



# GLOBAL CONNECTIONS

---

Somali diaspora practices  
and their effects

**Nauja Kleist** *with Masud Abdi*

# Global Connections

## Somali diaspora practices and their effects

Nauja Kleist with Masud Abdi  
Rift Valley Institute

---

**Nauja Kleist** is a Senior Researcher at the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS), and holds a PhD in Sociology, University of Copenhagen. Her research focuses on diaspora engagement, how migration and mobility is perceived, practiced and governed by different actors, belonging and gender. She is the principal investigator (PI) of the ‘Diaspora Humanitarianism in Complex Crises’ (D-Hum) collaborative research programme, focusing on the Somali regions.

**Masud S. I. Abdi** holds an MA in African Studies, University of Copenhagen. He is an experienced diaspora, humanitarian and development professional, and works as an independent consultant.

Thanks to Adrian Howard Cutler, Tobias Haggmann, Ahmed M. Musa, Ken Menkhaus, Jethro Norman, Verena Phipps, and Hannah Stogdon for comments to earlier versions of the report.

The report was originally prepared for the World Bank’s Somalia Social Assessment and is published in a revised version with the permission of the World Bank. This version contributes to the Diaspora Humanitarianism in Complex Crises (D-Hum) research programme—a research consortium between the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS); Institute for Development Studies (IDS), University of Nairobi; Rako Research and Communication Centre, Hargeisa; and Rift Valley Institute—that analyses how Somali diaspora groups mobilize, channel and deliver humanitarian relief to the Somali regions.

The Rift Valley Institute works in Eastern and Central Africa to bring local knowledge to bear on social, political and economic development. Copyright © Rift Valley Institute 2021. This work is published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

Cover photo: A radio programme is recorded at Mustaqbal radio station in Mogadishu. Photo by: Mohamed Abdikarim. © ICRC 13/12/2017 (V-P-SO-E-00904)



## Executive summary

With an estimated two million people of Somali descent living outside Somalia—the ‘Somali diaspora’—an understanding of migration and transnational practices is crucial for grasping Somali society. Mobility and mobile livelihoods have been important aspects of Somali life for centuries. Even so, international migration and transnational socio-economic practices—such as remittances, news and communication between Somalis in the Horn of Africa and elsewhere have intensified from 1988 onwards, as a result of the civil war and the ensuing decades of conflict, instability and complex emergencies.

While the large majority of diaspora Somalis, including refugees, live in neighbouring countries, many Somali families and kin networks are dispersed across the globe, with the UK, US, Sweden, South Africa and the Gulf states having emerged as important settlement countries. When looking at the Somali regions and diaspora, it is therefore important to keep in mind these multiple locations and multi-directional transnational practices, as well as the fact that political and financial decisions concerning the Somali regions may be co-decided in several places.

The implication here is that living conditions and political opportunity structures in different parts of the world can affect Somali diaspora engagement, and hence life in the Somali regions. Hence, these relationships and engagements reflect local and global inequalities. In this regard, security, employment/livelihoods, and high-mobility citizenship (or permanent residence papers) enabling safe and legal mobility around the world are particularly important.

### Key operational implications

Three key operational implications of Somali diaspora engagement can be summarized as follows:

- 1. Remittances reduce poverty while reproducing existing inequalities. Moreover, remittance effects are impeded by excessive securitization measures and high transfer costs.**

Estimates regarding the level of remittances sent each year to Somalia and Somaliland range from USD 1.4 billion to USD 2 billion, which constitutes a substantial chunk of their GDP. As such, remittances represent a lifeline for those in the Somali regions. Even so, only an estimated 40–60 per cent of households receive remittances regularly or ad hoc, which implies that many households only receive remittances intermittently if at all. This is an important point, as remittance-receiving households are less likely to

be poor than other households, and also more likely to support relatives in both urban and rural areas. While remittances reach all parts of Somali society, patterns of remittance receipt reflect and potentially reproduce existing inequalities. Urban households receive higher amounts and more regular transfers than households in rural settings and pastoralists, while internally displaced persons (IDPs) living in settlements (camps) receive the lowest amounts of all groups. Hence, the most vulnerable and disconnected groups in Somali society are the least likely to receive remittances, which may further entrench their poverty. Finally, excessive securitization and bank de-risking measures impede opportunities for legal remittances transfer and reduce the amounts received. Addressing this situation is a key challenge for international banks and other external actors.

- 2. Return migration may further development but it can also result in struggles over resources between returnees and local populations. Challenges following return must be addressed without marginalizing or excluding returnees.**

While diaspora engagement may be a key resource for development in the Somali regions, it is also subject to contestation. This appears particularly acute with regard to return migration, whether in the form of deported asylum seekers, repatriated camp refugees, diaspora professionals working for NGOs/international organizations, or returnees with political ambitions. Returnees may put pressure on already strained resources, aggravating existing vulnerabilities and deepening the divide between returnees and locals. Repatriated refugees may end up in IDP camps, while diaspora professionals compete with locals for well-paid jobs in an employment market where Western (or other foreign) educational credentials and careers are perceived as more attractive than their Somali equivalents.

When striking a balance between ‘diaspora returnees’ and ‘those who stayed behind’, it is therefore important to address favouritism towards non-Somali educational and job credentials, as well as uneven pay scales for local and international staff. With this in mind, exclusion or marginalization of returnees is not the answer. Rather, it should be acknowledged that return migration comes with its own challenges, which must be addressed alongside its positive potential in terms of private sector development, knowledge transfer and innovation.

- 3. The future of Somali diaspora engagement is uncertain and will be shaped by both generational changes and broader regimes of migration, transnational mobility and security.**

The future of transnational engagement<sup>1</sup> is a much-debated topic amongst Somalis in the diaspora, particularly in relation to generational change. With the large cohort of refugees who left during the early part of the Somali civil war getting older and retiring, so their ability to send remittances is dwindling, and it is only a matter of time before they will eventually have to step down from key diasporic positions. Whether the younger generations—who have lived most or all of their lives outside the Somali regions—will continue to send remittances and be transnationally engaged is therefore a key question amongst Somali diaspora groups and for programming.

The future of diaspora engagement is also contingent on global and regional regimes of migration and asylum policies as well as securitization measures. These factors not only affect access to asylum and transnational migration, and hence the replenishment of the diaspora, but also the opportunity for shorter or longer return stays and other kinds of transnational engagement that inspires and sustains diaspora engagement. Finally, the situation in the Somali regions is pertinent. Stabilization will likely result in increased return migration, including diaspora professionals and entrepreneurs as well as large-scale repatriation and deportation from neighbouring and other asylum countries. However, if not accompanied by inclusive growth and livelihood and educational opportunities for youth, outmigration will likely continue. Without legal migration options, such migration will be of a high-risk and irregular nature with the ensuing uncertainties and precarity. It is thus pertinent to include local youth in programming in both the short and long run, particularly in terms of sustainable futures in the Somali regions, as well as opportunities for safe and legal mobility.

---

<sup>1</sup> Three future scenarios of diaspora engagement are further elaborated in a policy brief by Nauja Kelist, Ahmed M. Musa and Jethro Norman, 'Adaptation, Professionalization and Disruption: Current trends and future scenarios of Somali diaspora engagement', Policy Brief, Rift Valley Institute, 2022.



# Nuxurka warbixinta

Iyadoo dad lagu qiyaasay labo milyan oo Soomaali ah ay ku nool yihiin dalal ka baxsan Soomaaliya—‘Qurba-joogta Soomaaliyeed’—fahamka socdaalkooda iyo iyo dhaqdhaqaaqooda caalamka ayaa muhiim u ah fahamka bulshada Soomaaliyeed. Dhaqdhaqaaqa iyo hab-nololeedyada ku saleysan reer-guuraanimada ayaa qarniyo badan ahaa mid muhiim u ah nololaha Soomaalida. Sikastaba ha ahaatee, socdaalka iyo dhaqamada dhaqan-dhaqaale ee caalamiga ah – sida xawaaladaha, wararka iyo is-gaarsiinta Soomaalida Geeska Afrika iyo meelo kaleba – waxaa la arki karaa inay sii xoogaysanayeen lagasoo bilaabo sanadkii 1988, taasoo ka dhalatay dagaalladii sokeeye iyo colaadihii dhowr iyo tobankii sano ee ka dambeeyay, xasiloondarrada iyo xaaladaha degdegga ah ee adag.

**Inkastoo inta badan qurba-joogta Soomaalida oo ay ku jiraan qaxoonti kuna nool yihiin dalalka deriska, qoysas badan oo Soomaaliyeed iyo shabakado ay sameysteen dad qaraabo ah ayaa ku kala firirsan daafaha caalamka, iyadoo dalalka UK, US, Sweden, South Africa iyo dalalka Khaliijka ay noqdeen dalal muhiim ah oo ay degaan Soomaalida. Marka la eego gobollada Soomaalida iyo qurba-joogta Soomaaliyeed, waxaa muhiim ah in maskaxda lagu hayo meelahan kala duwan iyo dhaqamada jihooyinka badan leh, iyo weliba in go'aannada siyaasadeed iyo kuwa maaliyadeed ee khuseeya gobollada Soomaalida laga yaabo in meelo badan lagasoo saaro.**

Macnuhu waa in **xaaladaha nololeed iyo qaababka fursadaha siyaasadeed ee ka jira meelo kala duwan oo adduunka ah ay saameyn ku yeelan karaan howlaha qurba-joogta Soomaalida, iyo sidoo kale nololaha ka jirta gobollada Soomaalida.** Sidaas awgeed, xiriirrada iyo howlaha waxay ka turjumayaan sinnaan la'aanta maxalliga ah iyo kuwa caalamka. Sidaas darteed, amniga, shaqada/dakhliga, iyo muwaadinnimada safarrada/dhaqdhaqaaqa badan (ama waraaqaha degenaanshaha joogtada ah) ee awood u siinaya in ay sameeyaan dhaqdhaqaaq ama safarro sharciga ah ee adduunka oo dhan ayaa si gaar ah muhiim u ah.

## Saamaynta hawleed ee muhiimka ah

Saddex arrimood oo muhiim ah iyo saameynta ay ku leeyihiin qurba-joogta Soomaalida ayaa lagasoo koobi karaa sidan soo socota:

1. Xawaaladaha waxay yareeyaan faqriga waxayse sii joogteyaan sinnaan la'aanta jirta. Waxaa intaa dheer, saamaynta xawaaladaha waxaa caqabad ku ah tillaabooyinka amni ee dheeraadka ah iyo qiimaha lacag dirida ee sarreeya.

Qiyaasta ku saabsan lacagaha xawaaladaha loogu diro Soomaaliya iyo Somaliland sanad kasta waxay u dhexeysaa USD 1.4 bilyan ilaa USD 2 bilyan, taasoo ka dhigan in lacagaha xawaaladaha ay qeyb muhiim ah ka yihiin GDP-ga. Sidoo kale, xawaaladaha waxay halbowle u yihiin dadka ku nool gobollada Soomaalida. Sikastaba ha ahaatee, keliya qiyaastii 40-60 boqolkiiba qoysas ah ayaa si joogto ah ama si aan joogto ahayn u hela lacagaha xawaaladaha, taasoo tusinaysa in qoysas badan ay si kumeelgaar ah u helaan lacagaha xawaaladaha. Tani waa qodob muhiim ah, maadaama qoysaska lacagaha loosoo xawilo ay yar tahay suurtagalnimada in ay ka saboolsan yihiin qoysaska kale, sidoo kalena ay u badan tahay inay taageeraan qaraabadooda ku nool miyiga iyo magaalooyinka. Inkastoo xawaaladaha ay gaaraan dhammaan qeybaha bulshada Soomaalida, qaababka loo helo lacagaha xawaaladaha ayaa ka tarjumaya oo ay ka dhalan kartaa sinnaan la'aanta jirta. Qoysaska reer magaalku waxay helaan lacago ka badan iyo xawilaad joogto ah marka loo eego qoysaska ku nool miyiga iyo reer guuraaga, halka dadka gudaha ku barakacay ee ku nool xeryaha barakacayaasha ay helaan lacagaha ugu hooseeya ee dhammaan kooxaha. Haddaba, kooxaha ugu nugul iyo kuwa ka go'an bulshada Soomaalida ayaa ah kuwa ugu yar ee hela lacagaha xawaaladaha, taasoo laga yaabo in ay ku sii korodho faqrinimadu. Ugu dambeyntii, baaritaanka iyo dabagalka xad-dhaafka ah iyo tillaabooyinka khatarta ka saaraya bangiyada ayaa caqabad ku ah fursadaha xawaaladaha sharciga ah waxayna yareeyaan tirada lacagaha la xawilo. Wax ka qabashada xaaladdan ayaa caqabad weyn ku ah bangiyada caalamiga ah iyo jilayaasha kale ee dibadda.

2. Soo laabashada qurbajoogta waxa laga yaabaa in ay keento horumar dheeraad ah laakiin waxa kale oo ay keeni kartaa loollan dhaqaale oo ee u dhexeeya kuwa soo laabanaya iyo kuwa joogo gudaha. Caqabadaha ku xeeran soo laabashada waa in wax laga qabtaa iyadoo aan la takoorin ama laga soocin kuwa soo laabtay.

