

Translation of the presentation letter for the research report ‘Niets is wat het lijkt’

Addressed to Mr. Asscher, Dutch Minister of Social Affairs and Employment

Date: 15 November 2016

Subject: Research Eritrean organisations in The Netherlands

Dear Mr. Asscher,

It does not happen often that as researchers one encounters that much fear, mistrust, contradictions, trauma and profound misery as we have found in the accompanying research – based on thorough analysis of more than 100 interviews, literature/document analysis and focus group discussions - within the community of Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands. At the same time, we have encountered plenty of positive input in the interviews and the desire to face the future with a clean slate. We refer to the report for the answers to the questions that you supplied us with.

Transcending the boundaries of the exact research questions of this study we would like to make use of the occasion to describe the problems and issues that we have found in this presentation letter.

Concern

There are valid reasons for concern about the integration and participation of the members of the Eritrean community in the Netherlands. Based broadly on our research, we want to address some common themes in this presentation letter of the research report ‘Niets is wat het lijkt’ (Nothing is what it seems’). The exact [summary](#) can be found at the end of the report

We will first elaborate on the findings for the whole community and the three migration waves¹. After this, we will zoom in on the specific problems for the third migration wave.

Gaps

There is a gap between the Eritrean culture and the Dutch culture: collectivistic versus individualistic. Refugees in all three migration waves encounter this gap. However, the gap is the most pronounced for refugees from the third wave. They often have a wrong image of the Netherlands. Conversely, Dutch people often have trouble to imagine what these refugees have been through.

In addition, a gap also exists between Eritrean refugees from the third migration wave and earlier waves. The refugees that are currently arriving in the Netherlands have a different culture, background and socio-economic status when compared to previous waves; they often come from rural areas, have

¹ **First wave** (1980-1998), Approx. 1.500 refugees A: 1980-1991 fleeing the independence war (members of the ELF and later of the EPLF; the predecessor of the PFDJ, the party of the current regime) B. 1991-1998 fleeing during the reconstruction of Eritrea due to various reasons; **Second wave** (1998-2010) Approx. 6000 refugees Since the border conflict with Ethiopia Fleeing the current regime **Third wave** (2010-current) Approx. 14.0000 refugees fleeing the current regime.

had little education and have often been confronted with the horrors of military service, detentions and fear in Eritrea and outside of it.

The refugees of the first wave hold a much more idealistic image of Eritrea. The third wave of refugees has lived in a completely different reality in Eritrea. They do not recognise the image of the older generation in the Netherlands at all. This can lead to incomprehension on both sides and that then leads to tensions between the different migration waves.

The people from the different waves thus have specific characteristics that offer points of departure for integration and participation. This calls for customized solutions, especially at the level of local communities. Customization should be supported by transfer of knowledge. This could for example take the shape of assisting local government- and welfare organisations in determining focus points for support of Eritrean refugees from the different waves. Some examples of such focus points are the role of fear and intimidation in the community, differences in culture, recruitment and deployment of interpreters, recruitment and selection of Eritrean volunteers, diaspora tax and other payments, problems related to debts, trauma, sexuality and religion. In addition, a clearer image of which specific organisations are linked with the Eritrean regime would be of benefit at local level.² Moreover, municipalities and other bodies could exchange experiences, for example about the cooperation with cultural mediators.

Fear and intimidation

Fear haunts the Eritrean community in the Netherlands. This fear is related to the awareness of surveillance and control. The PFDJ – the only political party in Eritrea with the president at its head – is operating in the Netherlands. The Eritrean embassy is run by the representatives of the PFDJ. It can be linked to a long arm that operates in the Netherlands via PFDJ-structures.

The interviews and documents show a seemingly unavoidable conclusion: the organisations allied with the PFDJ, the YPFDJ, NUEW and others are reporting to the embassy and to the political head of the PFDJ in Asmara. The vigilante group Eri-Blood, operating in European countries, is seen at gatherings and festivals. The interviews show fear that small groups of infiltrators travel along with the groups of new refugees. Infiltrators with assignments from the PFDJ in Asmara.

Beside this, local organisations play a role in the surveillance. The Orthodox Church is also managed by the PFDJ in the Netherlands and from Asmara, many respondents say.

Overt intimidation and humiliation contribute to the fear. The research shows that despite these obstacles, members from the Eritrean community in the Netherlands file police reports. A thorough analysis of the existing police reports can give a better overview of the problems and underlying patterns of intimidation.

