Rumors and Refugees:

How Government-Created Information Vacuums Undermine Effective Crisis Management

Based on original research by Melissa Carlsson, Laura Jakli & Katerina Linos

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Policy problem

In 2015, 800,000 displaced people arrived in Greece, yet less than 5% applied for asylum in Greece. Skipping registration makes access to critical services more difficult and increases the likelihood of arrest, deportation and extortion by smugglers. Aversion to using this legal pathway is even more puzzling considering that opportunities for formal relocation exist; the EU emergency relocation scheme agreed to relocate over 160,000 people from Greece and Italy to other EU states.

Factors such as economic conditions and language barriers cannot fully explain why so many refugees have opted to remain informal and use smugglers rather than use legal routes. In a recent article "Rumors and Refugees: How Government-Created Information Vacuums Undermine Effective Crisis Management", BIMI-members Carlson, Jakli and Linos study this important issue. They found three main ways through which governments unintentionally contribute to information vacuums and to weak policy compliance.

> ## Policy takeaways
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> Governments may prevent information vacuums and noncompliance with local policies through:
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> **1) Stable policies**
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> **2) Clear communication about existing policies**
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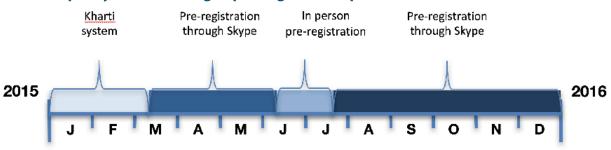> **3) Consistent implementation on the ground**

How governments cause information vacuums and weak compliance with policy

Carlson and colleagues find that government policies unintentionally decrease compliance with policy by increasing uncertainty among refugees. The uncertainty pushes refugees to seek information from informal sources, including smugglers. Refugees act based on informal information, often resulting in lower compliance with government policies. Governments contribute to this uncertainty in three main ways:

1)   Host governments' frequent policy shifts

In a crisis situation, rapid policy changes are often perceived as efficient ways to quickly improve ineffective policies. The numerous policy shifts in refugee pre-registration policies in Greece is a clear example (see figure 1). In a matter of several months, the Greek government shifted from registration by "Kharti", to pre-registration through Skype, to in-person pre-registration and back to pre-registration through Skype of refugees. Carlson and colleagues find that rapid policy shifts like these decrease trust in institutions and create uncertainty among refugees, driving them towards informal sources of information and support instead.

Fig. 1 Timeline policy shifts in refugee pre-registration policies in Greece

Kharti system | Pre-registration through Skype | In person pre-registration | Pre-registration through Skype

2015 — J F M A M J J A S O N D — 2016

2)   Restricting information dissemination

In some cases, governments actively restrict information about their policies to control refugee movement and ensure national security. UNHCR and the Greek government, for example, limited the information about the length of the asylum procedure to discourage refugees from leaving the country through smugglers. Yet, exactly these measures pushed asylum seekers to find information elsewhere, often ending up with information provided by smugglers and relying on rumors in decision-making.

3)   Inconsistent policy implementation

Government officials, particularly street-level bureaucrats, may enforce rules that deviate from official policies, which may lead to perceptions of arbitrariness and discrimination. After the implementation of the EU-Turkey deal, for example, the Greek government started a fast-track asylum procedure to determine whether applicants had a sufficient asylum claim. However, on the ground, government officials prioritized Syrian applications under the general assumption that they had valid asylum claims, while Afghanis' and Pakistanis' applications were delayed. These informal policies have short-term advantages, but in the long run they generate confusion and distrust, in turn creating an environment ripe for rumors and noncompliance.

What we can learn from the Greek case – The case of the 'Muslim' travel ban

This study carries important implications for how governments unintentionally push individuals to rely on extra-legal sources of support by creating an information vacuum. Carlson reflects on parallels of her study's findings with the Trump administration's travel ban for migrants from predominantly Muslim countries in a recent Washington Post article. The quick policy shifts, inconsistent information and implementation result in uncertainty similar to the situation in Greece. As Carlson states in the article: "This may lead legal residents to use informal and extralegal ways to get what they need. Once migrants begin to selectively comply with laws, the government will find it harder to enforce domestic policy." Carlson and colleagues' study shows that more stable policies, clear communication about existing policies, and consistent implementation on the ground may prevent the creation of an information vacuum and prevent noncompliance with local policies.

Government Action: Restricting Information Access

Unclear communication - An enlargement of 1 out of the 2 signs at the Scaramangas camp in Greece informing 2,000 refugees explaining the asylum process