



# Trust and the Triggers of Trauma

Exploring Experiences of Trust between Eritrean  
Unaccompanied Minors and their caregivers  
in The Netherlands

May 2018



# Research Questions

What are the experiences that undermine trust-building between Unaccompanied Minors of Eritrea and their caregivers in The Netherlands and how do they strategize to overcome such obstacles?

RQ1. What means 'trust' in the context of Eritrea and in the context of the migration experiences of the unaccompanied minors?

RQ2. What are the experiences of trust/trust building of Unaccompanied Minors of Eritrea with the guardians, mentors and other professionals and stakeholders in The Netherlands?

RQ3. What strategies do Unaccompanied Minors of Eritrea use to build trust with guardians and mentors?

RQ4. What are the experiences and perceptions of guardians and mentors in relation to trust building with Unaccompanied Minors of Eritrea and what challenges do they face?

RQ5. What strategies do guardians and mentors use to build trust with Unaccompanied Minors of Eritrea?

## Comparative Research Design

Participants:  
25 minors  
11 care-givers

	Concerns regarding Trust		Strategies for trust-building	
	Minors	Caregivers	Minors	Caregivers
Language-difficulties	Language: The inability to communicate and express information or ideas in adequate ways and the inability to understand information provided by the carers;		Planning the future, setting goals: The minors are keen to be independent and to ensure that they can support themselves, which encourages them to learn the language, go to school and set realistic goals for their future;	
Communication and cultural differences	Communication: The minors experience a culture shock which undermines trust; they particularly fail to understand the culture of asking many questions and the invasion of privacy;	Communication: the main problem identified by the caregivers is not the level of Dutch language skills but particular problems in communication, attributed to cultural differences related to the situation in Eritrea;		Communication and dialogue: the caregivers prioritise the communication and dialogue, emphasising the investment in the dialogue must be a two-way stream in which caregivers should be present as active and culturally sensitive listeners;
Meeting Unrealistic Demands	Meeting Unrealistic Demands: The minors are requested by the Dutch agencies to produce papers which they are unable to produce. The guardians and mentors are seen as complicit when they communicate or explain this and the lack of understanding of their situation is transferred to mistrust of the carers;	Secrecy: A legacy of the situation in Eritrea may be a strong dependency on private and secret communication with family to protect them, which can be misinterpreted as mistrust by the caregivers;	Protecting privacy: The minors protect themselves in relation to issues that they feel are outside of the care-system and which cannot be resolved within the care-system. They insist on their privacy to deal with issues that are beyond the immediate care-situation.	Offering care with honesty: caregivers try to balance a caring attitude with an honest and sincere approach to the minor, in order to build predictability and clarity as a basis for trust-building;
Rigidity of Negotiating Solutions	Rigidity of Negotiating Solutions: The Dutch system of rule-based requirements is contrary to the transactional situation in Eritrea and on the migration routes where most solutions can be negotiated (or paid for). The minors fail to understand why the carers, who are supposed to be on their side, fail to offer practical and workable solutions for them which takes into account their real situation;	Insufficient clarity of responsibility: the caregivers find that the organisation of their responsibilities lacks clarity and that this interferes with their attempts to build trust with the Eritrean minors.		Flexibility to follow instinct: the caregivers stress the need to balance rules and clarity with responsiveness to the pupils and flexibility;
Recording of Care	Recording of Care: The recording of information about the minors is a source of mistrust which reminds the minors of their situation at home in which intelligence record all daily activities – they perceive this as that the system of control is more relevant than the response to their needs. This undermines the trust they have in their guardians and mentors, especially those that seem to behave bureaucratically.	Lack of quality time: the caregivers feel that their schedules are too rushed and that these do not allow them adequate time to spend time with the minors which they see as necessary to be able to build trust;		Offering trust: caregivers have positive experiences in offering trust to the Eitrean minors as a way of inviting reciprocity of such trust;
Group Dynamics		Group dynamics: these are related to the Eritrean minors perceived as operating within closed groups, with leaders and followers, which are difficult to penetrate;	Providing mutual support: The Eritrean minors rely on each other and offer mutual support in diverse ways, ranging from cooking together to lending money or contributing to ransoms for family members who are trapped in detention;	-
The Desire to be Trusted	The desire to be trusted: The minors express a clear desire to be trusted and are disappointed if they are confronted with the issue of lack of trust between carers and minors.	Elasticity of the truth: care-givers find it difficult to relate to the different levels of truth communicated by their pupils;		A safe environment: trust requires a safe environment, which is a challenge with minors who may have experienced very traumatising situation. The caregivers try to do everything in their ability to create a safe environment.

# Theoretical Framework

- Trust has cultural and social dimensions and experiences shape notions of trust and what is considered as trustworthy.
- Traumatic Stress impacts on the experience of trust in that a depressed feeling negatively shades information and therefore enhances feelings of distrust.
- The deeply traumatizing experiences of the Eritrean unaccompanied minors puts trust on trial.

# Trust in Eritrean context

- In a traditional Eritrean setting the word 'èmnet' (ክምነት) associates with the unconditional transcended bond of family, community and ancestors, bound in the belief in God.
- The PFDJ, the only political party in Eritrea which rules with brutal force, has replaced the traditional concept of 'trust' with the concept of 'loyalty' 'tameni' (ተክማኒ) – based on the proximity and adherence to the guidelines set out by the party.
- In Eritrea and beyond - on the dangerous trajectories, the sacred and hidden bond of unconditional trust competes with the public bond of utilitarian loyalty.
- Once minors arrive in The Netherlands, neither of these two concepts apply to inform their relationship with their new minders.
- The carers are, after all, not included in the sacred, life-giving and transcended creating force of 'èmnet' (ክምነት), nor do they qualify in the utilitarian concept of result-driven loyalty 'tameni' (ተክማኒ).





