vulnerable groups include “pioneering siblings” emigrating from Eritrea, people born in rural areas, females traveling alone and without relatives in Kampala, survivors of torture and trafficking, and people without refugee status or formal documentation. As the first two groups were the most novel findings, they will be discussed in detail.

#### *“I was just looking after my siblings:” Migration as a family affair*

In the case of Eritrean migrants, migration is often part of a calculated strategic plan made with the broader household. Eritrea’s mandatory military conscription and its disruptions to familial structures and income lead to distinctive migration chains. Many Eritreans attempt to leave Eritrea before they are recruited for the military (at age 18) or shortly after they begin serving. Therefore, the oldest sibling, usually male, tends to leave first. This study described the first siblings in a household to leave as “pioneering siblings.” These migrants represent 43% of the qualitative sample.

This study found that birth order could have major implications for a young migrant’s resilience capabilities and well-being. Families often make a significant investment in the pioneering sibling’s migration, with an expectation that he/she will send remittances back to support the family and fund the next siblings’ journeys. Beyond feeling this burden, pioneering siblings also struggle because they lack the resources and support system that they hope to provide to their younger brothers and sisters. This was most evident in discussions with younger siblings, who benefited from advice and connections from pioneering siblings, in addition to financial capital in the form of remittances. One respondent described how his older sister, who already reached the west, guided him through the process of coming

to Kampala, sent him remittances, and gave him an interest-free loan to start a business. After experiencing success with his business, he paid his sister back for the loan and no longer needs financial support.

*"I don't have anyone to see and depend on:" Rural migrants and a cycle of vulnerability*

This study found that respondents born outside of the urban center of Asmara, Eritrea faced notable disadvantages as migrants. Respondents born in rural areas had less financial capital, were less likely to have refugee status, and felt less happy than migrants born in Asmara. This finding was significant, even after controlling for age at the time of the survey, departure age, marital status, gender, and education level. This is likely due to obstacles set in motion long before they migrated (see Figure 2).

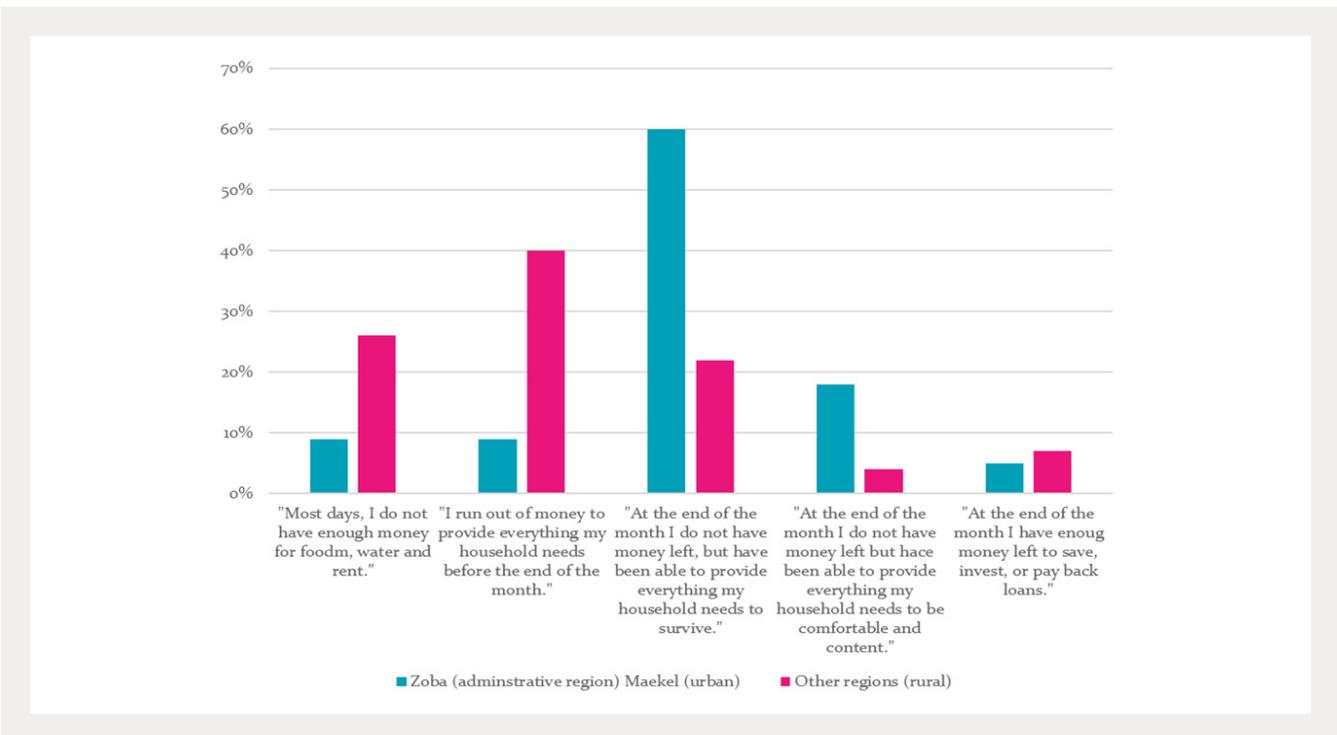
In the Eritrean context, rural children, particularly boys, are likely to drop out of school at a young age to help on the family farm, resulting in low educational attainment. Their families also have less

