

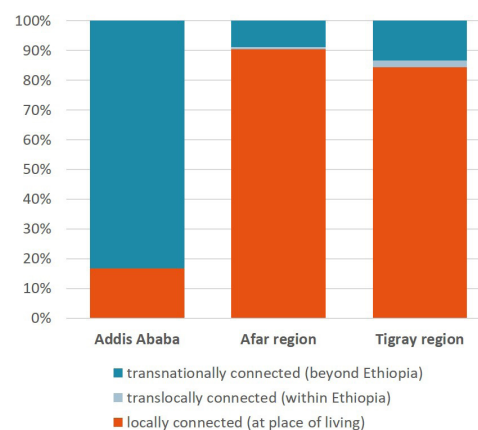
Supporting self-reliance for local integration: Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia

Many Eritrean refugees who live in camps in Ethiopia have no translocal or transnational connections. This means they have little opportunity to move onward from the camp and resettle elsewhere. However, many of them have strong connections with the host community, and even the most vulnerable refugees show resilience in everyday life. For these refugees, local integration may be the only way out of protracted displacement. Donors and aid agencies can help. TRAFIG research has found that the ability to break free from protracted displacement is mainly determined by a refugee's networks and connectivity. Local and translocal connectivity enable refugees to move out of camps, secure livelihoods, widen future chances and process their onward mobility.

Eritreans have a long history of displacement due to conflict and authoritarian rule. Many continue to seek refuge in neighbouring Ethiopia, which until our research ended in October 2020 hosted close to 180,000 Eritrean refugees—a number that may have changed since the conflict in Tigray began one month later. They are distributed across six different camps: The Afar live in two camps in the Afar regional state; the Kunama populate the Shimelba camp in Tigray, and the Tigriyna (Eritrean Tigrinya speakers) found refuge in the Mai-Aini, Adi Harush and Hitsats camps.

The Afar, Kunama and Tigriyna have differing connections to people within Eritrea, Ethiopia and/or countries around the world. Afar and Kunama have better local, yet less transnational connections than the Tigriyna. This lack of translocal 'connectivity' means that they have few to no options to move on from a refugee camp or its surroundings and find a new place to live. Without this connectivity or mobility, the Afar and Kunama inside camps—i.e. with little access to translocal support—are highly vulnerable to a state of endless waiting and uncertainty, a common feature of protracted displacement.

Eritrean refugees' personal networks beyond their place of living



Source: TRAFIG survey data, n=394

Solidarity is the basis for strong host-refugee relations

Yet, the Afar and Kunama refugees are neither helpless nor passive. Quite the contrary: They show remarkable initiative to integrate locally. It helps that refugees share kinship, language and culture with their hosts. Also, the Kunama, agriculturalists hosted in a fertile area in northern Ethiopia, have been sharing labour and knowledge with their Ethiopian kin and other host populations in sharecropping arrangements that allow them to maintain their livestock.

The Afar are mainly pastoralists and come from eastern arid lowland in Eritrea. They are hosted in the Afar region of Ethiopia, where similar livelihood activities are found. Unlike the Kunama, very few have managed to bring their herd livestock over the border. Their livelihood depends on local solidarity of Ethiopian Afar, who see them as kin regardless of national identities: "Afar is Afar".

Muna, an Afar Eritrean refugee woman who produces and sells traditional palm frond mats, explains:

Those who have land allow us to take grass from it without any problem. We meet them [the hosts] when we go to cut and collect wood, and there we ask them if we can take grass, and they agree. The people here share everything they have. They cannot afford to help us like an organisation because they do not have the resources (...) [but] They help us with everything they can (Sint-AAU-MG-033-ETH).

Examples of the Kunama and Afar refugees in Ethiopia show how local integration is possible for groups of refugees with good local connections, yet not many transnational connections or prospects of onward mobility.

Strong relations with hosts help refugees become self-reliant

This solidarity gives way to new livelihood arrangements between refugees and hosts: a joint cotton venture in Aysaita camp in the Afar region brought 15 refugees and 28 host community members who were willing to contribute their land together. Mekane Yesus, a local NGO, helped to organise the start-up and supported them with ploughs, cottonseed and pesticide. The refugees invested 300,000 Birr (US \$7,400) as payment for additional workers and after six months of labour, the venture collected their first cotton harvest. In the end, the refugees themselves, refugees in the camps, and also the host community at large benefitted.

International NGOs present in the Afar region praise the joint cotton venture as a successful model of entrepreneurship and local integration. Yet, there is a very significant hurdle as Mohammed, an Eritrean Afar and one of the members of the venture underscores: “You cannot start [such] a business if you do not have any capital to start with.” In other words, refugees can only go so far with local connections and solidarity: their ability to cope with protracted displacement or even integrate locally depends in large part on the access to and availability of jobs, land and livelihood activities. This is where aid should come in. Aid agencies have to understand local contexts and support existing initiatives and potentials from the bottom up.

Examples of the Kunama and Afar refugees in Ethiopia show how local integration is possible for groups of refugees with good local connections, yet not many transnational connections or prospects of onward mobility. It also shows how even the most vulnerable groups are never completely reliant upon aid—they use their own efforts and abilities to improve their daily lives. Donors and aid agencies can support endeavours to achieve self-reliance so that start-ups like the joint cotton venture become the rule, not the exception.

Local integration of refugees is a viable solution to protracted displacement when...

... solidarity is the basis of host-refugee relations

Shared language, kinship bonds, socio-cultural and religious similarities ease communication and heighten trust between hosts and refugees. The example of Afar shows that even in resource-scarce environments, a culture of solidarity and sharing facilitates local integration.

... refugees can make use of their knowledge and skills

Virtually all refugees show resilience, but not all are able to be self-reliant. Where they can use their own knowledge and engage in livelihood activities of their own choice outside of camps, new markets and jobs have been created to the benefit of all refugees and hosts.

... refugees’ own initiatives are adequately supported

Refugees can make significant contributions to local economies. Free access to the markets, credits and remittances are decisive for engaging in self-reliant behaviour. Donors and aid agencies can proactively look for refugees’ initiatives, provide training and support and fill resource gaps.

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