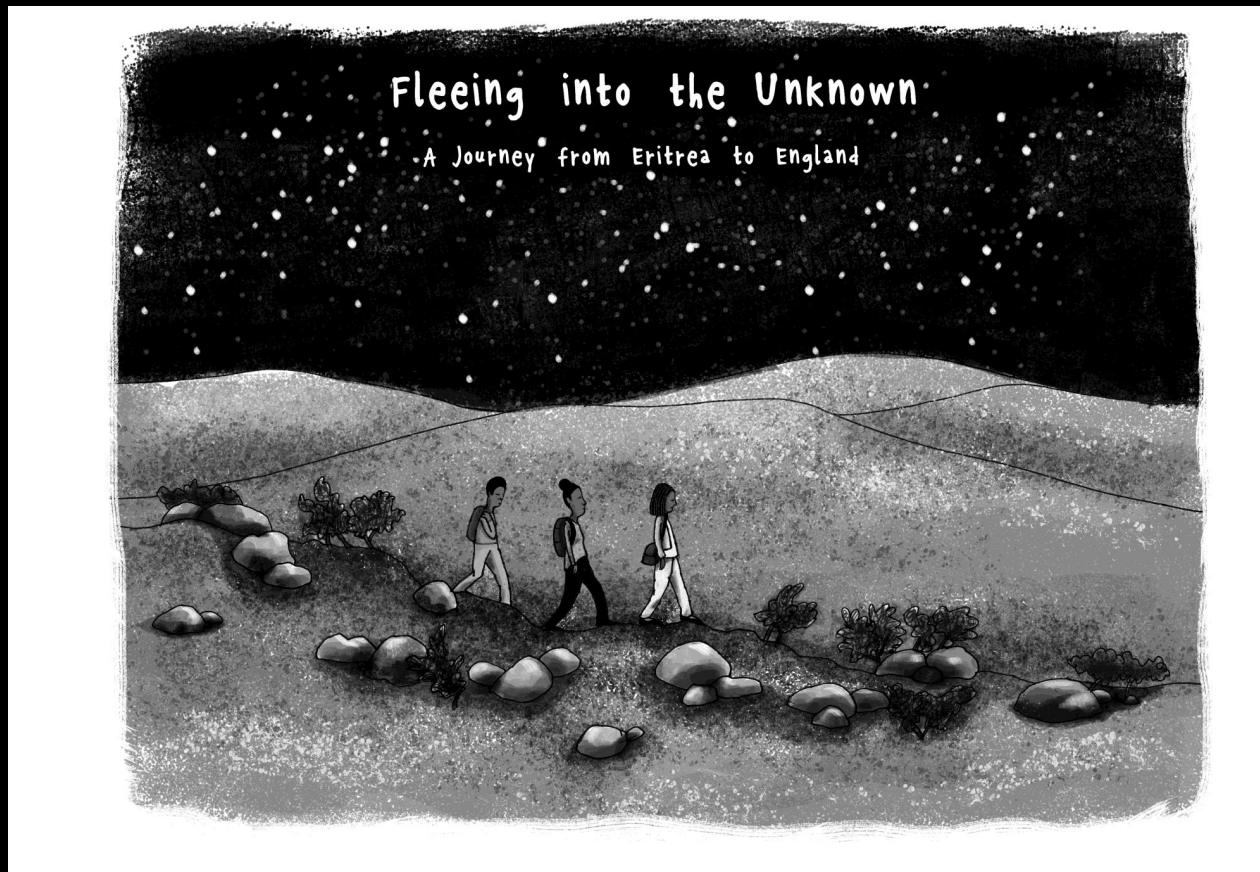


# Why Comics?



PositiveNegatives' Education Project

# Why Comics?

## PositiveNegatives' Education Project

Welcome to *Why Comics?*, [PositiveNegatives'](#) **Education Project Prototype**. We hope that you enjoy using it.

It is based on **Merha's Story**, our latest comic based on research by the **Overseas Development Institute**, [Journeys to Europe](#), recently launched and animated by [The Huffington Post](#).