Inkastoo ka qeyb-qaadashada qurba-joogtu ay noqon karto il muhiim u ah horumarka gobollada Soomaalida, haddana waa mid dood la gelin karo. Tani waxay u muuqataa mid si gaar ah u daran marka la eego soo noqoshada, ha noqoto qaab magangalyo-doon la tarxiilay, qaxootiga xerooyinka dib loo celiyay, xirfadlayaasha qurba-joogta ee u shaqeeya NGO-yada/hay'adaha caalamiga ah, ama soo laabtayaal leh damac siyaasadeed. Dadka soo laabanaya waxaa laga yaabaa inay cadaadis tartan saaraan kheyraadka markii horeba yaraa, taasoo sii xumeyneysa nuglaanta jirta waxayna sii kordhinaysaa kala qeybsanaanta dadka soo laabtay iyo dadka gudaha joogay. Qaxootiga dib loo celiyay waxa laga yaabaa in ay ku dhamaadaan xeryaha barakacayaasha, halka xirfadlayaasha qurba-joogta ahi ay dadka deegaanka kula tartamaan shaqooyin mushaar fiican laga helo ee suuqa shaqada halkaasoo shahaadooyinka iyo xirfadaha reer galbeedka (ama dalal kale) loo arko in ay kasoo jiidasho badan yihiin kuwa u dhigma ee Soomaalida.

Marka la isu dheellitirayo 'Qurba-joogta soo laabtay' iyo 'kuwa horey u joogay', waxaa muhiim ah in la xalliyo eexda loo sameeyo shahaadooyinka waxbarashada iyo khibradaha shaqo ee dibadda, iyo sidoo kale isudheellitirnaan la'aanta mushaarka shaqaalaha gudaha iyo kuwa caalamiga. Iyadoo tan maskaxda lagu hayo, ka saarista ama takooridda

dadka soo laabtay ma aha xalka. Balse waa in la isla qiro in soo laabashada qurbajoogta ay la timaaddo caqabado u gaar ah, kuwaasoo ay tahay in wax laga qabto oo ay barbar socoto awoodda togan ee soo laabashada qurbajoogta ee horumarinta ganacsiga gaarka loo leeyahay, gudbinta aqoonta iyo hal-abuurnimada.

- 3. Mustaqbalka ka-qeybgalka qurba-joogta Soomaalida waa mid aan la hubin, waxaana qaabeyn doona isbeddellada jiil iyo maareynta guud ee socdaalka, isu-socodka xuduudaha iyo amniga.**

Mustaqbalka ku xirnaanta qurbajoogta ee gobollada Soomaalida waa mawduuc ay aad uga doodaan Soomaalida qurbaha, gaar ahaan marka la eego isbeddelka jiilka. Dadkii kamidka ahaa qaxootigii faraha badnaa ee ka cararay dagaalladii sokeeye ee Soomaaliya ka dhacay ayaa duqoobay, isla markaana shaqada ka fadhiistay, sidaas awgeedna awooddii ay lacago ugu diri lahaayeen xawaaladaha ayaa sii yaraanaysa, waxaana suuragal ah in wakhti yar kadib ay ka baxaan qaadashada doorka muhiimka ah ee qurba-joogta. Jiilalka soo koraya – ee ku noolaa inta badan ama dhammaan noloshooda meel ka baxsan gobollada Soomaalida – in ay sii wadi doonaan kaalinta waalidiintood oo ay sii diri doonaan lacagaha xawaaladaha iyo inay la qabsanayaan oo ay la noolaanayaan wadamada kale oo ay dageen waa su'aal muhim ah oo dhex taal qurba-joogta Soomaalida.

Mustaqbalka ka-qeybgalka qurba-joogta ayaa sidoo kale ku xiran maamullada caalamiga ah iyo kuwa gobolka ee socdaalka iyo siyaasadaha magangalyada iyo sidoo kale tallaabooyinka anmiga lagu sugayo. Arrimahani ma saameeyaan oo keliya helitaanka magangelyo iyo tahriibka, balse waxay sidoo kale saamaynayaan fursadda joogitaan gaaban ama mid dheer iyo noocyo kale ee xiriirka caalamka kaasoo dhiirigelinaya islamarkaana joogteynaya kaalinta qurba-joogta. Ugu dambeyn, xaaladda gobollada Soomaalida waa mid muhiim ah. Xasiloonidu waxay u badan tahay inay dhaliso dadka dib usoo noqonaya oo kordha, oo ay ku jiraan xirfadlayaasha qurba-joogta iyo ganacsatada iyo sidoo kale dib-u-celinta ballaaran iyo masaafurinta dalalka deriska iyo dalalka kale ee magan-gelyada siiyey Soomaalida. Sikastaba ha ahaatee, haddii aanay la socon korriin loo dhan yahay, hab-nololeed hagaagsan iyo fursadaha waxbarasho ee dhalinyarada, waxay u badan tahay in tahriibku sii socon doono. Haddii aan la helin xulashooyin socdaal oo sharci ah, tahriibka ayaa noqon doona mid khatar sare leh iyo dabeecad aan caadi ahayn oo ay weheliso hubanti la'aan iyo taxadar la'aan. Haddaba waxaa habboon in dhallinyarada deegaanka lagu daro barnaamijyada mustaqbalka dhow iyo midka fogba, gaar ahaan marka la eego mustaqbalka waara ee gobollada Soomaalida, iyo sidoo kale fursadaha socdaal nabad ah, sharcina ah.



# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>History of Somali migration</b>	<b>12</b>
Labour migration	12
Refugees	13
Youth migration: <i>Tahriib</i>	16
<b>Regional dynamics and connections</b>	<b>18</b>
Horn of Africa	19
The Gulf	21
Western countries	22
<b>Diaspora effects</b>	<b>25</b>
Care money: Remittances sent to households	25
Collective remittances: Development projects and emergency relief	28
Institutionalized diaspora support	32
Somali diaspora engagement: An uncertain future	32
<b>Contested diaspora engagement and return migration</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Conclusions and policy implications</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>43</b>

---

# Introduction

With an estimated two million people of Somali descent living outside Somalia—the so-called ‘Somali diaspora’—an understanding of migration and transnational practices is crucial for grasping Somali society. Mobility and mobile livelihoods have been important aspects of Somali life for centuries. Even so, international migration and transnational socio-economic practices—such as remittances, news and communication between Somalis in the Horn of Africa and elsewhere—to have intensified from 1988 onwards, as a result of the civil war and the ensuing decades of conflict, instability and complex emergencies.

While the large majority of diaspora Somalis, including refugees, live in neighbouring countries, many Somali families and kin networks are dispersed across the globe, with the UK, US, Sweden, South Africa and the Gulf states having emerged as important settlement countries. When looking at the Somali regions and diaspora, it is therefore important to keep in mind these multiple locations and multi-directional transnational practices, as well as the fact that political and financial decisions concerning the Somali regions may be co-decided in several places.

The implication here is that living conditions and political opportunity structures in different parts of the world can affect Somali diaspora engagement, and hence life in the Somali regions. Hence, these relationships and engagements reflect local and global inequalities. In this regard, security, employment, livelihoods, and high-mobility citizenship (or permanent residence papers) enabling safe and legal mobility around the world are particularly important.

This report presents Somali diaspora engagement in global perspective, with the ambition to provide an overview of Somali transnational practices and their implications for the Somali regions, based on academic publications, reports, as well as blog posts and social media content. The report was originally prepared for the World Bank’s Somalia Social Assessment and is published in a revised version with the permission of the World Bank. This version contributes to the Diaspora Humanitarianism in Complex Crises (D-Hum)<sup>2</sup> research programme that analyses how Somali diaspora groups mobilize, channel and deliver humanitarian relief to the Somali regions. It is accompanied by a policy brief that elaborates three future scenarios of Somali diaspora engagement.

---

<sup>2</sup> D-Hum is a research consortium between the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS), Copenhagen; Institute for Development Studies (IDS), University of Nairobi; Rako Research and Communication Centre, Hargeisa; and Rift Valley Institute (RVI), Nairobi. It is funded by a grant from the Danish Consultative Research Committee (FFU) and runs between 2019 and 2024. See [www.diis.dk/d-hum](http://www.diis.dk/d-hum) for more information.

We use the notion of a global Somali diaspora as a shorthand for the globally dispersed population of persons of Somali descent, whether born in the Somali regions or their descendants. This is an extremely diverse population, characterized by a heterogeneity of histories, levels of transnational engagement (or the absence thereof), positions and legal categories. The global diaspora thus links different locations through practices, movements and relations, that are embedded in global, regional and local inequalities. Though refugees form a big part of the global diaspora, it also includes descendants, naturalized citizens, family-reunified persons, students and other groups of Somali decent. Altogether it is estimated to consist of some two million people, with around half this population constituted by refugees and the other half by those without refugee status. This understanding of the global Somali diaspora has several implications. First, it indicates that rather than ‘the diaspora’ simply referring to resourceful populations in Western countries, it includes people living under dire circumstances, who may be at the receiving end of remittances. Second, it highlights global dispersal and multiple connections rather than a dyadic relationship between a country of residence and an erstwhile homeland.<sup>3</sup> Third, it calls for attention to different positions and senses of belonging where ‘the diaspora category’ may or may not be claimed or attributed.<sup>4</sup> Hence, we should not conclude that everybody ‘in the diaspora’ identifies as such or is—or should be—transnationally engaged.

The report is structured as follows: **Section 1** sets out the history of Somali migration; **Section 2** highlights regional dynamics and connections; **Section 3** describes diaspora effects, with a particular focus on remittances and the uncertain future of diaspora engagement; **Section 4** explores contested diaspora engagement; while **Section 5** presents the report’s main take-aways.

---

<sup>3</sup> Nauja Kleist, ‘Somali Diaspora Groups in Sweden: Engagement in Development and Relief in the Horn of Africa’, Policy brief, *Delmi*, 2018, 5.

<sup>4</sup> For a theoretical discussion of diaspora as a political position and identity attribution, see Nauja Kleist, ‘In the Name of Diaspora: Between Struggles for Recognition and Political Aspirations’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 34/7 (2008): 1127-1143.

# History of Somali migration

The Somali regions are characterized by a long history of mobility, mobile livelihoods and displacement, and, as a consequence, transnational and translocal practices. This is reflective of changing geopolitical and local conditions, as we demonstrate below.

## Labour migration

Mobility and mobile livelihoods have been important aspects of Somali life for centuries, as well as within dominant discourses of ‘Somaliness’ or *Somalinimo*.<sup>5</sup> By the late nineteenth century, the Somali-speaking people had been divided into five different colonial states by four different colonial powers. These divisions crisscrossed mobile practices, such as pastoralism in the Horn of Africa, trade that extended to other parts of East Africa and the Gulf countries, and the search for peace in times of conflict.<sup>6</sup> On the one hand, colonial powers attempted to circumscribe Somali mobility through external and internal borders: migration control was a key policy issue during colonialism, with the colonial powers signing treaties aimed at governing and restraining mobility, as well as preventing migration between the British and Italian colonies.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, the creation of empires and colonial ties created new avenues of mobility, both during and after colonialism. Somali men served in the British and Italian armies within and outside Africa, and went seafaring in the merchant navy, and some settled in British ports, such as Cardiff, Liverpool and London.<sup>8</sup> Until the 1960s, overseas Somali migration seems to have been a predominantly male phenomenon, with Somali women engaged in trade, pastoralism and family-related mobility in the Somali region and neighbouring countries. Hence, mobility practices became ‘international migration’ through the establishment of colonial and, later, national borders. This observation remains pertinent today, as national boundaries define who gets categorized as refugees or IDPs in the Somali regions—with knock-on implications for possible asylum claims or resettlement elsewhere.

---

<sup>5</sup> Cindy Horst, *Transnational Nomads: How Somalis Cope with Refugee Life in the Dadaab Camps of Kenya*, Oxford & New York: Berghan Books, 2006; Marnie Shaffer, Giulia Ferrato and Zaheera Jinnah, ‘Routes, locations, and social imaginary: a comparative study of the on-going production of geographies in Somali forced migration’, *African Geographical Review* 37/2 (2018): 160.

<sup>6</sup> Nauja Kleist, ‘Nomads, Sailors and Refugees: A brief history of Somali migration’, Sussex Centre for Migration Working Paper 23, Brighton, University of Sussex, 2004; UNDP, ‘Somalia’s missing million: The Somali diaspora and its role in development’, Nairobi: UNDP Somalia, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Kleist, ‘Nomads, Sailors and Refugees’, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Nurrudin Farah, *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices from the Somali Diaspora*, London & New York: Cassell, 2000.