financial capital to invest in their migration, leading them to choose more risky migration journeys and to feel a greater sense of responsibility to send money home. Since acquiring refugee status often requires hefty bribes, it logically follows that rural migrants, with their limited financial capital, are unable to obtain this status. As one key informant explained, "Those villagers, because of the way in the village, the whole family were there [in Eritrea]. No one was in Europe, so no one could help them."<sup>5</sup>

## Implications

This study's findings draw relevant conclusions for policymakers and practitioners working directly with Eritrean migrants as well as for the field of migration more broadly. Although most challenges faced by Eritrean migrants require political solutions, Eritrean migrants also have many needs that could be addressed by closing gaps in current programming and targeting. Among the 71 survey respondents, 88% have not benefited from any NGO or government services in Kampala. This study

Figure 2. Influence of Region of Origin on Migrants' Monthly Wealth in Kampala (statistically significant)



<sup>5</sup> Key Informant Interview 03. Kampala. August 5, 2018.

concluded that a primary reason for this finding might be the lack of refugee status among most respondents due to extortion and a high rejection rate of Eritrean applicants. For example, one woman, who had been paying expensive medical bills out of pocket, explained her anger after being told that people with refugee status could receive financial help with medical expenses, but that she could only receive such status through a multi-year process. It is critical that humanitarian actors take efforts to include young migrants in their programs, regardless of whether they have refugee status. This can be achieved through advocating with government partners and donors to allow their inclusion and designing programs that are open to all.

Second, this study suggests that occupational skills training may be of marginal benefit to young migrants in markets in which employment opportunities are scarce or unavailable due to migration status. To address this, humanitarian actors may wish to prioritize helping migrants gain the financial capital, literacy, and tools needed to start microenterprises and manage their limited financial resources.

Finally, this study identified categories of youth migrants that are particularly vulnerable, as described above. These individuals are often less resilient due not to their journeys or strategies but to compounding layers of vulnerability, including geography, family circumstances, birth order, lack of education, and gender. These circumstances make it more difficult to bounce back following shocks or stresses such as theft, injury, and loss of livelihood. Although global refugee systems ideally identify and support the most vulnerable migrants, this study found that many Eritreans in Kampala fall through

the cracks. Migrants who lack savings, strong social ties in Kampala, or family in the west have less support in establishing themselves, generating income, and navigating the complex migration institutions in Kampala. They are thus not only more susceptible to extortion in the asylum process but also less likely to be in a position to finance these bribes. They also appear to be more likely to engage in risky behavior in Kampala and chose dangerous migration routes and strategies. There is a dearth of programs—whether from humanitarian actors or the host government—that support these high-risk youth migrants.

## Areas For Further Study

Building upon this study, further research should be conducted on how families make decisions regarding migration, the concept of pioneering siblings, and the role that birth order might play in youth migrant resilience. Additionally, it could be beneficial to conduct further research on the operations of OPM in Kampala to understand the function that corruption plays in this system and the ways in which the process can be a fairer and freer one for migrants.

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