Alongside some of the comic panels are **interactive coloured boxes** that you can click on to find out more about a  particular subject.

At the end of the comic are **discussion questions** you can raise with your class.

## About Merha's Story: Fleeing into the Unknown

Here, we follow the story of a **young Eritrean woman** caught up in a **vicious smuggling chain** across mountains, oceans and deserts, trying to escape persecution from the small, secretive East African nation.

Every month, **thousands of Eritreans attempt to flee repression, torture and indefinite forced conscriptions** by embarking on a dangerous journey to Europe.

Many of them put their fate in the hands of **human smugglers** and **travel thousands of miles** in the hope of finding a better life. These men, women and children make up just some of the over one million migrants and refugees who have sought asylum in Europe this past year.

We'd really appreciate it if you can fill in a **short anonymous SurveyMonkey questionnaire** at the end.

Thank you very much.

# Fleeing into the Unknown

A Journey from Eritrea to England





Where is  
Eritrea?



merhawit grew up in the Eritrean countryside. Everybody called her merha. Her sister Haben emigrated to the US when merha was small. Her father and older brothers were conscripted into "The Reserve Army". They were only granted a few days of leave each year.



In her final year of secondary school Merha was summoned for education and military training at Sawa camp. There, she was among thousands alternating between the classroom and gruelling exercise and drills.

Her grades were not high enough for university and she was ordered to work at the tax office in Abi Quala.

Read more about  
Eritrea's Military  
Service



Merha worked long hours. She hoped to send money home to her mother and sister.

But her salary afforded only the rent of a shared room and one meal a day.



Eritrea World

Bank

Economic

Statistics





One day security forces burst into the office. Merha and a handful of colleagues were falsely accused of plotting to flee Eritrea. Merha knew better than to resist.

Human Rights

Watch 2015

Eritrea

Report







merha was slung into a rusty shipping container, crowded with bedraggled and hungry people. It was dark in the box - but they knew night from day, because the sun roasted them, while at night they shivered and shook.

Sometimes, soldiers pulled a prisoner from the box and dragged them off for interrogation. When returned they would be battered and silent.

After one month, Merha was released without explanation and returned to the tax office. One day her name was posted on the notice board with two colleagues, ordering them to report for military service. The three huddled and whispered. None wanted to return to the misery of conscription, so a panicked plan to flee was swiftly hatched. After work, Merha met her colleagues by moonlight at the edge of town.





They fled for Ethiopia on foot, staying far from checkpoints. They whispered and squinted into the darkness, tensed to scatter at first sight of a patrol. They knew soldiers were ordered to shoot on sight.

Trace migration  
routes through  
Africa



Where is Hitsats  
refugee camp?



At sunrise, they entered the sprawling refugee camp in Hitsats. The camp was crowded and food was scarce. Merha spent her days braiding women's hair, so she could afford to eat. She knew she had no future there.

For £350 a smuggler was offering passage to Sudan in his pickup truck.

Merha phoned Haben in America, who wired money.

Three days later Merha set out with six others, all sweating under a remorseless sun.

After two days they arrived  
at the River Atbarah,  
which separates Ethiopia from Sudan.  
Crocodiles lined the banks.  
The smuggler ordered them onto  
a raft made of canisters.

Merha lay on the raft  
with her companions.  
The five at the bottom  
paddled with their hands,  
tensed for an explosion  
of water and teeth,  
and violent, bloody death.



Their Ethiopian smuggler handed them to a Sudanese smuggler, then turned and walked away. For four days and nights, the smuggler marched the group on blistered feet. Finally they reached a rough camp in Al Hajer. The men addressed the group. They were ordered to pay £1,000 to leave the camp or they would be sold. People passed around mobiles, babbling desperate pleas for help to relatives.



