

## **ABSTRACT for tropED website**

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**Thesis title:** In transit and trapped: Assessing the mental health status in forcibly displaced persons and migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa – A literature review with a focus on the Maghreb region in Northern Africa

**Key words:** mental health; forced displacement; refugees; containment; Sub-Saharan Africa; Maghreb

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### **Abstract:**

The overall objective of this critical literature review is to analyze the mental health status and mental disorders, as well as protective factors and coping mechanisms adopted by forcibly displaced persons and migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa during the flight and first asylum stages in transit countries within the Maghreb region of Northern Africa. The current situation for displaced Sub-Saharan Africans in the Maghreb region is difficult and complex with repeated exposure to various risks throughout the displacement experience, particularly during the first stages namely flight and first asylum in host countries. A number of factors outlined in the review contribute to this detrimental situation of forcibly displaced Sub-Saharan Africans and will impact on the psychological wellbeing of these individuals. The resurgence of ethno-religious conflicts and the continuation of protracted conflict situations in Sub-Saharan Africa are responsible for recent mass displacement and coinciding traumatisation within the region. Furthermore, the securitization of EU immigration and asylum policies hinders displaced populations from seeking asylum and assistance in Europe. The continuous criminalization of refuge seeking creates situations whereby confinement of displaced populations is not uncommon, particularly in detention facilities. Displaced Sub-Saharan Africans often find themselves trapped in transit in the Maghreb region seeking refuge in camp settings or in urban centers with limited infrastructure to accommodate refugees, asylum seekers or IPDs. Recent uprisings and crises within the region pose additional imminent threats to these population groups, exacerbating detrimental impacts on the mental health of forcibly displaced Sub-Saharan Africans in Northern Africa. The examination of specific mental disturbances and disorders prevalent within the subject group is thus key to this literature review, particularly from a cross-cultural perspective. However, not only risk factors exist leading to ill health in displaced persons, but also identifying protective factors can lead to better adjustment, resilience and prevention of psychological distress and mental disorders. Analysis of the key literature suggests that there are indeed serious mental health concerns among displaced Sub-Saharan populations within the Maghreb region with clear indication of heightened prevalence of PTSD, depressive and anxiety disorders, as well as behavioral and conduct disturbances. Recent developments have exacerbated the vulnerabilities of displaced Sub-Saharan Africans inevitably putting them at a potential higher risk for developing mental health problems. Consequently, this can lead to general long term

impairments, clearly an issue that needs further examination from a public health perspective. Emphasis on cross-cultural psychopathologies and a gender perspective of mental health and displacement are crucial to this review. Moreover, contextual protective factors leading to resilience and particular coping mechanisms within displaced individuals have been identified as income-generating and creative activities, private accommodation, and materially secure conditions. Social and personal protective factors contributing to a better mental health outcome are social capital including family and community-based support systems, spirituality and religious practice, participation and empowerment. Framing forced displacement and consequential mental health outcomes with a human rights approach is imperative from a humanitarian perspective and useful for advocacy and awareness raising purposes.