In order to guarantee good integration of Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands, it is essential that the fundamental values of the rule of law are protected and that all citizens know themselves protected from fear, intimidation or worse. This is a task for the police and the justice system (Public Prosecutor),

² This research shows that this is not an easy task. Nothing is what it seems,... this specific topic included. Therefore, what will be needed can perhaps best be compared to the Public Administration Probity Screening Act (Wet bevordering integriteitsbeoordelingen door het openbaar bestuur – Bibob law), which has the goal of enabling the municipalities, provinces and ministries to test the integrity of holders of and applicants for permits and subsidies at the National Bibob bureau.

but that task is not an easy one. Fear for violence and intimidations contributes to a climate of isolation and mistrust. Judicial investigation into the practices of extortion, intimidation or worse are hampered by the uncommunicative nature of the community. Despite this, there are enough reasons to take police reports and notifications from the community very seriously and to dedicate special attention to these. Specialised investigation work and specialised judicial work from the Public Prosecutor is required in order to investigate these matters thoroughly. European cooperation in this area is recommended.

Diaspora tax and other financial contributions

The financial contributions are made in the embassy (diaspora tax) and at parties and festivals organised by the YPFDJ and other organisations allied to the PFDJ. The interviews show that pressure, compulsion and coercion are experienced, but some interviewees state that they make these contributions voluntarily. Further investigation of the contributions can show if – and under which circumstances – these contributions can be viewed as legal. The following aspects can be used as criteria for further investigation into the nature and scope of the financial contributions:

- Information on the reason behind the contribution (was sufficiently insightful and clear information available?)
- The manner of obtaining the contribution (was improper pressure used?)
- The extent of voluntariness or extortion (were the purposes improper?)
- The relation between the stated objectives of the contributions and the delivery of these (have any false pretences been made?)
- The transparency of the spending of the contribution (is there any public information available about the spending of the contribution?)
- The connection with illegal transactions (in which financial flow did the contribution end up and was this transaction legal?)

To what extent the financial contributions, the diaspora tax and the other contributions, are compatible with Dutch law (on gifts, services and taxation) is an open question and the practice of making consular services conditional to the financial contributions seems to be in contrary to the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations.

Religion

Most of the people in the Eritrean community are religious and the church is important for the community. This applies to the third wave of refugees to a greater degree. Traditional rituals are part of this. Religious priests are seen as important to solving physical and mental issues and can play a major role in processing trauma. Confidential and intimate information may be shared in this process. Confession plays an important but also sensitive part in this process. Some respondents point to a possibly critical function of confessors for young women in possibly sensitive and intimate matters. A great demand for religious training for interested refugees and religious leaders seems to exist within the community. It includes attention to trauma-processing, with special focus on the problems of women and girls. Existing Dutch churches and religious communities could play a supporting role in this.

Help desk

The integration of members of the Eritrean community is hampered by a constant stream of information and rumours within the Dutch Eritrean community with regard to matters such as safety and violence. A factor in this is the lack of trust in authorities and government, partly due to the experiences with government institutions in Eritrea and experiences during the routes of migration, human smuggling and human trafficking.

Due to the particular situation of Eritrea and Eritrean refugees and the high threshold and apprehension for authorities, this group is in need of an easy accessible help desk where members of the Eritrean community can express their concerns. In particular, a thorough understanding of the issues is crucial to win the trust of the community. Such a helpdesk could pick up signals from the Eritrean community about problems that seemingly occur, such as pressure, intimidation and other issues that form barriers for integration, so that problems and misconduct can be identified and communicated in a timely fashion to institutions involved.

Language is not enough

Learning the Dutch language is not enough to integrate into Dutch society. The Dutch culture and communication and policies are entirely different from what the Eritrean people are used to. Hence the entire way of communication has to be different. The manner of communication and learning to build a network are skills that need training. In the case of the third migration wave, the low level of education should be taken into account. Integration is not just about social variables, but also about spatial planning and housing: does an Eritrean person live in isolation with a group of other Eritreans at the edge of a city, or does an individual Eritrean live in a neighbourhood or village? The last case means that integration is easier, according to research in Nijmegen by Ezli Suitela. The explanation for this seems to be that the contact with Dutch people and Dutch organisations is easier. Via informal contacts the refugees can improve their Dutch and build a network. Through coaching and support from a buddy, the gap can be closed as quickly as possible, in the area of language as well as culture. It helps to reduce loneliness and timidity. The achievements of the buddy-system are substantial.

