



Adaptation, professionalization and disruption: Current trends and future scenarios of Somali diaspora engagement

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The global Somali diaspora numbers two million people that live outside the Somali regions of the Horn of Africa.¹ The strong links that diaspora populations maintain with the Somali regions—engaging multifariously in the spheres of development, politics, and economy—exert a crucial influence on Somali society in the Horn. However, in recent years there have been indications that these practices are changing in new and unpredictable ways. This briefing examines the current trends and suggests three possible future scenarios for diaspora engagement in the Somali regions of the Horn of Africa.²

Current trends

The majority of Somalis in the diaspora (including refugees) live in the neighbouring countries of Kenya and Ethiopia, although Yemen also hosts a large population. In addition to these relatively closely located diaspora populations, many Somalis are dispersed across the globe with the UK, US, Sweden, South Africa and the Gulf states having become important settlement countries.

Germany and Turkey are emerging as important new destinations too. This is a result of the growth in high-risk and irregular youth migration, known as *tahriib*, which is triggered not only by conflict, insecure livelihoods, and economic hardship, but also by the desire to obtain a Western passport that can facilitate movement to other destinations. In time, Germany and Turkey may also become important settlement countries.

The large-scale displacement of Somalis—within Somalia and into other countries—emerged in the late 1980s and peaked in the 1990s due to the Somali civil war and the complex emergencies connected with the conflict. While migration and displacement still take place, the relative stability and economic advances made in some Somali regions, combined with more restrictive policies towards mobility in the Horn of Africa region and globally, mean that it is at a much lower level than during its peak.

Somali migration today is thus extremely diverse in type. While some Somalis are forced to move due to (generally) conflict-related displacement and may become asylum seekers, others make the choice to seek better educational or employment opportunities elsewhere. Return migration is happening as well. Returnees mainly consist of male, educated professionals, or those with entrepreneurial skills (and capital), who are returning to work and invest. These returnees also often hold a Western passport, which acts as a bulwark against future crises.

1 The term Somali regions refers to the territory of the Republic of Somalia prior to the civil war.

2 The briefing supplements a report on Somali transnational practices originally prepared for the World Bank's Somalia Social Assessment by the Rift Valley Institute. See Nauja Kleist with Masud Abdi, *Global Connections: Somali diaspora practices and their effects*, London: Rift Valley Institute, March 2022. It contributes to the ongoing research project Diaspora Humanitarianism in Complex Crises (D-Hum), that focuses on the Somali regions and Somali diaspora groups in Africa and Europe. www.diiis.dk/d-hum.

Somali urban centres increasingly offer services such as relatively high quality (private) education, healthcare, internet and electricity for those who can afford it. While diaspora professionals and investors may bring economic development and innovation, competition for scarce resources is becoming a source of friction between diaspora returnees and locals.

Return migration is still very challenging for people without the skills or capital that enable them to earn or finance a decent living and to continue to maintain responsibilities, such as remittances to family in the Somali regions and in the diaspora. This applies to diaspora returnees as well as repatriates from refugee camps and deportees, who make up the highest number of returnees. Return or forced relocation may therefore entail struggles over scarce resources, potentially provoking disharmony between internally displaced persons (IDPs), returnees and the local population.

The multiple, and varied locations where the Somali diaspora are found means that wide-ranging living conditions, income disparities, and political opportunity structures in different parts of the world can affect Somali diaspora engagement, and hence life in the Somali regions. Political and financial decisions concerning the Somali regions may be co-decided in diverse, sometimes distant, places, and embedded in multi-directional transnational practices and senses of belonging.

Somali affairs are thus deeply influenced by local and global inequalities, and assistance is mediated by, and contingent on, the inherently iniquitous structures of global capitalism. Though inequality is tied into unequal access to services and stratified patterns of remittance receipt in the Somali regions, it also reflects unequal access to safe and legal international mobility, and the resultant disparities in security of holding a Somali passport compared to a Western one.

Consequently, local integration policies and restrictive asylum and immigration regimes may have both local and transnational repercussions. For example, if Kenya goes ahead with its decision to close the Dadaab refugee camp complex, expelling most or all of the Somali refugee population living there, this will have huge consequences for stability in the Somali regions.

Locally driven events and conditions in the Somali regions are important as well, not least in terms of (in-) security and economic development that shape life for local populations and returnees. The lens of the diaspora hence reveals how both local and global circumstances impact diaspora engagement and its effects.

Future scenarios

The future of transnational engagement is a much-debated topic amongst Somalis in the diaspora and in the Somali regions, particularly in relation to generational change. As the large cohort of refugees who left during the early part of the Somali civil war are getting older and retiring, their ability to send remittances and engage in other ways dwindles. The generations who have lived most or all of their lives outside the Somali regions may have a different sense of connection and obligation than their older relatives. The question of whether they will send remittances and be engaged to the same degree as the older generations is much debated.

This question also relates to the possible transformation of kinship and clan dynamics. While individual remittance recipients tend to be family members, much of the money raised for development activities, and during humanitarian emergencies, is mobilized through clan. Hence, the level of integration or dis-integration of younger generations with these social structures will also affect future diaspora engagement.

The following are three potential future scenarios for Somali diaspora engagement. As scenarios, they are not predictions but thought experiments to illustrate possible outcomes of current trends as they may look in ten-to-fifteen years.

1. Adaptation and continuation of current trends: Transnational practices will follow the same overall patterns seen today while continuously adapting to changing local and global circumstances and technological development.