From the late 1960s onwards, several other migrant cohorts emerged. Somali seamen reached Europe looking for work or to study, which coincided with a general demand for labour migration prior to the oil crisis. Male labour migration to the Gulf countries—particularly Saudi Arabia—and the Middle East also took off following the oil boom. In addition to economic opportunities, these migrations took place against a backdrop of long drought seasons (*dabadheer*) in the early 1970s, which disrupted the local economy and caused loss of livestock and employment opportunities.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, migration was facilitated by the Somali government lifting certain travel restrictions.<sup>10</sup> Somalis went to the Gulf countries for religious purposes, to do business, and to pursue employment open to educated Arab speakers. Further, as the Siyad Barre government became increasingly repressive towards the end of the 1970s, the Gulf countries became a destination for discontented or persecuted political activists, particularly from the north-western part of Somalia (that is, today's Somaliland). In the 1980s, the number of Somalis in the Gulf region was estimated to be approximately 200,000–300,000 people.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, political refugees headed to Western countries during this period. Student migration also took place, mainly to Italy, Egypt and the UK, as well as the USSR, Cuba and other communist countries prior to 1978, then primarily to Western countries following the change of political allegiances by the Somali government.<sup>12</sup>

## Refugees

In 1978, Somalia received an estimated 1.5 million refugees from the Ogaden region of Ethiopia.<sup>13</sup> This followed military defeat in the Ogaden war, when the former allies of USSR and Cuba switched sides and backed the Ethiopian army. The mass displacement had several consequences. Taking advantage of its strategic location in the context of the Cold War, Somalia turned to the US for military help and economic support, resulting in further militarization. Moreover, the international humanitarian system became a significant presence, prompting growing dependency and leading to humanitarian aid becoming a major source of corruption.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, development of the pastoral economy was neglected.<sup>15</sup> Armed opposition movements also emerged in response to oppression, human rights abuses and disaffection with Barre's regime. These included the Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF) in 1978 and the Somali National Movement (SNM) in 1981, the latter founded in London. As a result, the economic and security

---

<sup>9</sup> UNDP, 'Somalia's missing million', 6.

<sup>10</sup> UNDP, 'Somalia's missing million', 6.

<sup>11</sup> Ioan M. Lewis, *Blood and Bone: The Call of Kinship in Somali Society*, Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 1994, 122.

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Hadley, 'Scholarships for Somalia', *Anglo-Somali Society Newsletter* 7–9 (1989); Kleist, 'Nomads, Sailors and Refugees'.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Bradbury, 'Somaliland Country Report', London: CIIR, 1997, 7.

<sup>14</sup> Simons, 1995, quoted in Bradbury, 'Somaliland Country Report', 9.

<sup>15</sup> Guenther Schlee, 'Regional political history and the production of diasporas', in *Diasporas, Development and Peacemaking in the Horn of Africa*, eds. Liisa Laakso and Petri Hautaniemi, London: Zed Books, 2014, 38–39.

situation deteriorated, with increasingly violent persecution of political opponents and the clan groups associated with them.

The tense political situation exploded in 1988, when Siyad Barre and Ethiopia's president Mengistu signed a peace accord recognizing Ethiopian control over the Somali-inhabited Haud areas, with Ethiopia agreeing to stop hosting the SNM. Consequently, a large number of Somali refugees fled to Somalia,<sup>16</sup> while the SNM responded by attacking Hargeisa and Burao, the major towns in the region. Siyad Barre responded in turn with full-scale assaults on the local population, destroying the two cities, poisoning wells and planting landmines.<sup>17</sup> More than 600,000 people fled to Ethiopia,<sup>18</sup> with an estimated 50,000 people killed between May 1988 and March 1989 alone.<sup>19</sup> The number of Somalis fleeing Barre's persecution to seek asylum in Western countries also soared during this period.

Over the next two years, civil war spread to the rest of Somalia, leading to Siyad Barre being ousted from Mogadishu in January 1991. Following this, the country descended into full-scale civil war. The activities of rebels, warlords and clan-based armed groups, in combination with drought, led to humanitarian crises and displacement in Somalia's southern and central regions. It is estimated that by the end of 1992, 500,000 people had lost their lives due to violence and famine, two million people were internally displaced through flight or being forced off their land, and between 800,000<sup>20</sup> and 1.5 million people<sup>21</sup> had fled the country. A majority of the latter went to isolated refugee camps in the deserts of Ethiopia, Kenya, Yemen and Djibouti, or to relatives in neighbouring countries. Furthermore, many people sought refuge in areas where their clan dominated, resulting in a higher coincidence between clan affiliation and residence than prior to the civil war.<sup>22</sup> Ultimately, a large portion of Somalia's population—estimated to be around 7.3 million at the time<sup>23</sup>—was displaced either inside or outside the country.

The movement of Somali refugees to neighbouring countries and further afield has continued with varying intensity since the outbreak of the civil war, stimulated by renewed outbreaks of conflict, militarization, environmental and humanitarian catastrophes, violent extremism and terrorism, as well as local pockets of instability and violence. Key events include the de facto independence of Somaliland in 1991; the failure of US Operation Restore Hope in 1992–1993; the declaration of Puntland as an

---

16 Lewis, *Blood and Bone*, 177–219.

17 Schlee, 'Regional political history', 39.

18 UNDP, *Human Development Report Somalia 2001*, Nairobi: United Nations Development Programme, 2001, 214.

19 Bradbury, 'Somaliland Country Report', 11.

20 UNDP, *Human Development 2001*, 59.

21 Bradbury, 'Somaliland Country Report', 1.

22 Cedric Barnes, '*U dhashay—Ku dhashay*: Genealogical and Territorial Discourse in Somali History', *Social Identities* 12/4 (2006); Markus Virgil Hoehne 'The Rupture of Territoriality and the Diminishing Relevance of Cross-cutting Ties in Somalia after 1990', *Development and Change* 47/6 (2016).

23 See <https://countryeconomy.com/demography/population/somalia?year=1992>.



autonomous state in 1998 (as part of the future federal state); the Djibouti-based Arta peace process, which led to the short-lived Transitional National Government (TNG) in 2000; the establishment of the Nairobi-based Transitional Federal Government (TFG) in 2004; the defeat of Mogadishu's warlords by the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in 2006; the US-backed Ethiopian invasion in 2006–2007; the presence of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) from 2007 onwards (with the UN mandate extended to March 31, 2022); the capture of Mogadishu by al-Shabaab between 2009 and 2011; and the establishment of the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) in 2012. Terrorist attacks and suicide bombings in Mogadishu and elsewhere, as well as al-Shabaab's continued presence in Somalia's southern regions, continue to make for a volatile situation. By contrast, Somaliland has been relatively peaceful since 1996.

These events—combined with more localized circumstances—have impacted Somali migration and displacement patterns. Asylum migration to Europe, North America, Australia and other further-flung regions of the world intensified from the middle of the 1990s through resettlement, onward migration, flight and family reunification. As a result, many Somali families have family members living in different parts of the world. Furthermore, when the first Gulf War broke out in 1990, many Somalis could not return to Somalia due to the civil war, and so fled to Europe. Likewise, with their country of origin descending into civil conflict, many students or expatriates living outside Somalia applied for asylum.

The number of displaced people, as well as movements internally and across borders, has thus shifted over time. Significant to this have been large United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)-assisted repatriations from refugee camps in neighbouring countries, and self-organized returns—whether temporary or long-term—from countries in the region or the West. At the geopolitical level, the end of the Cold War and the spectacular failure of Operation Restore Hope resulted in the withdrawal of the international community from Somalia. Moreover, by the 1990s the country no longer constituted a strategic location, with the world's attention now turned to the civil war in Yugoslavia, the Gulf War, and the Rwandan genocide. The War on Terror beginning in the 2000s and restrictive regimes of mobility, however, brought international attention back to the Somali regions, this time with an emphasis on combatting terrorism and containing migration. As a result, gaining asylum and third country resettlement has become significantly harder over the past two decades. Many Somali refugees now end up either warehoused in Kenyan refugee camps or urban areas, become part of mixed migration flows in the Horn of Africa or North Africa, are detained, or live clandestinely without regularized documents. Those who make it to Europe or elsewhere are faced with a policy trend of granting short-term—rather than long-term or permanent—resident permits, as well a growing emphasis on deportation in Western and African asylum and migration regimes. Thus, while refugee and asylum issues are subject to constant change, since the 2000s there has been a strong tendency towards increasingly restrictive measures.

These trends have severe implications both for Somalis living inside Somali regions and those outside them. Refugees living under precarious circumstances, such as in refugee camps, asylum centres or deportation centres, cannot usually send remittances. This affects their families, as extended household strategies—through which Somalis living in different locations contribute to households in the Somali regions—are an important element of the so-called ‘diaspora lifeline’. Diversification of livelihood, income and risk are common strategies amongst Somalis, including in pastoral production, where family members herd and live with different groups of animals in various locations, and in Somali family constellations, where spouses may not reside in the same location at the same time. Likewise, families may pool resources to ‘send’ a family member abroad in the hope of improving his or her safety and future prospects, and possibly work towards family reunification and/or remittances. Importantly, such practices should not be seen as undermining the legitimacy of asylum claims, as economic and protection needs may well co-exist. Due to the difficulties of obtaining asylum, however, such migration often forms part of mixed migration movements, where both people seeking protection and those seeking better economic opportunities (or both) travel along the same routes, by the same means.<sup>24</sup>

### Youth migration: *Tahriib*

High-risk overland youth migration is another example of mixed migration movements. Known as *tahriib*, it refers to ‘the emigration of young Somali men—and to a lesser extent women—leaving for Europe via Ethiopia, Sudan and Libya, and then across the Mediterranean Sea’.<sup>25</sup> *Tahriib* migrants tend to have secondary or early tertiary schooling, and use deferred payment on a ‘leave now-pay later scheme’ facilitated by human smugglers.<sup>26</sup> Initial costs are thus low, with families only tending to get involved later on.<sup>27</sup> Many *tahriib* migrants are held for ransom by smugglers, with family members, including those in the diaspora, potentially forced to borrow money or sell livestock/land in order to save their children or relatives. The average cost for *tahriib* amounts to around USD 7,700,<sup>28</sup> escalating to USD 10,000–20,000 for migration to Europe and the US.<sup>29</sup>

Motivating factors for *tahriib* include insecurity, lack of livelihoods opportunities, and expectations or responsibilities related to providing for one’s family. An additional

---

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, <http://www.mixedmigration.org/about/>.

<sup>25</sup> Nimo-Ilhan Ali, ‘Going on Tahriib: The causes and consequences of Somali youth migration to Europe’, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2016, 7.

<sup>26</sup> Ali, ‘Going on Tahriib’, 8.

<sup>27</sup> Ali, ‘Going on Tahriib’; Ruta Nimkar, ‘Split Loyalties: Mixed Migration and the Diaspora Connection. An analysis of Somali and Afghan Diasporas in Denmark and their connections to the new wave of mixed migration’, Danish Refugee Council, 2017; Mahad Wasuge, ‘Youth Migration in Somalia: Causes, Consequences and Possible Remedies’, Mogadishu: Heritage Institute for Policy Studies, 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Ali, ‘Going on Tahriib’, 8.

<sup>29</sup> Wasuge, ‘Youth Migration in Somalia’.

factor is the 'diaspora effect',<sup>30</sup> whereby a European passport, education or employment is associated with: upward social mobility and better opportunities for supporting one's family; personal development, including better marriage prospects; and physical mobility in a world where a Somali or Somaliland passport elicits strict visa demands. This notion is reinforced by successful diaspora returnees and tourists, as well as the actual existing inequalities between the Horn of Africa and Western countries. As Wasuge adds, many Somalis believe that governments and donor communities 'prefer diaspora Somalis when it comes to employment'.<sup>31</sup> This reflects a belief that a 'diaspora position' is instrumental when it comes to obtaining a better or more promising future in Somalia or Somaliland, and plays into the highly contentious debate surrounding diaspora privileges and discrimination against the non-diaspora population.

---

30 Ali, 'Going on Tahriib', 35–37.

31 Wasuge, 'Youth Migration', 11.

## Regional dynamics and connections

This section focuses on three major regional diaspora formations in the Horn of Africa, the Gulf countries, and Western countries. These locations present varying opportunities and challenges for Somali diaspora groups, further shaped by differences in legal categories, histories and individual backgrounds. The section also demonstrates how regional diaspora groups are connected through dispersed families in both the Somali regions and across the globe. Attention to multi-sited and multi-directional transnational practices is thus important when considering Somali diaspora engagement. Though not included in the case studies here, it should be mentioned that other African countries, especially South African and Uganda, are important settlement and asylum countries. Furthermore, Asian countries, such as Malaysia, have emerged as educational migration destinations, while Latin American countries have become destinations for onward migration towards North America. Likewise, Egypt and Turkey are important destinations for Somalis, both from the Horn of Africa and the wider diaspora.