Watch documentary following the  
train of people smugglers



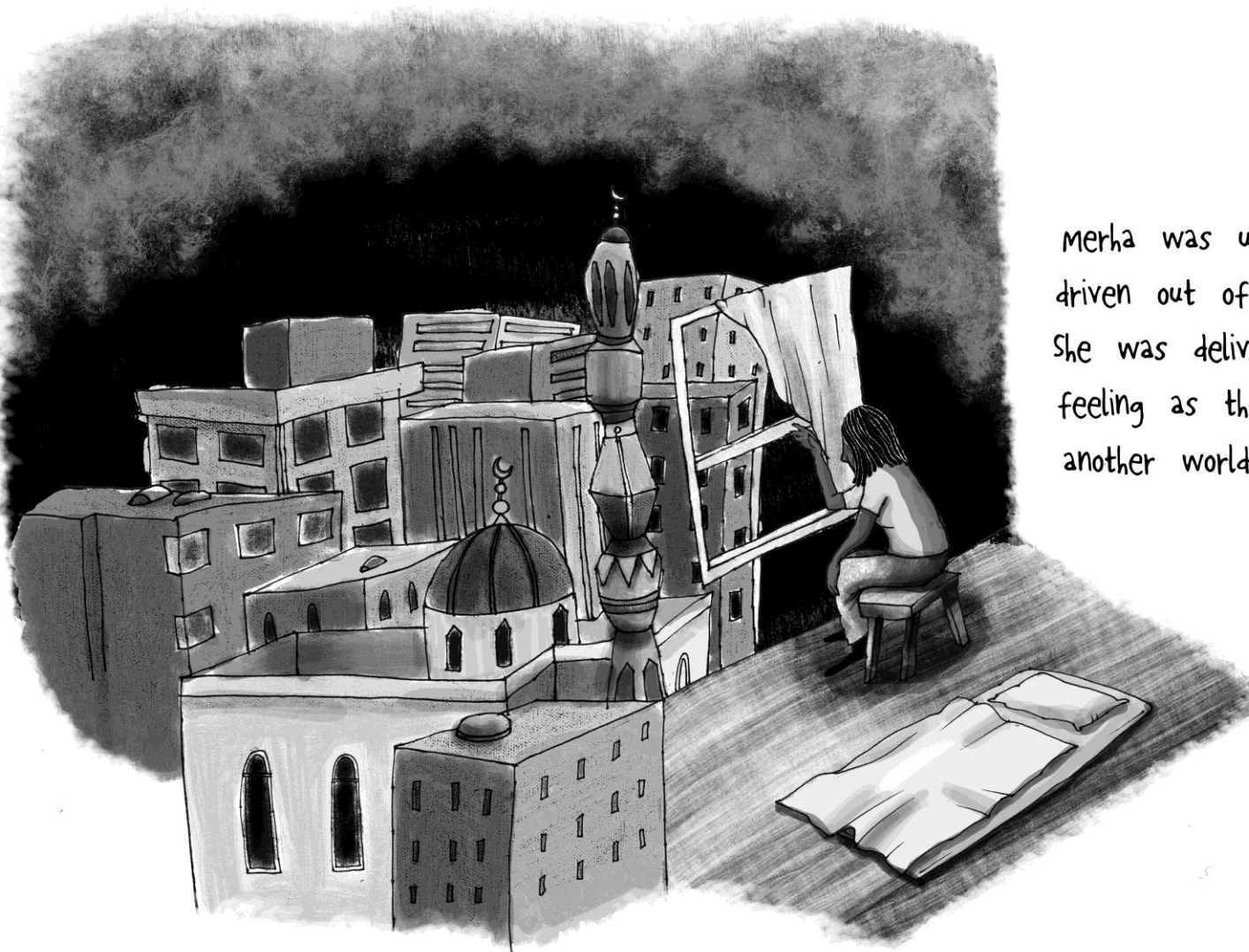
In tears merha called her sister and told her story.

"Wait a while", Haben said - "be brave" - then was gone.

Two days later, a trafficker approached merha, knife in hand.

The money had arrived.





Merha was ushered onto a pickup and driven out of the camp. She was delivered to Khartoum, feeling as though arriving in another world.