Job opportunities for the third wave

The third wave of refugees is young and highly motivated to quickly start working. They want to be of service to for example the elderly in society and they are more than willing to do the work that Dutch youth often does not aspire to. Looking for a goal and fulfilment of a duty are important motivators to many of the refugees in the third wave. They are motivated to build future perspectives and they are of an age when integration can be very successful. Initiatives in the area of (elderly) care and wellbeing exist and have shown to be successful (see report). Success stories like this should be actively promoted as examples for local institutions and care givers.

Trauma

The third wave of Eritrean refugees is predominantly young and has been through a lot. Furthermore, gruesome matters are shared via Facebook and other social media and many of them are or have been victim of – or have witnessed directly - extortion and torture, sexual violence and the consequences of disasters, or family members involved in disasters. Trauma does not facilitate integration. Asylum seeker organisations such as the Central Reception Organisation for Asylum Seekers (COA), Protection of

young refugees (NIDOS) and Refugee support (VluchtelingenWerk) take the signs seriously. New ways of detecting and treating serious traumas are being researched. This involves cooperation with specialised organisations. Practical help, serenity and clarity are needed. Asylum seeker organisations, mental health organisations and individual caretakers play a crucial role in dealing with trauma. The refugees from the third wave are being spread across the Netherlands and come into contact with many local healthcare institutions. It is therefore important that information exchange is organised at an overarching level. Communication and cooperation between separate providers and partners in the care chain is essential.

Debts

The refugees from the third wave in particular are vulnerable to financial debts, although migrants that have been in the Netherlands for longer may also have accumulated financial debts (including through informal transactions ('hawala'), debts to the family, as a result of extortion and human trafficking). Asylum seeker organisations, local governments and debt counselling organisations have very little information about the different financial flows that are relevant for Eritrean refugees. Counsellors often do not know what to pay attention to when mapping the financial situations. The (risks of) accumulation of debt should be made discussable, comprehensible and manageable. Debt counselling can play an important role locally, but then the organisations should be better informed of the often-specific debt problems that have been outlined (see report).

Documents for asylum application

The policies of European member states with regard to documents needed for asylum applications for Eritrean refugees are considerably divergent. Several countries no longer accept documents issued by the Eritrean embassies, consulates and churches because of the impression that such documents are issued in an arbitrary way. Lawyers and social workers we have interviewed do not feel that there is a uniform policy approach in the Netherlands in relation to documents from the embassy and the church. Therefore, some lawyers and social workers send their clients to the embassy or church to obtain documents while other lawyers see this as undesirable (due to the possible repercussions or reprisals for family members in Eritrea) and unreliable or arbitrary in nature. Some feel forced to send clients to the embassy and/or the church despite the objections mentioned, due to the lack of alternative procedures. There is a need for more clarity on the legal framework of the Dutch Integration and Naturalisation Service (IND). Lawyers and legal experts require a clear position stating that documents from the embassy are a negative indication for asylum procedures and family reunion procedures. Clear guidelines for alternative procedures are needed in order to legally demonstrate matters.

Interpreters

There is upheaval about interpreters that might be linked to the Eritrean regime. For this reason, people use the options of assistance less often and this hampers integration. There is a demand for a unified country-wide registration for Eritrean interpreters that work for the government and commercial translation services that can be used by public organisations and authorities. For this, it is useful to distinguish between different purposes for which the interpreters can be deployed (for example commercially, as cultural mediator, etc.).

Women and girls

The problems for women and girls among the refugees of the third wave require special attention. Many of them have been and are being abused. The situation of the women and girls is often experienced as uncomfortable – with feelings of unease, lack of self-confidence and feelings of guilt. The intimacy of the matters, the need for protection and the possibility of extortion can further increase the vulnerability of the women and girls. The researchers received reports of prostitution, which has reportedly taken significantly large shape (including among minors). Therefore, there is need of female counsellors within the Dutch asylum seekers organisations and with subsequent efforts to help women and girls to make decisions around sexuality and relations, in order to build trust to aid with integration in the Netherlands. The first step is enabling caretakers to speak about this with their pupils. The help desk that was mentioned earlier can play an important role in the issues of possible abuse and prostitution of minor girls.

We hope that the outcomes of the research shed more light on the extremely complex situation of the Eritrean community, with its kaleidoscopic abundance of organisations. If we can be of service in this, we are always willing to deliver serious input. The many Eritrean refugees deserve this, because, as we mentioned before, we have noticed a lot of new and positive signs and the will to face the future with a clean slate.

Sincerely,

Paul van Soomeren, DSP-groep Amsterdam

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