Due to the prominent role played by mobility in Somali society, coupled with the complex conflict and displacement history, it can be hard to establish who is and is not included in the diaspora. Even those who appear to live sedentary lives may have moved extensively, emphasizing how mobility and the search for security and opportunities are important characteristics of Somali society. Furthermore, statistics are often imprecise or simply unavailable, with few accurate numbers of Somalis living in different settlement countries or in the Somali regions. Those numbers that are referenced are usually no more than estimates. A recent Somalia Migration Profile<sup>32</sup> estimates the global Somali diaspora population as of 2017 to be 1,988,500 people,<sup>33</sup> of whom almost half (986,400) were refugees. According to the profile, these populations—the ‘total’ global diaspora and the refugee share of the diaspora—are equivalent to, respectively, 13.5 per cent and 6.7 per cent of the entire Somali population, estimated to be 14.7 million people. Around 80 per cent of refugees—approximately 791,400 people—live in the neighbouring countries of Kenya, Ethiopia and Yemen. Both historically and currently, however, IDPs constitute the largest share of displaced persons. Being displaced within national borders, IDPs do not have the same rights as refugees—however insufficient those rights may be—and so are amongst the most vulnerable populations, often living

---

<sup>32</sup> EC, ‘Migration Profile Somalia End 2017’, European Commission, 2019.

<sup>33</sup> When compared with the numbers provided in the ‘Somalia’s Missing Million’ report, both the diaspora and the Somali population have doubled over the last ten years; UNDP, ‘Somalia’s missing million’.

in squalid conditions.<sup>34</sup> Most of Somalia's estimated 2,648,000 IDPs<sup>35</sup> live in urban areas and informal settlements located across the Somali territories, with the biggest concentration (almost 500,000 IDPs)<sup>36</sup> in Mogadishu.

## Horn of Africa

The Horn of Africa is thus home to a large majority of the displaced Somali population, whether inside or outside the Somali regions. Here it is necessary to bear in mind that the Somali-speaking peoples (and minorities) were divided between different colonial territories and, from 1960, different nation states. Somalis constitute ethnic minorities in Ethiopia and Kenya, and are the majority population in Djibouti. This situation has a number of important implications: many Somalis have near or distant relatives in these countries; livelihoods, such as pastoralism or trade, have long existed across borders; and Ethiopia and Kenya usually constitute the first—sometimes permanent—stop in the search for refuge. A prominent example is the Dadaab refugee complex in semi-arid Garissa County in Kenya's North Eastern Province. The complex, inhabited by ethnic Somalis, was established in 1991–1992 following an influx of refugees from the Somali civil war, and was originally designed to accommodate 90,000 refugees. More recent camps were added in 2011, following drought and famine.<sup>37</sup> The number of inhabitants has fluctuated over time, dropping from 463,000 in November 2011<sup>38</sup> to 218,873 registered refugees and asylum seekers (primarily of Somali origin) in July 2020. For many years, the Dadaab camps have been affected by conflict and deteriorating security, including sexual violence, al-Shabaab organized kidnappings and terrorism, and considerable political contestation from the Kenyan state. In May 2016, President Kenyatta announced his intention—comparable to the emphasis on deportation in Western regimes of mobility—to close the camps and repatriate Somali refugees. This provoked heavy criticism from human rights organizations and raised concerns over the security of refugees to Somalia. While the closure of Dadaab refugee camp was later ruled unconstitutional by the Kenyan High Court,<sup>39</sup> the Kenyan government re-announced its closure (also of Kakuma camp) in April 2021, scheduled for 30 June, 2022.<sup>40</sup> Kenyatta's announcements can hence be read as a message that Somali refugees are not welcome in Kenya.

---

34 Anna Lindley, 'Displacement in contested places: governance, movement and settlement in the Somali territories', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 7/2 (2013).

35 UNHCR, 'Operational Update March 2020', Geneva: UNHCR, 2020.

36 See [https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/cccm\\_somalia](https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/cccm_somalia).

37 See [www.unhcr.org/ke/dadaab-refugee-complex](http://www.unhcr.org/ke/dadaab-refugee-complex).

38 See Damien McSweeney, 'Conflict and deteriorating security in Dadaab', Humanitarian Practice Network, March 2021. (<https://odihpn.org/magazine/conflict-and-deteriorating-security-in-dadaab/>).

39 See John Kamau, 'Dadaab weak link in fight against terrorism', *The Nation*, February 2019. ([www.nation.co.ke/news/Dadaab-weak-link-in-fight-against-terrorism/1056-4965062-k4n738z/index.html](http://www.nation.co.ke/news/Dadaab-weak-link-in-fight-against-terrorism/1056-4965062-k4n738z/index.html)).

40 'Kenya sets date for closure of Dadaab, Kakuma refugees camps', *Africa News*, 30 April 2021. (<https://www.africanews.com/2021/04/30/kenya-sets-date-for-closure-of-dadaab-kakuma-refugees-camps>)

Despite the Dadaab complex's isolated location, camp refugees are linked to Somalia, other locations in Kenya, the Horn of Africa, and indeed the rest of world through their dispersed family networks. Horst explores how refugees and their family networks utilize a repertoire of practices drawn from a 'nomadic heritage', which has evolved from a translocal to a transnational character: 'a mentality of looking for greener pastures; a strong social network that entails the obligation to assist each other in surviving; and risk-reduction through strategically dispersing investments in family members and activities'.<sup>41</sup> Or, in other words, mobility coupled with social connections and obligations in different locations.

Translocal and transnational connections are also characteristic in Eastleigh, a Somali-inhabited neighbourhood in Nairobi. Eastleigh has developed into a hub for Somali business and investment, reflected in the development of huge shopping malls and rocketing real estate prices. Moreover, Eastleigh is characterized by transnational practices and ongoing mobility: it houses both Kenyan-Somalis and Somali (and other) refugees; attracts shoppers and traders from elsewhere in Nairobi, as well as other parts of Africa; and draws in investors from even further afield. Given its location in Nairobi—itsself a hub for business, travel and international organizations—Eastleigh also functions as: a temporary refuge; a steppingstone for onward mobility; a convenient meeting point or place to stay on the way into or out of Somalia; and a locality to go in search of a Somali meal or good bargains on textiles or consumer goods. As in the case of the Dadaab camps, strong social bonds and networks are important, as are trust, reputation and a willingness to take risks in uncertain and often hostile circumstances.<sup>42</sup>

The case of Kenya points to several important aspects. On the one hand, Somali refugees face ongoing political pressure, manifested in residence permit legislation and restrictions on citizenship, as well as police harassment, especially in the wake of terrorist attacks carried out by al-Shabaab in Nairobi and elsewhere. The controversy of the status of refugees in Dadaab epitomizes the key questions concerning the future of Somali refugees in Kenya: Will they stay in Kenya? Will they be deported or relocate themselves to the Somali regions? Or will they move on to other countries, either through third country resettlement or self-organized onward migration? On the other hand, there are prominent Somali politicians and businesspeople living in Kenya, as well as well-educated Kenya-based Somalis—whether Kenyan citizens or (former) refugees—who find employment in Somalia, especially in non-governmental or international organizations. While large-scale deportations/repatriations would put a strain on limited livelihood resources in the Somali regions, highly skilled labour (return) migration may create tensions with locally based Somalis due to competition over jobs. Hence, the impact of Kenya-based Somalis on Somali affairs is embedded in regional politics and inequalities.

---

<sup>41</sup> Horst, *Transnational Nomads*, 2.

<sup>42</sup> Neil Carrier, *Little Mogadishu: Eastleigh, Nairobi's Global Somali Hub*, London: Hurst & Company, 2016.



## The Gulf

For centuries, Somalis have travelled to the Arab Peninsula for trade, exploration and religious education,<sup>43</sup> with the port of Aden in Yemen an important point of departure for Somali seamen in the north of the country. While Saudi Arabia appears to be the most attractive destination, other Gulf countries are important as well. Yemen houses approximately 255,000 Somali refugees and 278,000 Somali migrants,<sup>44</sup> constituting the third biggest settlement country after Kenya and Ethiopia. Amongst the Gulf countries, Yemen is the only signatory of the Refugee Convention, and so has been a significant refugee settlement country since the 1980s. Moreover, Yemen is a transit country towards Saudi Arabia and further afield—many drowning tragedies have occurred in the Gulf of Aden or on the shores of Yemen, caused by unseaworthy boats or smugglers trying to avoid apprehension by authorities.<sup>45</sup> Worsening conditions following the Yemeni civil war and famine has prompted the return migration of Somali refugees through an Assisted Spontaneous Return (ASR) programme, facilitated by UNHCR in cooperation with humanitarian partners and authorities in Yemen and Somalia.<sup>46</sup>

Aside from Yemen, Somali migration to the Gulf countries consists mainly of labour migration, though this may be motivated and intensified by protection needs. The Gulf countries rely on migrant labour, organized through the so-called *kafala* system—an employer-sponsored visa system used especially in the construction, oil, service and domestic sectors.<sup>47</sup> Compulsory work visas are obtained through contracts with local employers, who then monitor and control their labour force, including their entry and exit from the country, or possible job transfer.<sup>48</sup> This creates significant vulnerabilities and leaves migrants open to exploitation—not least in situations where asylum and refugee protection are absent. Saudi Arabia, for instance, deported 12,000 Somalis to Somalia in 2014, without considering their possible protection needs.<sup>49</sup>

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is also an important settlement country, with Dubai acting as a business and investment hub, particularly for exports to Somalia and as headquarters for Somali industries and conglomerates, including the money transfer company Dahabshiil.<sup>50</sup> The *kafala* sponsorship system also means that Somali entre-

---

<sup>43</sup> Abdi, *Elusive Jannah*, 69.

<sup>44</sup> EC, 'Migration Profile'.

<sup>45</sup> See 'Up to 50 refugees 'deliberately drowned' off Yemen: UN', *Al Jazeera*, August 2017. ([www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/08/50-refugees-deliberately-drowned-yemen-170809204210883.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/08/50-refugees-deliberately-drowned-yemen-170809204210883.html)).

<sup>46</sup> See 'Somali refugees return home from Yemen in latest UNHCR-facilitated departure', UNHCR, October 2019. ([www.unhcr.org/news/press/2019/10/5db8299e4/somali-refugees-return-home-yemen-latest-unhcr-facilitated-departure.html](http://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2019/10/5db8299e4/somali-refugees-return-home-yemen-latest-unhcr-facilitated-departure.html)).

<sup>47</sup> Abdi, *Elusive Jannah*, 67–68.

<sup>48</sup> See 'Reform of the kafala (sponsorship) system', Migrant Reform Asia. ([www.ilo.org/dyn/migpractice/docs/132/PB2.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/dyn/migpractice/docs/132/PB2.pdf)).

<sup>49</sup> See 'Saudi Arabia: 12,000 Somalis expelled', *Human Rights Watch*, February 2014. ([www.hrw.org/news/2014/02/18/saudi-arabia-12000-somalis-expelled](http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/02/18/saudi-arabia-12000-somalis-expelled)).

<sup>50</sup> Abdi, *Elusive Jannah*, 74; Jos Meester, Ana Uzelac and Claire Elder, 'Transnational capital in Somalia: Blue desert strategy', Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael', 2019, 21.

preneurs and employers in UAE can sponsor other Somalis, constituting a ‘second-tier visa procurement industry’ that has been key to Somali migration.<sup>51</sup> Dubai represents a promising environment for successful Somali entrepreneurs holding Western—or other high-mobility—citizenships and travel documents, as it offers the possibility of attaining an economic autonomy and luxurious lifestyle impossible in most Western countries. Moreover, it provides ‘a sense of belonging in a Muslim nation that is a stone’s throw away from home’.<sup>52</sup> Some Somali families may choose to split family member residence across different locations, with the wife and children living in a Western or Middle Eastern country that offers greater stability and lower living costs (including free education) than in the UAE. Somali maids are at the other end of the spectrum, living and working under precarious circumstances, earning extremely low wages, yet still managing to send remittances to their families. Hence, while life in the UAE may offer religious and cultural spaces of belonging and respect, the legal situation remains precarious for Somali nationals.

## Western countries

Somali migration to Western countries, which stretches back more than a hundred years, intensified from the late 1980s/early 1990s, following the civil war. In 2019, the biggest Western settlement countries were the UK, US, Sweden, Norway and Canada.<sup>53</sup> Some Western countries have a more attractive reputation than others in terms of asylum and family reunification legislation, education, job opportunities or the presence of relatives. The actual country where asylum is claimed is, however, often not a matter of choice. Instead, it is dependent on such factors as the connections of human smugglers, luck or, in the case of EU countries, the Dublin Convention, which determines which member state is responsible for asylum application assessments (and hence the country of asylum, if granted).

Western countries are important to include in an analysis of Somali diaspora engagement due to the magnitude of remittances sent from these countries, as well as the international mobility offered by a Western citizenship. The latter facilitates transnational engagement, including political involvement in the Somali regions. Even so, Somalis in Western countries—particularly the first generation—have often faced considerable challenges in terms of racism and Islamophobia, unemployment and social problems. Though these challenges appear to be more pronounced in countries characterized by high employment market thresholds related to language skills and recognition of competences, such as the Nordic countries, they are also present in multicultural countries, such as the UK, US and Canada.

---

<sup>51</sup> Abdi, *Elusive Jannah*, 76.

<sup>52</sup> Abdi, *Elusive Jannah*, 84.

<sup>53</sup> See [www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/estimates19.asp](https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/estimates19.asp).