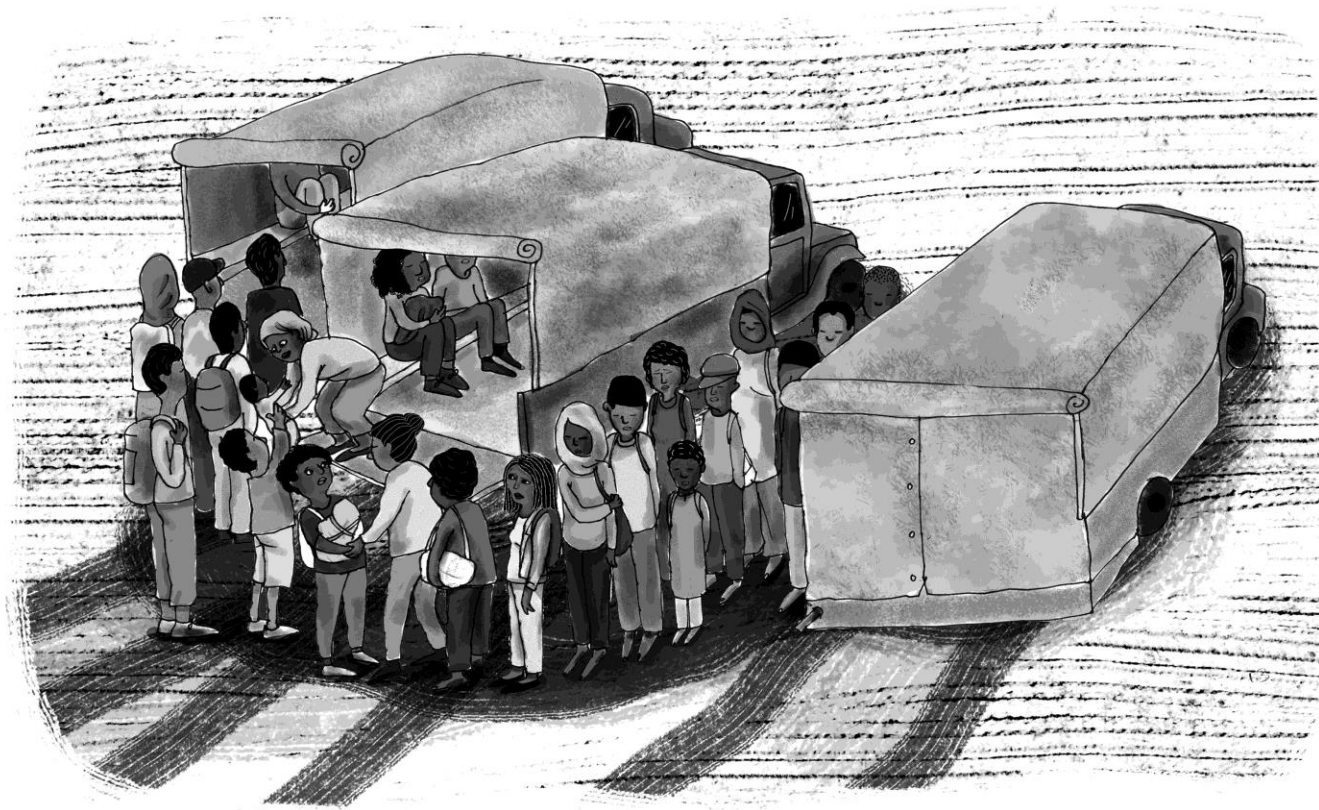
Sudan  
Country  
Profile



She moved in with her niece Elen and another woman.

Merha wanted to work like them but couldn't as she had no ID. She was afraid of the Sudanese Police, who arrested migrants and extorted money for their release,





Merha asked Elen where in the world she might find freedom. Elen told her that

*“You must find your way to Europe, where they have human rights.”*

Three days later she sat opposite a smuggler in a quiet cafe. *“Passage to Libya,”* he said,

*“one person, one way. £1,750”* The sum was enormous, but for Haben, in America, maybe possible?