# Trust in Dutch context

- In Dutch, the word trust translates in vertrouwen, 'trouw' related to a bond, especially referring to a family-bond; the word 'trouwen' means to marry.
- 'Vertrouwen' in Dutch relates to an intimate relationship between two or more people in each other. It is the personal bond that is expressed in the word 'vertrouwen'.
- It expresses a judgement of the personal relationship, in the context of everything else that is also present.
- It is expressed in the moment of time, but with a time perspective associated with it that links past and future through the judgement of the relationship in the present.
- It is the relationship that is central in the judgement of vertrouwen, quite independent from what society or legal solutions offer and quite distinct from any societal contractual and legal arrangements.



# Language difficulties

The difficulties in language comprehension was only offered by the minors as an explanation for the lack of trust with the caregivers.

In their conversations, the minors showed an interest to set goals to help improve their future situation in The Netherlands.

It was also noted by caregivers that minors, once they settle down and are able to set goals, become more responsible in terms of school attendance and schoolwork.

# Communication and Cultural Differences

- The minors felt the Dutch way of asking many questions intrusive.
- The caregivers find the minors evasive and experience difficulty in conversations because of the short answers they receive back.
- Understanding the background of Eritrean refugees in their home-country and on the migration trajectories offered some explanation to caregivers.
- They also felt that techniques such as cultural listening and active listening assisted in overcoming communication problems.
- They emphasised the need to find ways of engaging in two-way communication and not expect the minors to do all the cultural bridging.

# Meeting Unrealistic Demands

- The legal situation of Eritrean minors is precarious, especially in relation to family-reunification and at times in relation to their own asylum request.
- The perception of the minors is that many requests for documentation are simply unrealistic.
- These unrealistic demands create a feeling that the request of such documents is done in ignorance or, worse, in bad faith.
- The care-givers emphasise that building trust demands they act professionally, and requires them to be clear and honest in terms of informing the minors about their situation.
- The caregivers identify that their sincerity is the best strategy to not lose trust and help the minors with the situation they face.

# Rigidity of Negotiating Solutions

- The ways of dealing with negotiations are a source of tension that has the potential to undermine trust.
- The Eritrean minors have survived in situations that are entirely transactional – if you give something, you may be able to negotiate a situation.
- The caregivers operate in a rule-based Dutch system in which predictability of rules and rights guide interactions and favour is not for sale.
- The caregivers also identify that problems exist because the minors are insufficiently clear of the responsibilities and roles of the caregivers.

# Records of Care

- The records of care is one way of coordination and avoiding confusion or duplication in the organisation of care, to record communications and events helps to ensure that requests are picked up by the right person.
- However, for the Eritrean minors, the system of recording actions and communication is reminiscent of the intelligence operation in Eritrea where deep community infiltration is the basis of a system in which all private and personal information can be used against you, or your family members.
- For any Eritrean, with the government or in opposition to it, this is a source of fear.
- The record-systems of information in the care system of the minors is perhaps a serious source of mistrust and a reason for the silence of Eritrean minors, their secrecy, privately and in groups and their reliance on their groups.
- The caregivers have not identified the issue of recording of information as a source of mistrust.

# Records & Intelligence in Eritrea

*“You see the Local Administration has all your data - how many people in the house, what they do; where they go and the use of the data is not in the interest of the people but is used against them and their families as a weapon”*

# Group Dynamics

- Whilst caregivers identify the group dynamics as a source of problem in trust – building, the minors identify the group dynamics as a source of support.
- The caregivers point to the hierarchy in the groups, the – to them, unhealthy nature of the leaders and followers within the groups and the secretive nature of the groups.
- The minors see the groups as mutual support systems to help solve practical issues and celebrations

# The Desire to be Trusted

- Both minors and caregivers want to be trusted and failure to establish trusted relationships are painful.
- The caregivers point to the difficulty of understanding the elasticity of the truth, while also pointing to their experience as a basis for understanding that truth appears at different levels within the lived reality of a minor.
- Caregivers emphasise their efforts to build a place of safety, in the best interest of the minor, as the main task they have that may contribute to building trust – eventually...



# Feelings-as-Information – avoiding traumatic triggers

- Feelings determine the way information is processed. Unhealed trauma is a source of negative information.
- The ways to address trauma need to be practical and geared towards the situation of the minors.
- Re-narration can be re-traumatising and it may not be necessary. Narration-based counselling may not be safe for the Eritrean minors.
- In the Eritrean Hitsats camps good results were obtained with a short smart phone based APP that provided an EMDR Self Help based intervention, called SHLCPTS).
- The practical nature of it and the privacy of using it on the phone was experienced as helpful by the young people who participated in the test of it.

# Recommendations

1. Explore options to change the perception of the records of care
2. Feelings of being misunderstood due to unreasonable legal demands  
re documentation
3. Flexibility and offering trust
4. Background of the situation in Eritrea and beyond
5. Addressing Trauma with appropriate tools
6. Reducing Triggers of Trauma

# Thank you!

Authors:

Prof. Dr. Mirjam van Reisen

Taha Al-Qasim

Carlotta Zanzottera

Rick Schoenmackers

Comments to: [mirjamvanreisen@gmail.com](mailto:mirjamvanreisen@gmail.com)