Information and communication technologies, mobility and migration in the Horn of Africa

Introduction and purpose of research

This research brief presents the key findings and recommendations of an extensive literature review on how Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) affect intentions and behaviours related to mobility within the Horn of Africa (HoA).

The report investigates:

- Types of technologies and platforms used in the HoA, and who access and used them
- The multifaceted impacts of ICTs on mobility and migration
- The influence of ICT use on livelihoods and 'everyday' mobility (such as for pastoralist populations)
- Existing policy and programming efforts vis-à-vis ICT and mobility and migration
- Key gaps in knowledge on the relationship between ICT and mobility/migration

Key findings

Digital inequalities in the HoA are prevalent and multifaceted. They relate to geographical location, gender, social class and other factors.

Basic phone access and use is often integral to mobile livelihoods and to processes of migration and displacement. In some contexts, mobile money is vital for displaced populations and plays a critical role in the everyday livelihoods in the wider societies in which migrants settle.

Women's use of new technologies has often been constrained by wider digital inequalities relating to poverty, gendered power relations, and (male) control of limited financial resources needed for access. These gendered inequalities remain important, although in many parts of the HoA, more research is

needed into how the proliferation of smartphones is affecting women and their abilities to safely use ICTs.

Basic mobile phone use has connected urban with rural areas, further linking modes of production and livelihood strategies across distances. These connections are important alongside wider rural-urban migration/urbanization patterns, and ICTs facilitate multidirectional mobility between cities and rural areas.

There is limited conclusive evidence to show that increased access to ICTs 'causes' increased internal or international migration. Migration is driven or constrained by multiple interrelated factors, including the maturity level of digitization, and causation may work both ways, as mobility itself can accelerate the

diffusion and use of technology to wider communities.

The proliferation of mobile phones among displaced populations has precipitated a shift by humanitarian actors towards cash assistance through SMS-based mobile money systems. This raises questions about beneficiaries' digital literacy, humanitarian data security, and the role of local telecommunication companies.

ICTs may both encourage and discourage mobility and migration. People's needs to physically travel may be reduced as ICTs can connect them 'virtually' to local and distant opportunities. However, ICTs may also facilitate the growth of social networks that provide opportunities for people to move.

Multilateral organisations such as the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), the World Bank and IMF, and multinational companies are major actors in influencing ICT policies in the region. Private sector companies, educational institutions, parastatals, local NGOs, civil society and media organisations also play a role in shaping ICT policies. There is limited evidence on how the resources and expertise of international actors may be integrated into local contexts.

Key recommendations

Support migrants' multidirectional mobility between rural and urban areas, and support facilitation of different kinds of remittances – potentially contributing to technology diffusion and greater rural ICT access and use. Policy actors should engage with communications companies to promote the affordability of ICT access and develop more accessible forms of engagement with services such as mobile money and market information systems.

Target the digital inclusion and literacy needs of marginalised groups beyond the mere provision of ICT devices. Approaches must take into consideration local contexts relating to gender, culture, local knowledge and skills, power relations and macro-socioeconomic conditions, as these have impacts on household livelihoods and physical and virtual (im)mobility.

Initiate or further develop digital literacy discussions in HoA contexts in relation to users' online safety and awareness of the data they generate on digital platforms. Questions around the 'digital rights' of marginalised mobile populations have yet to be widely considered in many HoA countries. These questions should be integrated into digital literacy-type programming and could have implications for wider online safety, e.g. in terms of people's engagement with mis/disinformation.

Learn from and use the experiences of returned international migrants in the HoA to promote 'safer' mobility through education-based initiatives. Research has shown that much can be learnt from engaging with current or former migrants about their experiences of ICT use on journeys, and in host community contexts. Insights should be incorporated into educational outreach to potential migrants, raising awareness of the risks (mis/dis-information, abuses, scamming) and developing broader digital literacy skills to navigate complex modern information environments.

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