Choking with guilt, Merha phoned Haben again. And so after four months in Khartoum Merha joined a hundred others in a sweltering truck heading for Libya.

They drove through the Sahara to avoid ISIS and the Egyptian army.



merha and a few others were driven through the desert.

For three days they had nothing to eat or drink. Their driver delivered them to a new group of smugglers in Tripoli. By now, merha understood that she was trapped in a great smuggling network with no break in the chain or chance of escape.

The men addressed them. merha already guessed what they had to say:

*"To reach Italy you must pay: £1,250."*

Merha was brought to a port where a large, rusty trawler rocked gently at dock. Four hundred people were loaded like cargo. "I should be excited", Merha thought, but she was too tired, too afraid, and too sick as the ship rolled on the waves. They travelled for just one night. Then, as the sun rose, the Italian coastguard appeared on the horizon.



Watch and listen to one man's story of what it is like to reach the Mediterranean





For a fortnight, Merha was tended to by the Red Cross in Lampedusa. Around her were people from all places, speaking all languages. She was not registered or finger-printed - only fed, washed, examined and shuffled amongst a great disoriented mass of weary refugees.

Learn about the people helping migrants who crossed the Mediterranean





merha was allowed to leave. Arriving in milan, she found other Eritreans sleeping rough and without work. They said she would have a better chance in England.

Summoning her strength, she sought out a new smuggler. A Sudanese man accepted £75 apiece from merha and two others, then accompanied them to Calais and *The Jungle*.



Explore more of the  
Calais Jungle



*The Jungle* was a chaos of tents and shacks. People stoked little fires, traded and debated how best to escape. Merha stayed close to other Eritrean women. She slept on the ground. The Catholic Church sometimes came with food, and she would join a long line to be fed. Other nights she went hungry. She knew that England was close - painfully close - but still beyond an ocean, police, razor wire and dogs.

To reach England required stealth, courage, and risk. People bore scars and wounds from ill-fated attempts at stowing away. They spoke of friends dying on the train tracks, or freezing to death in refrigerated lorries.

After four months, merha and another girl managed to sneak into the boot of a car while the driver relieved himself at a service station. They held their breath in the darkness for several hours. The car drove a long time - then stopped a long time - then drove a long time again.

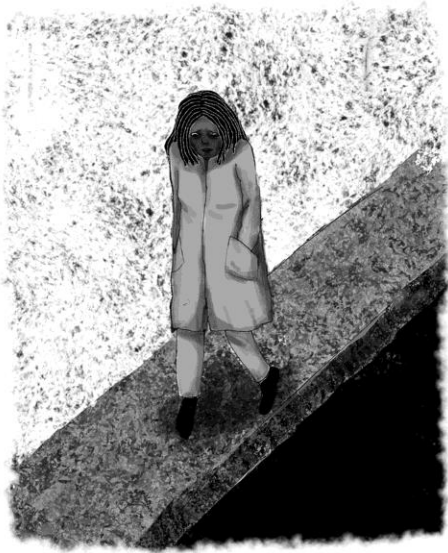


Peering through a chink in the door, she finally glimpsed signs in English.  
The two women cried out for their freedom.

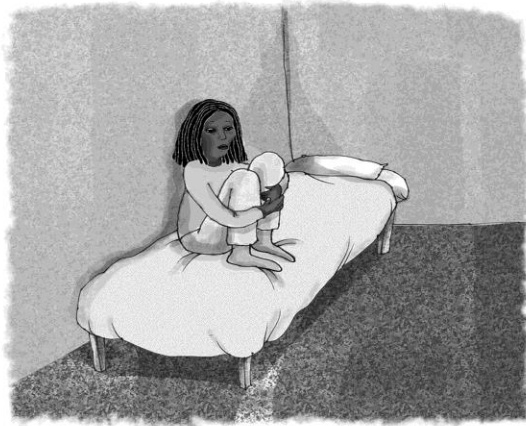


They sat down in a park, confused and unsure what to do.  
Eventually police came by and the two spent the night in a cell at the station.  
The next day they were delivered to an asylum centre.  
Merha had a bed, a basin, and a door she could close. She felt so happy she could have cried.  
She slept a long time.