According to Abdi, the US is ‘one the most idealized destinations for Somali refugees’<sup>54</sup>—a country where one can become American, earn money and, with a US passport, travel the world. This is in contrast to many European countries, where refugees remain perpetual outsiders.<sup>55</sup> The reality, however, is often quite different.<sup>56</sup> With the exception of successful professionals and business people, many Somalis end up in the lowest tier of the economy, working ‘many over-hours, doing very filthy jobs’<sup>57</sup> in meat-processing and poultry factories, or as bus/taxi drivers, janitors and cleaners, all the while struggling to send remittances and keep afloat. In the absence of employment, they may be forced to subsist on social welfare. Racism and discrimination are also ever-present concerns.<sup>58</sup> The Twin Cities (Minneapolis and St. Paul) in Minnesota are said to have the highest concentration of Somali speakers outside the Horn of Africa and Yemen, with Minnesota’s fifth congressional district represented by Democrat Ilhan Omar, a naturalized American of Somali descent.

In Europe, the UK and Sweden are the biggest settlement countries. Somalis have settled in the UK since the late nineteenth century, with the country a centre for educational migration both during and after colonialism. Since the late 1980s, the UK has received a high number of Somali asylum seekers. Today, the greatest numbers of Somalis are found in the major cities of London and Birmingham, as well as in Leicester. The presence of long-term Somali communities in the UK, coupled with a reputation for being an English-speaking, multicultural country and a business-friendly environment, made the UK an attractive destination country in the 1990s and 2000s. Large numbers of Somalis—following naturalization in their countries of asylum in Scandinavia and the Netherlands—relocated to the UK in the early-to-mid 2000s in order to join family members, gain an international education and/or become part of a larger Somali or Muslim community.<sup>59</sup> The UK is a centre for Somali diaspora activities—especially, though not exclusively, in relation to Somaliland—as evidenced by the prominence of Somali associations, charity funds, arts and culture, and businesses.<sup>60</sup> Despite this, un-

---

54 Abdi, *Elusive Jannah*, 169.

55 Nauja Kleist, ‘Ambivalent Encounters: Negotiating boundaries of Danishness, Somaliness, and belonging’, in *From Mogadishu to Dixon: The Somali Diaspora in a Global Perspective*, eds. Abdi M. Kusow and Stephanie Bjørk, Lawrenceville, NJ: Africa World Press/Red Sea Press, 2007.

56 Abdi, *Elusive Jannah*, 169ff; Cindy Horst, ‘The Somali Diaspora in Minneapolis: Expectations and Realities’, in *From Mogadishu to Dixon: The Somali Diaspora in a Global Context*, eds. Abdi Kusow and Stephanie Bjork, Asmara: Red Sea Press, Inc., 2007.

57 Horst, ‘The Somali Diaspora’, 281.

58 See, for example, ‘“These People Aren’t Coming From Norway”: Refugees in a Minnesota City Face a Backlash’, *New York Times*, June 2019. ([www.nytimes.com/2019/06/20/us/politics/minnesota-refugees-trump.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/20/us/politics/minnesota-refugees-trump.html)).

59 Kleist, ‘Ambivalent Encounters’; Ilse van Liempt, ‘“And then one day they all moved to Leicester”: the relocation of Somalis from the Netherlands to the UK explained’, *Population, Space, Place* 17 (2011); Katrine Bang Nielsen, ‘Next Stop Britain: The Influence of Transnational Networks on the Secondary Movement of Danish Somalis’, Sussex Centre for Migration Working Paper 23, Brighton, University of Sussex, 2004.

60 Anya Ahmed, ‘Somalis in London’, New York City: Open Society Foundations, 2014; Laura Hammond, ‘Somali Transnational Activism and Integration in the UK: Mutually Supporting Strategies’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 39/6 (2013); Laura Hammond et al., ‘Cash and Compassion: The Somali Diaspora’s Role in Relief, Development and Peace-building’, Nairobi: UNDP Somalia, 2011.

or under-employment, as well as discrimination, remain a daily reality for many Somalis in the UK. In some cases, onward migration to the UK has been followed by (partial) relocation to the Somali region or a return to the first country of settlement. This reflects the importance of ongoing mobility, facilitated by EU citizenship.<sup>61</sup> Whether the UK remains an attractive destination and diaspora site post-Brexit remains to be seen.

Sweden is a relatively recent settlement country, with the large majority of the country's 66,800 Somalis arriving from the middle of the 2000s onwards.<sup>62</sup> Until July 2016, all recognized asylum seekers in Sweden received a permanent residence permit, which was reduced to a three-year permit following this date. Most Somali-Swedes live in larger cities—such as Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö—and their suburbs. The educational level for Somali-born people in Sweden is reported to be primary school level or unknown for 70 per cent of the population, with about 10 per cent having gone through tertiary education. Many Somalis are thus un- or under-employed and on social welfare, though there are also numerous examples of professionals, who often play important roles in transnational activities. Racism, Islamophobia, negative media exposure and lack of acceptance are reported as being an everyday part of life by some Somali-Swedes,<sup>63</sup> a situation also found in other Scandinavian countries.<sup>64</sup>

As highlighted in the cases discussed, Somali diaspora groups are heterogeneous in terms of their legal statuses and rights, mobility and settlement history, educational and employment situations, as well as other kinds of positionality, such as gender and generation. This heterogeneity is embedded in the multi-layered history of geopolitics, violence and opportunity that continues to shape Somali life both inside and outside the Horn of Africa. Nevertheless, the global Somali diaspora functions like an interconnected if uneven global network, with information, finance and people moving between various locations. Within this network, the Somali regions act as the main nodes, and the important diaspora sites as secondary or tertiary nodes. Here, it is important to keep the issue of inequality in mind. Broadly speaking, from the perspective of those in the Horn of Africa, living in a Western or Gulf country is—irrespective of the known social, cultural and economic challenges—seen as an economically fortunate position.<sup>65</sup> This potentially creates expectations regarding remittances, which can be hard to fulfil. Such paradoxical socio-economic positions reflect the global and regional inequalities within which Somali transnational practices and diaspora engagement plays out.

---

<sup>61</sup> For an analysis of mobility capital amongst Somalis living in Switzerland, see Moret, Joëlle, *European Somalis' Post-Migration Movements: Mobility Capital and the Transnationalisation of Resources*, Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018.

<sup>62</sup> Nauja Kleist, 'Somali Diaspora Groups in Sweden: Engagement in Development and Relief in the Horn of Africa', Stockholm: Delmi, 2018, 18.

<sup>63</sup> Carlson et al., 'Somalis in Malmö'; Kleist, 'Somali Diaspora Groups', 19.

<sup>64</sup> Cindy Horst et al., 'Somalis in Oslo'. New York, USA: Open Society Foundations, 2013; Helle Stenum and Abdulkadir Osman Farah, 'Somalis in Copenhagen', New York and London: Open Society Foundations, 2014.

<sup>65</sup> Nauja Kleist, 'Negotiating Respectable Masculinity: Gender and recognition in the Somali Diaspora'. *African Diaspora* 3/2 (2010).

# Diaspora effects

What, then, are the social and economic implications of the global dispersal of Somalis? This section discusses the transnational practices that connect diaspora groups with the Somali regions, with a particular emphasis on remittances and contributions to development and humanitarian engagement. Such practices form part of broader transnational exchanges in which information, news and gossip are transmitted, meaning that Somalis in the diaspora are usually well informed about what goes on in the Somali regions and vice versa. Moreover, they reflect longstanding practices of care and reciprocity within families and kinship groups across various sites, both within the Horn of Africa and across continents.

## Care money: Remittances sent to households

Sending remittances to family and kin has a long history in the Somali regions, and as established livelihood and survival practices have become global in scope. Estimates regarding the level of remittances sent each year to Somalia and Somaliland range from USD 1.4 billion<sup>66</sup> to USD 2 billion,<sup>67</sup> though a recent estimate suggests that the amounts are significantly higher with USD 1.4 billion to Somaliland alone in 2018.<sup>68</sup> Either way, it is a significant amount in relation to Somaliland's estimated GDP of USD 2 billion the same year<sup>69</sup> and Somalia's estimated GDP of USD 4.9 billion in 2019.<sup>70</sup> According to a survey commissioned by the Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit (FSNAU) for Somalia in 2013, the top three remittance-sending regions were, respectively, Europe, North America, and the Middle East and Egypt, with the US and UK as the top two remitting countries (in monetary value)<sup>71</sup>. However, remittances are (and were) sent from all countries of settlement.

---

<sup>66</sup> See 'World Bank makes progress to support remittance flows to Somalia', *World Bank*, Press release, June 2016. ([www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2016/06/10/world-bank-makes-progress-to-support-remittance-flows-to-somalia](http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2016/06/10/world-bank-makes-progress-to-support-remittance-flows-to-somalia)).

<sup>67</sup> See [www.ifad.org/en/web/operations/country/id/somalia](http://www.ifad.org/en/web/operations/country/id/somalia). As indicated in the Somali Poverty and Vulnerability Assessment report, there are no accurate data on remittances, which are estimated as being at least USD 1.3 billion per year, though the real figure is probably far higher; World Bank Group, *Somali Poverty and Vulnerability Assessment: Findings from Wave 2 of the Somali High Frequency Survey*, Washington, DC: World Bank, 2019.

<sup>68</sup> Mark Bradbury, Mohammed Aden Hassan, Ahmed M. Musa and Nauja Kleist, 'Covid-19 has transformed Somaliland's remittance lifeline', *Open Democracy*, April 2021. (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/covid-19-has-transformed-somalilands-remittance-lifeline/>).

<sup>69</sup> See <https://somalilandcsd.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Somaliland-GDP-Report-2012-2019.pdf>.

<sup>70</sup> See [tradingeconomics.com/somalia/gdp](http://tradingeconomics.com/somalia/gdp).

<sup>71</sup> Laura Hammond, 'Family Ties: Remittances and Livelihoods Support in Puntland and Somaliland', Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit (FSNAU) for Somalia, 2013.

Remittances can be divided into three main types: 1) ‘care and maintenance money’ (biil—meaning ‘bills’ in Somali); 2) ‘emergency aid’; 3) and ‘sustainable development aid’.<sup>72</sup> The first type is used for food security, household expenses, and health and education costs.<sup>73</sup> Reaching poor as well as better-off households, this money keeps families afloat during complex crises, improves access to credit, and helps ‘contribute to the smoothing out of income and expenditure cycles’.<sup>74</sup> Emergency—or ad hoc—remittances function more as an insurance mechanism in times of crises. Furthermore, remittances are used for investment and start-up businesses.<sup>75</sup> ‘Monthly bills’ are mainly expected from close relatives, whether living in the same location or further afield. This indicates how remittances have evolved out of translocal practices of reciprocity, where family members take care of each other, as well as social expectations and obligations, which may be enlarged for relatives living in high-income countries.

Remittances to Somalia have been described as a lifeline,<sup>76</sup> with between 40 per cent and 60 per cent of households estimated to receive remittances directly.<sup>77</sup> This also indicates that many Somali households receive remittances only intermittently if at all, which is an important point, as remittance-receiving households are less likely to be poor than other households.<sup>78</sup> Data from the second wave of the Somali High Frequency Survey (SHFS) shows that urban households receive higher amounts and more regular transfers than households in rural settings and pastoralists, while IDPs living in settlements (camps) receive the lowest amounts of all.<sup>79</sup> Hence, the most vulnerable and disconnected groups in Somali society are the least likely to receive remittances, potentially further entrenching their poverty. Remittance patterns thus reflect and possibly accentuate inequalities between those who do and do not receive regular payments.

Migration dynamics also shape remittance patterns, with the poorest people in society—in the Somali regions as in most other places—the least likely to migrate internationally, let alone to high-income countries. It thus follows that more remittances are sent to areas with longer traditions of migration, such as Somaliland and Puntland.<sup>80</sup> Clan

---

<sup>72</sup> Cindy Horst, ‘A monopoly on assistance: International aid to refugee camps and the neglected role of the Somali diaspora’, *Africa Spectrum* 43/1 (2008): 125.

<sup>73</sup> World Bank Group, *Somali Poverty*.

<sup>74</sup> Nisar Majid, Khalif Abdirahman and Shamsa Hassan, ‘Remittances and Vulnerability in Somalia’, Rift Valley Institute Briefing Paper, 2018, 5.

<sup>75</sup> Caitlin Chalmers and Aden Mohamed Hassan, ‘UK Somali Remittances Survey’, London: Department for International Development; Peter Hansen, ‘Revolving Returnees: Meanings and Practices of Transnational Return Among Somalilanders’, PhD dissertation, University of Copenhagen, 2007; Meester, Uzelac and Elder, ‘Transnational capital’.

<sup>76</sup> Manuel Orozco and Julia Yansura, ‘Keeping the lifeline open: Remittances and markets in Somalia’, Oxfam America/Adeso/Inter-American Dialogue, 2013; UNDP, ‘Somalia’s missing million’.

<sup>77</sup> Chalmers and Hassan, ‘UK Somali Remittances’, 12; Masid et al. 2008: 1; Orozco and Yansura, ‘Keeping the lifeline open’, 9.