In this scenario, diaspora youth remain connected to the Somali regions and other diaspora groups around the world, and maintain a sense of belonging, familiarity and solidarity with Somali affairs. Transnational practices will be increasingly mediated by digital and social media involvement—already an important feature of Somali transnational relations—mainly but not exclusively organized around kinship logics and regional affiliation as major axes of loyalty and identification. Holiday visits and shorter or longer return trips to (ancestral or erstwhile) places of origin will remain important in sustaining and inspiring transnational practices.

The likelihood of this scenario is supported by the fact that there are currently no signs of remittance fatigue amongst Somali diaspora groups, with younger Somalis visibly active in diaspora organizations (whether creating their own or joining existing ones) and in other kinds of transnational activities. Moreover, it should be noted that migration from the Somali regions has not come a halt, which implies there are still many in the diaspora who have lived for at least part of their lives in the Somali regions. As such, they feel compelled to support their families who live in the home country, indicating that concerns over diaspora engagement as a one-generation-only phenomenon, or disengagement from kinship-oriented logics may be overstated. Adaptation, which is at the heart of the durability of Somali transnational relations, will remain intact despite complex crises, such as the global disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Professionalization and dis-embeddedness: Diaspora youth maintain an overall sense of belonging to the Somali regions but will be less guided by place (and clan) affiliation than the older generation.

In this scenario, the lives of diaspora youth in their countries of residence will take priority over distant relatives, as they raise their own families and their parents grow old there. Remittances will thus dwindle or be directed towards providing insurance schemes, or other institutionalized support systems. Collective transnational practices will be more focused on areas that reflect professional competences or interests—for example, health, climate or gender relations—and diaspora members may position themselves explicitly against place- and clan-based engagement. Global outreach will be pursued through digital and social media, such as GoFundMe campaigns that appeal to a broad group of donors, including non-Somalis. A trend towards increased digitization and dis-embeddedness from clan and kinship logics will likely result in further diversification of diaspora engagement and contribute to a divide between groups and individuals guided by such logics and those who are not, whether in the diaspora or the Somali regions. As in the scenario above, transnational mobility will be pertinent in sustaining diaspora engagement but necessarily to erstwhile places of origin.

Interest-based and/or competence-driven transnational practices may thus result in ‘NGO-ization’, as diaspora engagement becomes more similar to, or transforms into, NGOs, with the strengths and weaknesses this entails. Such a transformation may appeal to a larger pool of potential donors and activists and hence strengthen certain kinds of diaspora engagement through enhanced coordination and professionalization. However, it may also raise issues concerning (dis)trust, and perhaps a lack of agility and flexibility. Furthermore, NGO-ization may cause distrust and discomfort amongst those accustomed to personalized transnational practices or who are uncomfortable with digitized practices or the (relative) inflexibility of institutionalized organizations in terms of organization, reporting, and accountability.

3. Securitization and deepening divides: Restrictive mobility, asylum and integration regimes, as well as continued securitization of remittance transfers and transnational mobility, will constrain and delimit Somali diaspora engagement in combination with a significant reduction in interest amongst younger generations.

In this scenario, the replenishment of the diaspora will be negatively impacted due to delimited outmigration from the Somali regions, as well as impeded asylum and settlement in third countries. Likewise, periods of uncertainty and precarity will be protracted, with negative repercussions for employment and education. Visits and return trips will be difficult to organize and/or met with suspicion in the Somali regions and in countries of residence alike. Finally, remittances and the development effects arising from them, will dwindle due to reduced choice and lack of safe, low-cost means of transfer.

Tensions between Somalis living in the Somali regions and in the diaspora may deepen, with the former feeling let down by the latter, who in turn feel disconnected. A deepened mobility divide between those with access to safe and legal international mobility and those without will further aggravate resentment towards those who can fly in and out as they please, particularly in political circles, but also in regard to pursuing well-paid professional positions. Likewise, large-scale enforced relocation from refugee camps in neighbouring countries as well as deportees, rejected asylum seekers and refugees who have lost protection status of (former) countries of settlement, will cause conflict and tension with poor local populations.

A convergence of practices and tendencies

The scenarios above have taken departure in three overall trends: continued diaspora engagement organized around kinship, clan and regional affiliations; continued diaspora engagement marked by dis-embeddedness from these dynamics and a trend towards professionalization; and finally, disruption of diaspora engagement due to marginalization and securitization, combined with reduced interest. These may be extreme versions and the most likely future of diaspora engagement is a mix of all three.

While the three scenarios may be, or seem, internally contradictory, they can nevertheless exist side-by-side. Securitization and increasingly restrictive migration and asylum legislation, with the emphasis on short-term protection statuses and/or deportation seem to be megatrends, however, that will most likely affect Somali transnational practices and migration far into the future. However, continued stabilization in some regions may reduce financial and migratory securitization measures in the long-run, but is also likely to spur deportation and other forced relocation interventions.

A result of such a convergence of the contrasting—and perhaps polarizing—trends may well be deepening divides and distinctions between different populations within the Somali regions and in the diaspora. Over time, the relevant distinction with regards to assistance will transform from diaspora versus ‘those who stayed’ to urban elites connected to the global economy versus the marginalized rural poor within the Somali regions. This suggestion also accentuates the importance of considering (trans)local support networks and practices as well as of the salience of local transformations.

Credits

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