What happens to  
asylum seekers when  
they reach the UK?



Her asylum application was submitted. After five days she was moved to a hostel in Liverpool where she stayed for six weeks; then to shared accommodation in Bolton for two months; then to another shared accommodation, in Salford, where she waited for more than a year.



Many people aided Merha on her way to the UK, read about one man's efforts to help migrants

Finally Merha was granted leave to remain. But she was told to leave her State sponsored accommodation the very next day. 22<sup>nd</sup> December. Over winter she was homeless in Manchester. On friends' advice she moved to London, where Eritrean churches supported her and introduced her to St Mungo's. The case workers there helped her into a shared house.


At time of writing, Merha is trying to get a job. She wants to work as a cleaner but is hindered by her language skills.

The job centre has arranged an English course, which she attends diligently.

She misses her family.

But for the first time in her life, Merha has hope of a better future.



Have questions or want to learn more about others like Merha? Click [here](#) 

# CLASSROOM DISCUSSION POINTS

1. What are your initial reflections on Merha's story? How do her experiences differ from what you hear in the media?
2. How and why was Merha displaced? Is she a **migrant** or a **refugee**?
3. How has she adapted to what has happened to her? How do you think she feels?
4. What would you have done in her situation?
5. How should **refugees** and **asylum seekers** such as Merha be integrated into our society?
6. What are her options now that she's arrived in London?
7. How did the authorities treat Merha?
8. How does the media report these issues in different contexts? (e.g. in the UK or Eritrea, or different right or left-wing newspapers such as the Guardian, Times or Sun).
9. Is it always easy to spot when a news article is biased? (e.g. anti-refugees) Find an example when this is more subtle.
10. How are you different, and similar to Merha?



**Thank you very much.**

We'd really appreciate it if you can fill out a **short anonymous SurveyMonkey questionnaire** to help us develop and improve the project.

You can see more information about what the finished project will look like on the next slides.

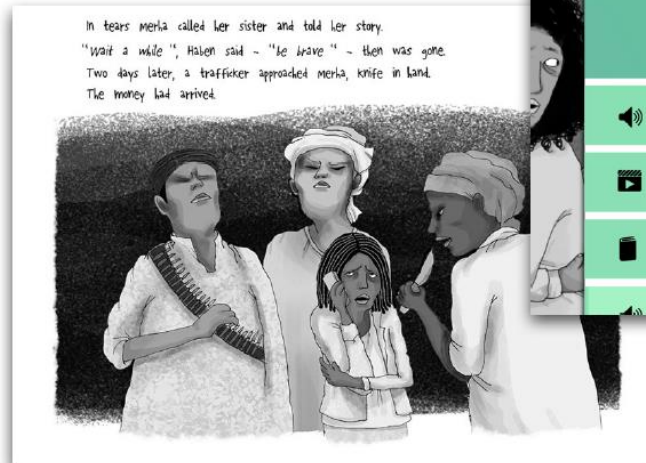
This gives an indication of what the finished **interactive educational platform** will look like.

A **parallel learning layer** will smoothly appear alongside each comic panel. You can see a **short video** on the next slide.

*Digital comic with parallel learning layer*

## Context behind the comics

This concept gives the students access to relevant content relating to the comic they're reading digitally, giving them the option to dive deeper into an issue or continue reading the story with minimal interruption.



### **BBC Eritrea Country profile**

Bordered by Sudan, Ethiopia and Djibouti, it occupies a strategic area in the Horn of Africa but remains one of the most secretive states in the world. Tensions with Ethiopia remain high across a closed and heavily fortified border.