<sup>78</sup> World Bank Group, *Somali Poverty*, xxvi.

<sup>79</sup> World Bank Group, *Somali Poverty*.

<sup>80</sup> Hammond, ‘Family Ties’; Nisar Majid, Khalif Abdirahman and Shamsa Hassan, ‘Remittances and Vulnerability in Somalia’, Rift Valley Institute Briefing Paper, 2018.



dynamics must be considered as well, with majority clans able to mobilize more external support than minority clans. In a study of the 2017 drought response, for instance, the Rahanweyne clan received less assistance from Somalis abroad than larger and internationally well-connected clan families in the area.<sup>81</sup>

Yet, the SHFS report shows that, with the exception of IDPs living in camps, all types of surveyed households in Somalia<sup>82</sup> also send remittances. While uneven, remittances reach all parts of society in the Somali regions—in other words, urban and rural recipients may send or share remittances with (other) rural relatives. As the FSNAU survey points out, the obligation to support relatives is extremely strong in Somalia, and receiving remittances makes support for poorer relatives more likely.<sup>83</sup> So-called reverse remittances<sup>84</sup>—remittances sent from families in Somalia or the Horn of Africa to their relatives in Western countries or elsewhere—also exist.

Another study found that 51 per cent of remittance recipients are women, and that female remittance recipients ‘are more likely to invest the funds in overall household well-being through increased expenditures on health, education, and nutrition’ than their male counterparts.<sup>85</sup> This study also notes, however, that women tend to receive slightly smaller amounts and are more dependent on remittances than men. Reliance on remittances as the sole (or primary) household income represents a vulnerability, which may be further aggravated by dependency on a single remitter.<sup>86</sup>

Remittances are private money, provided by senders who often (but not always) live in difficult circumstances themselves. For many Somali migrants and refugees, having poor and vulnerable family members in the Somali regions is a source of worry, with the result that there is social pressure to send remittances, despite the economic strain this may cause. Supporting families is ‘kin work’,<sup>87</sup> and failing in this task can cause shame and isolation.<sup>88</sup> During times of crisis in the Somali region, the plight of family and friends can place even greater pressure on remittance senders. Somalis are known to be persistent remitters: a survey of Somalis and nine other migrant and refugee groups in Norway characterizes Somalis as having an ‘exceptional propensity to remit’—five times more

---

81 Majid, Abdirahman and Hassan, ‘Remittances and Vulnerability’, 3.

82 Households were divided into urban, rural, IDPs living in settlements, IDPs living outside settlements (presumably in urban areas), and nomads (World Bank Group, *Somali Poverty*).

83 Hammond, ‘Family Ties’, 2.

84 Valentina Mazzucato, ‘Reverse Remittances in the Migration–Development Nexus: Two-Way Flows between Ghana and the Netherlands’, *Population, Space & Place* 17 (2011).

85 Orozco and Yansura, ‘Keeping the lifeline open’, 10.

86 Hammond, ‘Family Ties’.

87 Anna Lindley, ‘The Early-Morning Phonecall: Remittances from a Refugee Diaspora Perspective’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 35/8 (2009): 1327.

88 Laura Hammond, ‘Obligated to Give: Remittances and the Maintenance of Transnational Networks Between Somalis “At home” and Abroad’, *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies* 10 (2011).

likely than any other of the surveyed groups.<sup>89</sup> This is despite the fact that Somalis are one of the poorest and most marginalized ethnic groups in Norway. The authors suggest that ‘the extraordinary remittance-sending commitment of Somalis reflects the specific combination of acute crisis, generalized poverty, and strong norms for mutual assistance’.<sup>90</sup> A similar situation may well be the case in other Western settlement countries, with findings from Sweden, for instance, emphasizing a sense of moral and religious obligation, as well as a familiarity with suffering.<sup>91</sup>

The fact that remittances are known to be countercyclical, remaining—in contrast to other financial flows—relatively stable during crises, further demonstrates the extraordinary commitment of remittance senders. However, in cases of crises that impede the ability to send remittances—be it Covid-19, unemployment or deportation—remittance-receiving families in the Somali regions may be severely affected.

### **Collective remittances: Development projects and emergency relief**

Another form of remittance is transnational engagement directed towards projects or activities outside the household sphere. This section outlines the various activities and actors that fall under the ‘emergency aid’ and ‘sustainable development aid’ remittance categories mentioned above. While less extensive in volume than household remittances, they are important to include, as they target collective development processes and so highlight the diversity of diaspora engagement.

Collective remittances aim at establishing, reconstructing or improving development (in a broad sense), in situations of absent, destroyed or insufficient service provision caused by a weak or absent post-conflict state. Given the strength of private sector service provision in the Somali regions, such activities may also include private sector initiatives, thereby going beyond the non-profit/for-profit divide sometimes found in development circles.

Six overall areas of potentially overlapping engagement can be identified:<sup>92</sup>

- 1.** Service provision and infrastructure, such as WASH (water, sanitation and health); the educational sector, such as schools, payment of salaries and universities; and infrastructure, such as roads and bridges. This may also include private sector engagement.

---

<sup>89</sup> Jørgen Carling, Marta Bivand Erdal and Cindy Horst, ‘How Does Conflict in Migrants’ Country of Origin Affect Remittance-Sending? Financial Priorities and Transnational Obligations Among Somalis and Pakistanis in Norway’, *International Migration Review* 46/2 (2012): 302.

<sup>90</sup> Carling, Erdal and Horst, ‘How Does Conflict’, 301.

<sup>91</sup> Kleist, ‘Somali Diaspora Groups’, 59–60.

<sup>92</sup> Adapted from Hammond et al., ‘Cash and Compassion’; Kleist, ‘Somali Diaspora Groups’.

2. Sustainable development, such as livelihoods (for example, support to the fishing and meat-processing industries) and environmental protection (for example, tree planting and waste management).
3. Civil society and rights-based interventions, such as human rights, gender and minority rights, democracy and journalism.
4. Skills transfer and capacity building, including assisted temporary return programmes.
5. Humanitarian relief to emerging and protracted emergencies, such as drought, flooding and bombings.
6. Private sector investment, such as hotels, telecommunication, transport and creating local jobs.

Health and education are considered key challenges by many Somalis, due to extensive health problems, high illiteracy rates and a generally low level of education in the Somali regions, and schools, universities, hospitals and clinics (partially) established by diaspora actors can be found all over the Somali regions. A similar situation applies to the provision of (second-hand) equipment and payment of staff salaries. Such projects may—or may not—be supplemented by or linked to civil society activities, such as support for girls' education, health provision for battered women, and awareness campaigns against female genital mutilation (FGM) or about human rights.

This diversity of activity is matched by the range of diaspora actors involved in development. In many Western countries, registered associations provide a significant political opportunity structure for pursuing matched funding.<sup>93</sup> The number of Somali associations in Scandinavia, for instance, is high, with an estimated 500–600 active Somali-led associations in Sweden alone.<sup>94</sup> Many of these associations are active in issues that concern those living in the settlement country as well as those in Somalia regions, reflecting local and transnational civil society engagement. Diaspora actors engaged in development and relief work at the collective level can be divided into the following overlapping sub-categories:<sup>95</sup>

- Individual households that support development projects or organizations.

---

93 Kleist, 'Somali Diaspora Groups'; Päivi Pirkkalainen, Petra Mezzetti and Matteo Guglielmo, 'Somali Associations' Trajectories in Italy and Finland: Leaders Building Trust and Finding Legitimation', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 39/8 (2013).

94 Kleist, 'Somali Diaspora Groups', 20.

95 Hammond et al., 'Cash and Compassion', 5; Kleist, 'Somali Diaspora Groups', 34–39.

- Translocal associations focused on development and/or reconstruction in a specific area in the Somali regions—such as a town, region or (federal) state—with which the (majority) of members are in some way affiliated.
- NGOs focused on particular topics—such as the environment—rather than group affiliation.
- Professional associations organized around shared professional qualifications, such as doctors, engineers and agronomists. Individuals may offer technical skills, whether online or during return trips/holidays, or as part of formal capacity building activities.
- Umbrella organizations, which are often perceived as having greater representativity and legitimacy. These include pan-European and other regional diaspora networks.
- Religious organizations and mosques that organize Islamic charity, zakat and fundraising events during emergencies.<sup>96</sup>
- Women’s associations, which are often highlighted as important actors given the male-dominated organizational landscape.
- Global diasporic networks organized around clan or regional affiliation. Such networks tend to be less formally organized than registered associations and can raise significant funds in response to emergencies or development projects.
- Investors and shareholders in private businesses who also run businesses in the Somali regions and so are able to offer financial support and other contributions to development.
- Members of service providers, private businesses and boards of trustees of local NGOs, providing ‘support in terms of professional advice, access to professional networks abroad, and sometimes funding’.<sup>97</sup>

It is important to emphasize that development activity contributions are made in addition to remittances sent to family members, rather than replacing them. Engagement with development activities can be very time consuming, not least when it is voluntary and so must be done outside of regular working hours. Motivations for such engagement includes compassion and a sense of moral or religious obligation to assist others

---

<sup>96</sup> See Kaja Borschgrevink and Bivand Erdal Erdal, ‘With faith in development: Organizing transnational Islamic charity’, *Progress in Development Studies* 17/3 (2017).

<sup>97</sup> Hammond et al., ‘Cash and Compassion’, 2011, 5.

in need. It may also be linked to questions of recognition by one's peers as a person who makes a difference for other people and in the Somali regions.<sup>98</sup> This can apply equally to professionals using their qualifications to assist in the Somali regions, and to un- or under-employed people wishing to make a difference. Finally, engagement may be linked to realizing personal ambitions, such as a career in an international organization or in politics, where 'bringing projects' to the Somali regions may enhance an individual's prospects.

Contributions to disaster relief or other emergencies appear to be perceived as of a different and more urgent nature—a 'responsibility that should be met if at all possible'<sup>99</sup>—and therefore has priority over contributions to development projects. The literature on Somali diaspora humanitarianism emphasizes a sense of social and religious obligation to assist in times of crisis, informal organization (with social media important for mobilization) and the importance of trust.<sup>100</sup> It seems that, should a crisis arise, most types of diaspora actor are active in emergency relief, with mosques a particularly important facilitator.

Though emergency relief is sometimes described as transcending regional or clan affinities, Maxwell and Majid<sup>101</sup> suggest that emergency mobilization takes place through three concentric circles of connectedness: first, a rather narrow circle of immediate kin, whether abroad or in urban employment; second, the wider clan and community; and third, those who normally would not be approached, such as distant relatives or friends of relatives. People in the second and third circles are only (or primarily) approached in cases where, respectively, the first and second circles have proven insufficient in providing the level of help needed. This rationale underlying the sending and mobilizing of 'emergency aid', as well as other kinds of transnational support systems, demonstrates that remittances are not 'just' money flowing from rich to poor countries, but have their own social logic. It also emphasizes how varying access to diaspora groups may (re)produce inequality. This same logic also applies more broadly to development activities. In both cases, the scale and level of organization of initiatives have repercussions for trust: the larger the number of people involved, the more potential for internal conflict and mistrust.

---

98 Nauja Kleist 'In the Name of Diaspora: Between Struggles for Recognition and Political Aspirations', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 34/7 (2008): 1127-1143.

99 Kleist, 'Somali Diaspora Groups', 60; cf. Hammond 2013.

100 Cindy Horst, Stephen Lubkemann and Robtel Neajai Pailey, 'The Invisibility of a Third Humanitarian Domain', in *The New Humanitarians in International Practices: Emerging actors and contested principles*, eds. Zeynep Sezgin and Dennis Dijkzeul, London and New York: Routledge, 2016; Kleist, 'Somali Diaspora Groups'; Nisar Majid and Khalif Abdirahman, 'Diaspora Drought Response', Copenhagen: DEMAC, 2017; Mohamed Aden Hassan et al. 'Recognising Diaspora Humanitarianism. What we know and what we need to know more about', DIIS Policy Brief, 2021, 1-4.

101 Daniel Maxwell and Nisar Majid, eds., *Famine in Somalia: Competing Imperatives, Collective Failures, 2011–12*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, 13–14.

## Institutionalized diaspora support

Over the past two decades, development projects driven or supported by diaspora actors have been subject to attention from international organizations, donor governments and other institutionalized Western development actors. Matched funding to development projects, as well as facilitation of temporary return and skills transfer, represent some of the established means of supporting diaspora contributions to development.<sup>102</sup> Institutionalized support to diaspora-driven development activities can either be channelled through specific diaspora funding initiatives or mainstreamed through access to civil society organization (CSO) funding mechanisms, where diaspora associations compete with other CSOs.

The relationship between donors and diaspora actors tends to be characterized by a degree of ambivalence. Diaspora actors have expressed frustration with time-consuming application and reporting procedures and have also called for their inclusion in policy development and consultation. For their part, some development and humanitarian organizations have expressed scepticism concerning the professionalism and impartiality of Somali diaspora engagement, as well as the fear that they may be overwhelmed by the variety of Somali diaspora actors. Moreover, there is a concern that diaspora projects may be driven by specific group interests, rather than the needs of the local population.

## Somali diaspora engagement: An uncertain future

The future of transnational engagement is a much-debated topic amongst Somalis in the diaspora, with discussions revolving around: 1) regulatory restrictions; 2) digitalization of remittances; 3) the repercussions of Covid-19; and 4) generational change.

### *Regulatory restrictions*

Tougher anti-terror financing and money laundering legislation following the 9/11 attacks in 2001, combined with increased banking industry regulation post the 2008 financial crisis, have led all major banks to designate traditional money transfer operations (MTOs) as high-risk, low-yield clients. This has resulted in the (threatened) closure of remittance companies, such as Al-Barakat in 2001,<sup>103</sup> and Barclay's Bank's stated intention to shut down the accounts of Somali money transfer companies in 2013.<sup>104</sup> Access to remittance transfer services has thus become severely restricted or subject

---

<sup>102</sup> Matilde Skov Danstrøm, Nauja Kleist and Ninna Nyberg Sørensen, 'Somali and Afghan Diaspora Associations in Development and Relief Cooperation', DIIS Reports, Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2015; Hammond et al., 'Cash and Compassion'; Kleist, 'Somali Diaspora Groups'.

<sup>103</sup> Al-Barakat was cleared of allegations and relaunched in 2014.

<sup>104</sup> Mohamed Aden Hassan and Guilia Liberatore, 'Global Remittances: Update on the UK–Somali Corridor', *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies* 15 (2016); Paul, Scott et al., 'Hanging by a thread: The ongoing threat to Somalia's remittance lifeline', Oxford: Adeso/Global Center for Cooperative Security/Oxfam International, 2015.



to reduced choice. The consequences of this range from refusals to open bank accounts for Somali associations in Western countries (meaning that, by implication, they cannot send larger amounts of money through formal channels to, for example, development projects) to problems in transferring salaries or grants to the Somali regions. Traditional cash-based MTO infrastructure now relies on agents ferrying cash from one location to another, through such intermediary locations as Dubai, with the increased operational costs often passed on to clients. Moreover, some MTOs have introduced caps on daily remittances, affecting individual remittances to family members and support networks, as well as capital investments and savings.

### *Digitalization of remittances*

Digitalization of transnational engagement also affects remittances, a transition that may be accelerated by Covid-19 and restrictions on cash-based transfers (elaborated below). Such digitization is being facilitated by increased global uptake of smartphones, in concert with established mobile money services and digital wallets—such as Taaj in Somalia and Zaad under Telesom in Somaliland—opening their doors to Somali digital remittance entrepreneurs. Examples of companies set up by such entrepreneurs include WorldRemit, with headquarters in London, and Transfer Galaxy, with headquarters in Sweden, both of which operate across the world and have Somali co-founders<sup>105</sup>. While digitization facilitates money transfer and fundraising for the Internet savvy, it may pose challenges for other remittance senders who distrust or are uncomfortable with impersonalized means of transfer<sup>106</sup>. Hence the digital divide affects Somali remittance patterns as well, reflecting rural-urban as well as generational transformations.

### *Covid-19*

Regulatory restrictions and bank de-risking measures have negatively impacted remitters' ability to act as first responders during crises, including Covid-19. With large numbers of the diaspora affected by lockdowns, layoffs and trade disruptions in 2020 and 2021, there has been widespread concern if the pandemic would cause a decline in remittances<sup>107</sup> and in April 2020, the World Bank projected a 20 per cent drop in remittances for 2020.<sup>108</sup> This projection is exacerbated by the fact that some of the most severely affected industries—such as hospitality, transportation and food—are amongst

---

<sup>105</sup> Mark Bradbury et al, 'Covid-19 has transformed Somaliland's remittance lifeline'.

<sup>106</sup> See Ahmed Musa, Jethro Norman, Mark Bradbury, Mohamed Aden Hassan & Nauja Kleist, 'Tech trusts and challenges: emerging trends in Somaliland diaspora response to Covid-19', Danish Institute for International Studies, September 2020. (<https://www.diis.dk/en/research/tech-and-trust-challenges>).

<sup>107</sup> Nisar Majid, Laura Hammond, Khalif Abdirahman, Guhad Adan and Nauja Kleist, 'How Will Remittances Affect the Somali COVID-19 Response?', London School of Economics, April 2020. (<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/crp/2020/04/07/remittances-affect-the-somali-covid-19-response/>).

<sup>108</sup> 'COVID-19 Crisis Through a Migration Lens', World Bank Group, Migration and Development Brief 32, April 2020. (<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/33634/COVID-19-Crisis-Through-a-Migration-Lens.pdf?sequence=5&isAllowed=y>).

the main sources of employment for Somalis in the diaspora.<sup>109</sup> Closure of MTO offices means remittance transfers are challenging for those used to personal and trust-based transaction mechanisms, particularly the older generation. Finally, Somalis in the diaspora are and have been directly affected by Covid-19 health problems and fatalities. Not only does this reduce or terminate remittable income, but affected diaspora members may need social and financial support themselves.<sup>110</sup>

While there is no doubt that the Covid-19 has had severe consequences in the Somali regions and the global Somali diaspora, communication from financial institutions suggest that the projected remittance drop has been less dramatic than feared. According to the National Economic Forum of Somalia remittances sent to Somalia in 2020 surpassed remittances in 2019 by 11.6 per cent<sup>111</sup>, while the Central Bank of Somaliland recorded a minor drop of 6.8 per cent when compared to 2018 though the numbers picked up in the last quarter of 2020<sup>112</sup>. If informal channels were included, the estimates of remittances would no doubt be higher. In all cases, these numbers are a testimony to the extraordinary commitment of Somali remittance senders.

### *Generational change*

Finally, diaspora engagement may be affected by socio-demographic changes. Refugees who fled the civil war in the 1990s are now ageing or retiring, with reduced incomes. As a result, there is widespread concern amongst diaspora Somalis as to whether children and youth—who have been born or lived most of their lives outside the Somali regions—will send remittances with the same regularity, or at all. Such considerations are common in all diasporas where questions about the priorities of youth vis-à-vis the older generation come into play. In the Somali case, an additional factor is whether regional and clan affiliations will play a less significant role for the younger generation of remitters. Moreover, restrictions in asylum and immigration legislation have made it significantly harder to (re)settle and get a permanent residence permit or citizenship in high-income settlement countries, and so replenish the Somali diaspora with first-generation remitters.

Whether such transformations materialize remains to be seen. As pointed out by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 2009, the Somali diaspora is youthful and there is not, as yet, evidence of remittance fatigue or withdrawal from transnational engagement.<sup>113</sup> Though this observation remains valid today, we may yet see changes

---

<sup>109</sup> See Yusuf Sheikh Omar, 'Why is the Somali diaspora so badly hit by Covid-19?', *African Arguments*, May 2020. (<https://africanarguments.org/2020/05/13/why-is-the-somali-diaspora-so-badly-hit-by-Covid-19/>). See 'Ethnic minorities dying of Covid-19 at higher rate, analysis shows', *Guardian*, April 2020. ([www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/22/racial-inequality-in-britain-found-a-risk-factor-for-Covid-19](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/22/racial-inequality-in-britain-found-a-risk-factor-for-Covid-19)).

<sup>110</sup> See [www.diis.dk/en/research/tech-and-trust-challenges](http://www.diis.dk/en/research/tech-and-trust-challenges).

<sup>111</sup> <https://twitter.com/khalidawmusse/status/1406545854417211395/photo/1>

<sup>112</sup> Mark Bradbury 'et al. 'Covid-19 has transformed Somaliland's remittance lifeline'.

<sup>113</sup> UNDP, 'Somalia's missing million', 10.

in how engagement takes place, as familiarity with social media and technology shapes transnational practices in new ways. Here, *Somali Faces* is an example of an organization that uses storytelling to ‘turn the attention of a wide community into action through social media and social fundraising’ to change stereotypes, work towards peacebuilding, and support vulnerable people in Somalia, such as women in IDP camps.<sup>114</sup> Another example is *Abaaraha* (meaning drought in Somali), an online crisis-mapping platform created by five Somali-Swedish tech professionals and social entrepreneurs in response to the drought in 2017, with the aim of rendering aid faster and more efficiently.<sup>115</sup>

---

114 See [www.somalifaces.org/about/](http://www.somalifaces.org/about/).

115 See [https://abaaraha.org/new\\_about-us/](https://abaaraha.org/new_about-us/).

## Contested diaspora engagement and return migration

While Somali transnational engagement contributes to survival, reconstruction and development processes in the Somali regions, it is also subject to contestation, as well as struggles over resources in relation to return migration, such as job competition and the political involvement of diaspora returnees.

Refugees arriving from refugee camps in neighbouring countries constitute the highest number of returnees, and is a growing trend—whether through deportation<sup>116</sup> or large-scale organized repatriation. Relocation of deportees and Somalis living in neighbouring countries to Somalia means competition over scarce resources and already ‘overstretched’ social structures, potentially provoking conflict between IDPs, returnees and the local population. As has been previously pointed out, camp IDPs, pastoralists and rural populations are the most vulnerable groups in Somali society, meaning the relocation of poor groups and individuals to the Somali regions may aggravate already existing inequalities faced by these groups.

Self-organized diaspora return—whether from Western or neighbouring countries—are often temporary and may form part of circular migration patterns. Short or long-term relocation is greatly facilitated by settlement country citizenship (particularly Western countries), which enables frequent return trips and possible evacuation if necessary. Such opportunities for safe and legal mobility contrasts sharply with visa demands placed on Somalia and Somaliland passport holders, highlighting global inequalities. Moreover, self-organized return is usually dependent on having sufficient means to provide for oneself and one’s family—or, in other words, the ability to continue remittance responsibilities prior to relocation.

Contestation over diaspora return may also be expressed through concerns over loyalties and behaviour. Some observers write of a ‘deepening returnee–stayee divide at all levels of society’, expressed through a ‘festering schism between diaspora (qurbojoog) and “stayees” (qoraxjoog) [that] has evoked anxieties about citizenship and belonging’.<sup>117</sup> Some returnees are labelled *dayuusbor*a (ill-mannered diaspora), a contemptuous label for returnees who do not behave well. This may apply to deportees, such as rejected asylum seekers or criminal offenders, or to cases of cultural rehabilitation involving

---

<sup>116</sup> Nathalie Peutz, “‘Criminal Alien’ Deportees in Somaliland: An Ethnography of Removal”, in *The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space and the Freedom of Movement*, eds. Nicolas De Genova and Nathalie Peutz, Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2010.

<sup>117</sup> See Mohamed Dual, ‘Moving forward while standing still’, *Africa is a Country*, July 2020. (<https://africasacountry.com/2020/07/moving-forward-while-standing-still>).

younger Somalis—so-called *dhaqan celis*.<sup>118</sup> Thus, contestation or scepticism over diaspora return may revolve around both socio-cultural norms of good behaviour and struggles over resources, with deportees and asylum seekers likely to be making their return empty-handed or indebted.

Longer-term return tends to be dominated by men, with other family members remaining in the country of settlement. Despite this, prominent female returnees are also in evidence. Diaspora returnees work in business, the public and non-profit sectors, NGOs, international organizations, and state institutions. Furthermore, trends show young Somali entrepreneurs returning eager to exploit Somalia's digitized opportunities,<sup>119</sup> with some inspired by Western platform business models, such as Uber.<sup>120</sup> Returnees thus play an important role in private sector development and investment in the Somali regions, which may in turn generate employment and economic growth. Aside from business, the humanitarian and development industry forms a significant proportion of diaspora returnees' employment prospects, while women and the younger generation of returnees are predominantly represented in the civil service or consulting roles to senior government officials.<sup>121</sup> Finally, for some diaspora Somalis, Somalia and Somaliland offer business and career opportunities that may be inaccessible in their country of settlement<sup>122</sup>.

The political sphere offers another career path for diaspora returnees,<sup>123</sup> in particular mature men. Returnees from Western countries constitute a large proportion of high-ranking politicians in Somalia and Somaliland. Since the 2012 elections, the 4.5 clan formula has resulted in a growing number of returnees vying for various political roles, with increasing return to Somalia's southern and central parts due to improved security situations. Prominent diaspora politicians in Somalia include Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, nicknamed Farmaajo, who has lived in the US and is the current acting president of the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) though his original presidential term expired in February 2021. Farmaajo was prime minister of Somalia between 2010 and 2011, before returning to the US and his job in the New York State Department

---

118 Marja Tiliainen, 'Failed Diaspora: Experiences of *Dhaqan Celis* and Mentally Ill Returnees in Somaliland', *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 20/1 (2011).

119 See Abdi Latif Dahir, 'Somalia's young entrepreneurs are finding their way in the new global economy', *Quartz Africa*, November 2016. (<https://qz.com/africa/839427/somalias-young-entrepreneurs-are-using-technology-and-innovation-to-find-their-way-into-the-new-global-economy/>).