[LEARN MORE ►](#)

### **Refugees in Eastern Sudan**

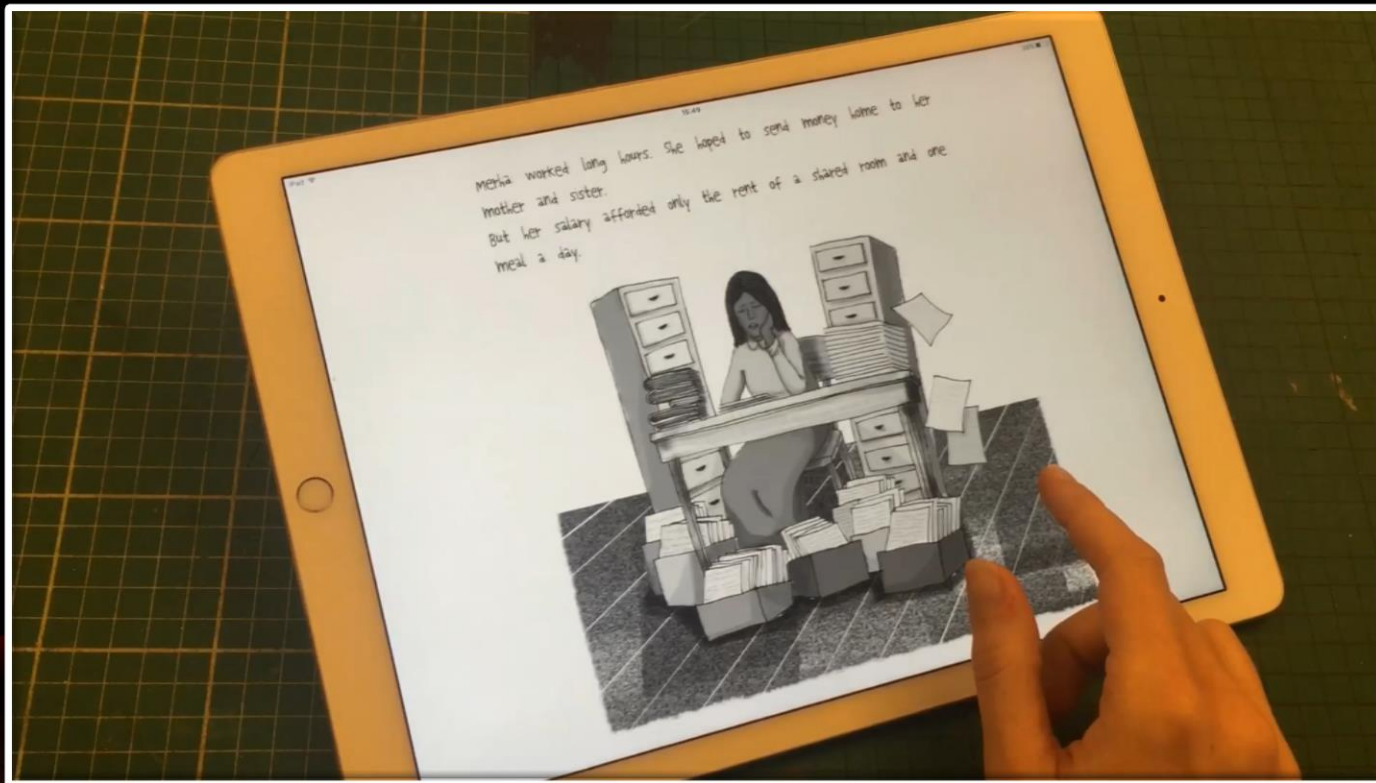
### **Life in Asmara**

### **The Smuggling industry**

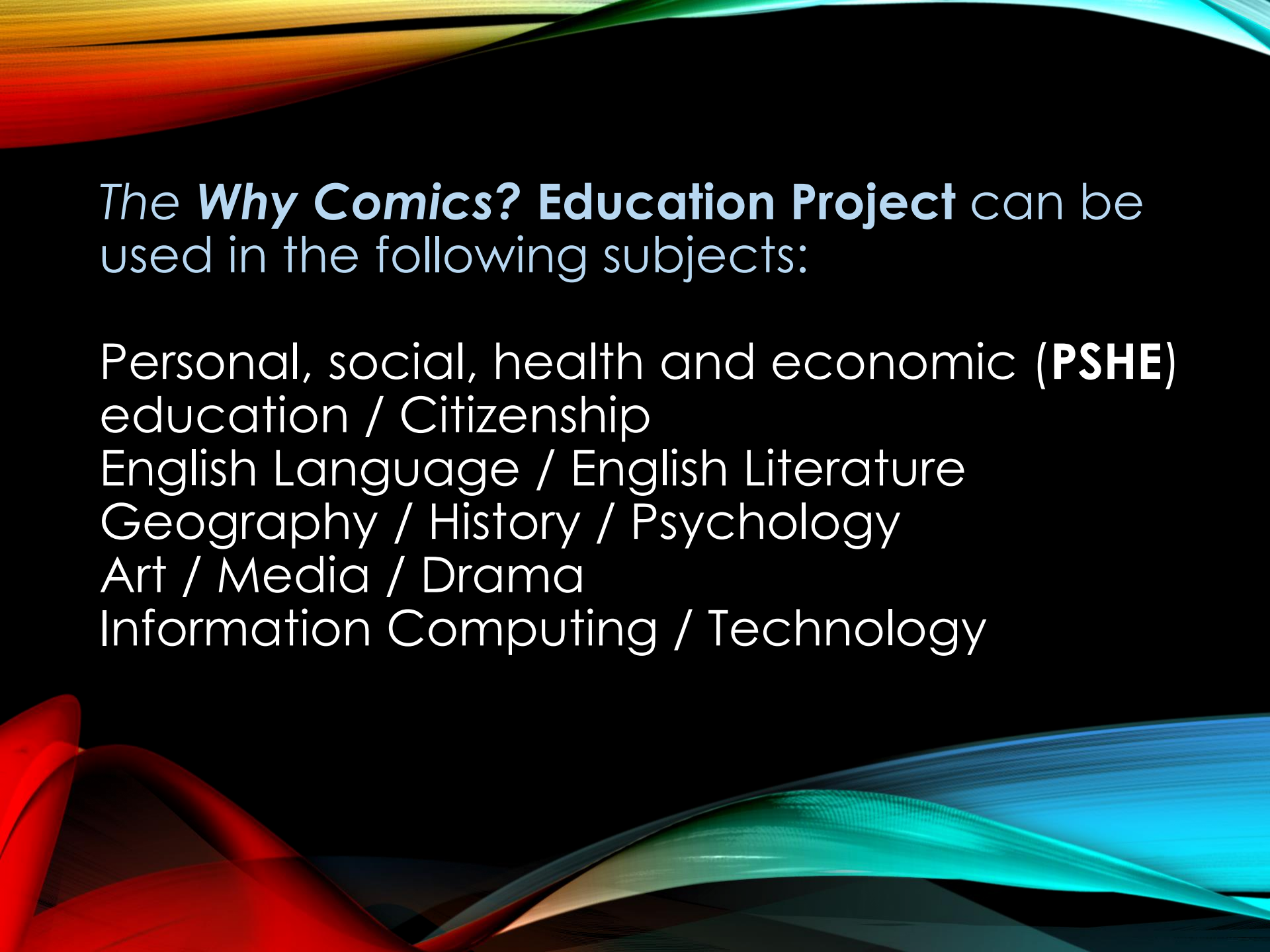
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[Video link,](#)  
developed by  
IDEO



The **Why Comics? Education Project** can be used in the following subjects:

Personal, social, health and economic (**PSHE**)  
education / Citizenship

English Language / English Literature

Geography / History / Psychology

Art / Media / Drama

Information Computing / Technology



We're intending to develop this *Why Comics?* prototype into an **interactive educational platform** (using multiple comics from [our portfolio](#)) to be implemented in schools from September 2016.

If you would like any more information or would like to be involved, please contact

[comics@positivenegatives.org](mailto:comics@positivenegatives.org)

**Thank you.**