120 See Abdi Latif Dahir, 'Somalia's e-commerce businesses are rising against the odds', *Quartz Africa*, October 2018. (<https://qz.com/africa/1428066/somalias-e-commerce-start-ups-gulliverry-saami-online-thrive/>).

121 Maimuna Mohamoud, 'Diaspora Return to Somalia: Perceptions and Implications', HIPS Policy Brief. Mogadishu: Heritage Institute for Policy Studies (HIPS), 2014.

122 Laura Hammond, 'Diaspora returnees to Somaliland: heroes of development or job-stealing scoundrels?', in *Africa's Return Migrants: The New Developers*, eds. Lisa Åkeson and Maria Eriksson Baaz, London: Zed Books, 2015; Peter Hansen, 'Diaspora returnees in Somaliland's displacement economy', in *Displacement Economies: Paradoxes of Crisis and Creativity*, ed. Amanda Hammar, London: Zed Books, 2014; Mohamoud, 'Diaspora Return to Somalia'.

123 Claire Elder, 'Diaspora Return to Politics: From State Collapse to a New Federal Somalia and Somaliland, 1985–2018', DPhil dissertation, Oxford University, 2020; Hammond, 'Diaspora returnees to Somaliland'.

of Transportation.<sup>124</sup> He stayed in Somali politics, however, and ran for president in 2016, winning the election. Another example is former FGS prime minister, Hassan Ali Khayre, who has Norwegian citizenship, and his successor Mohamed Hussein Roble, who has studied in Sweden and holds dual Somali and Swedish citizenship. In 2019, the majority of cabinet ministers held foreign passports, and more than a third of the Federal Parliament had dual nationality.<sup>125</sup> Diaspora returnees appear to have played an even greater political role in Somaliland and Puntland.<sup>126</sup> In Somaliland, examples include the minister of finance, Saad Ali Shire (UK), the Speaker of the House of Elders/Upper House (UK) and the outgoing speaker of the House of Representatives/Lower House (Canada), and the leaders of the two opposition parties (Finland).

The prominence of diaspora returnees in politics does not imply it is an open sphere for returnees. Rather, it is dominated by older Somali males, with young and female diaspora returnees experiencing ‘significantly greater barriers to entering high-level politics’<sup>127</sup>. Furthermore, there are fierce debates concerning the loyalties of Somali politicians who are (dual) citizens of another country,<sup>128</sup> and who may therefore be able to return to their other country of citizenship if things go wrong. Perhaps as a response to this debate, President Farmaajo announced in August 2019 his intention to renounce his US citizenship.<sup>129</sup>

The question of staying or leaving is also contested in other regards, with those Western passport holders who leave during crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, seen as revealing their lack of commitment. Furthermore, some diaspora returnees are accused of feelings of superiority, or of unwelcome attempts to ‘save’ the locals. Perceived Western behaviour or promotion of non-Somali norms can cause controversy in daily life as well, where patriarchal norms make return for diaspora professional women more difficult.<sup>130</sup>

Finally, tensions revolve around employment opportunities. Diaspora returnees with educational credentials and career histories from Western—or other foreign—countries are widely perceived to have an advantage over locals, thereby creating disparities in wages and employment prospects that can aggravate tensions and feed into notions of

---

124 See John Leland, ‘After a Break to Run Somalia, Back at His Cubicle’, *New York Times*, December 2011, ([www.nytimes.com/2011/12/07/nyregion/after-serving-as-somalias-prime-minister-back-to-work-in-buffalo.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/07/nyregion/after-serving-as-somalias-prime-minister-back-to-work-in-buffalo.html)).

125 See ‘Divided loyalties? Dual citizenship and high-ranking political office in Somalia’, *Somali Public Agenda*, August 2019. (<https://somalipublicagenda.org/dual-citizenship-and-high-ranking-political-office-in-somalia/>).

126 Osman, Idil, *Media, Diaspora and the Somali Conflict*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

127 Mohamoud, *Diaspora Return*, 3.

128 See <https://somalipublicagenda.org/dual-citizenship-and-high-ranking-political-office-in-somalia/>.

129 See ‘Farmaajo drop US citizenship, but will this deliver victory?’, *The East African*, August 2019. ([www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/farmaajo-drops-us-citizenship-but-will-this-deliver-victory--1424194](http://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/farmaajo-drops-us-citizenship-but-will-this-deliver-victory--1424194)).

130 Mohamoud, ‘Diaspora Return to Somalia’.

foreign passport holders being unduly favoured.<sup>131</sup> This is particularly the case when pay scales between local and international employees are not harmonized, with segregation due to security concerns further aggravating such divides. It should be emphasized, however, that contestation concerning return migration can be found in many other contexts<sup>132</sup> and should not be regarded as a uniquely Somali phenomenon.

---

<sup>131</sup> Elder, 'Diaspora Return to Politics'; Mohamoud, 'Diaspora Return to Somalia'; Wasuge, 'Youth Migration'; 'Job and pay gap between local Somali graduates and diaspora returnees', Hiraan Online, 26 February 2018. [www.hiraan.com/news4/2018/Feb/156969/job\\_and\\_pay\\_gap\\_between\\_local\\_somali\\_graduates\\_and\\_diaspora\\_returnees.aspx](http://www.hiraan.com/news4/2018/Feb/156969/job_and_pay_gap_between_local_somali_graduates_and_diaspora_returnees.aspx)

<sup>132</sup> See Åkesson, Lisa and Maria Eriksson Baaz, eds., *Africa's Return Migrants: The New Developers?*, London: Zed Books, 2015.



## Conclusions and policy implications

Somali society is shaped by transnational lives and activities, highlighting the importance of mobility, multi-directional practices and senses of belonging. This has important implications both for understanding Somali society and for programming, as key political and financial decisions—ranging from pooling of funds during emergencies to diaspora involvement in politics—are co-decided in different, sometimes distant, places. Furthermore, it means that Somali affairs are solidly embedded in local and global inequalities. 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 (or other high mobility) passport. Moreover, the living conditions of Somali diaspora groups in different parts of the world effects life in the Somali regions, with the ability to send remittances and conduct other transnational practices shaped by local integration policies and restrictive asylum and immigration regimes.

Three overall points and key operational implications of Somali diaspora engagement are summarized below:

- 1. Remittances reduce poverty while reproducing existing inequalities. Moreover, remittance effects are impeded by excessive securitization measures and high transfer costs.**

Estimates regarding the level of remittances sent each year to Somalia and Somaliland range from USD 1.4 billion to USD 2 billion, which constitutes a substantial chunk of their GDP. As such, remittances represent a lifeline for those in the Somali regions. Even so, only an estimated 40–60 per cent of households receive remittances regularly or ad hoc, which implies that many households only receive remittances intermittently if at all. This is an important point, as remittance-receiving households are less likely to be poor than other households, and also more likely to support relatives in both urban and rural areas. While remittances reach all parts of Somali society, patterns of remittance receipt reflect and potentially reproduce existing inequalities. Urban households receive higher amounts and more regular transfers than households in rural settings and pastoralists, while internally displaced persons (IDPs) living in settlements (camps) receive the lowest amounts of all groups. Hence, the most vulnerable and disconnected groups in Somali society are the least likely to receive remittances, which may further entrench their poverty. Finally, excessive securitization and bank de-risking measures impede opportunities for legal remittance transfer and reduce the amounts received. Addressing this situation is a key challenge for international banks and other external actors.

2. Return migration may further development but can also result in struggles over resources between returnees and those who stay. Challenges following return must be addressed without marginalizing or excluding returnees.

While diaspora engagement may be a key resource for development in the Somali regions, it is also subject to contestation. This appears particularly acute with regard to return migration, whether in the form of deported asylum seekers, repatriated camp refugees, diaspora professionals working for NGOs/international organizations, or returnees with political ambitions. Returnees may put pressure on already strained resources, aggravating existing vulnerabilities and deepening the divide between returnees and locals. Repatriated refugees may end up in IDP camps, while diaspora professionals compete with locals for well-paid jobs in an employment market where Western (or other foreign) educational credentials and careers are perceived as more attractive than their Somali equivalents.

When striking a balance between ‘diaspora returnees’ and ‘those who stayed behind’, it is therefore important to address favouritism towards non-Somali educational and job credentials, as well as uneven pay scales for local and international staff. With this in mind, exclusion or marginalization of returnees is not the answer. Rather, it should be acknowledged that return migration comes with its own challenges, which must be addressed alongside its positive potential in terms of private sector development, knowledge transfer and innovation.

3. The future of Somali diaspora engagement is uncertain and will be shaped by both generational changes and broader regimes of migration, transnational mobility and security.

The future of transnational engagement is a much-debated topic amongst Somalis in the diaspora, particularly in relation to generational change. With the large cohort of refugees who left during the early part of the Somali civil war getting older and retiring, so their ability to send remittances is dwindling, and it is only a matter of time before they will eventually have to step down from key diasporic positions. Whether the younger generations—who have lived most or all of their lives outside the Somali regions—will continue to send remittances and be transnationally engaged is therefore a key question amongst Somali diaspora groups and for programming.

The future of diaspora engagement is also contingent on global and regional regimes of migration and asylum policies as well as securitization measures. These factors not only affect access to asylum and transnational migration, and hence the replenishment of the diaspora, but also the opportunity for shorter or longer return stays and other kinds of transnational engagement that inspires and sustains diaspora engagement. Finally, the situation in the Somali regions is pertinent. Stabilization will likely result in increased return migration, including diaspora professionals and entrepreneurs as well

as large-scale repatriation and deportation from neighbouring and other asylum countries. However, if not accompanied by inclusive growth and livelihood and educational opportunities for the youth, outmigration will likely continue. Without legal migration options, such migration might be of a high-risk and irregular nature, with the ensuing uncertainties and precariousness. It is thus pertinent to include local youth in programming in both the short and long run, particularly in terms of sustainable futures in the Somali regions, as well as opportunities for safe and legal mobility.

# Bibliography

- Abdi, Cawo M. *Elusive Jannah: The Somali Diaspora and a Borderless Muslim Identity*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.
- Ahmed, Anya. 'Somalis in London'. New York City: Open Society Foundations, 2014.
- Åkesson, Lisa and Maria Eriksson Baaz, eds. *Africa's Return Migrants: The New Developers?* London: Zed Books, 2015.
- Ali, Nimo-Ilhan. 'Going on Tahriib: The causes and consequences of Somali youth migration to Europe'. Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2016.
- Barnes, Cedric. 'U dhashay—Ku dhashay: Genealogical and Territorial Discourse in Somali History'. *Social Identities* 12/4 (2006): 487–498.
- Borschgrevink, Kaja and Bivand Erdal Erdal. 'With faith in development: Organizing transnational Islamic charity'. *Progress in Development Studies* 17/3 (2017): 214–228.
- Bradbury, Mark. 'Somaliland Country Report'. London: CIIR, 1997.
- Mark Bradbury, Mohammed Aden Hassan, Ahmed M. Musa and Nauja Kleist, 'Covid-19 has transformed Somaliland's remittance lifeline', 2021, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/covid-19-has-transformed-somalilands-remittance-lifeline/>.
- Carling, Jørgen, Marta Bivand Erdal and Cindy Horst. 'How Does Conflict in Migrants' Country of Origin Affect Remittance-Sending? Financial Priorities and Transnational Obligations Among Somalis and Pakistanis in Norway'. *International Migration Review* 46/2 (2012): 283–309.
- Carlson, Benny, Fozia Sloane, Karin Magnusson, Rickard Lagervall and Jonas Otterbeck. 'Somalis in Malmö'. New York, NY: Open Society Foundations, 2014.
- Carrier, Neil. *Little Mogadishu: Eastleigh, Nairobi's Global Somali Hub*. London: Hurst & Company, 2016.
- Chalmers, Caitlin and Aden Mohamed Hassan. 'UK Somali Remittances Survey'. London: Department for International Development, 2008.
- Danstrøm, Matilde Skov, Nauja Kleist and Ninna Nyberg Sørensen. 'Somali and Afghan Diaspora Associations in Development and Relief Cooperation'. DIIS Reports. Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2015.
- EC. 'Migration Profile Somalia End 2017'. European Commission, 2019.
- Elder, Claire. 'Diaspora Return to Politics: From State Collapse to a New Federal Somalia and Somaliland, 1985–2018'. DPhil dissertation, Oxford University, 2020.
- Farah, Nurrudin. *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices from the Somali Diaspora*. London & New York: Cassell, 2000.
- Hadley, Andrew. 'Scholarships for Somalia'. *Anglo-Somali Society Newsletter* 7–9 (1989).

- Hammond, Laura. 'Obligated to Give: Remittances and the Maintenance of Transnational Networks Between Somalis "At home" and Abroad'. *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies* 10 (2011): 125–151.
- . 'Family Ties: Remittances and Livelihoods Support in Puntland and Somaliland'. Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit (FSNAU) for Somalia, 2013.
- . 'Somali Transnational Activism and Integration in the UK: Mutually Supporting Strategies'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 39/6 (2013): 1001–1017.
- . 'Diaspora returnees to Somaliland: heroes of development or job-stealing scoundrels?' In *Africa's Return Migrants: The New Developers*, edited by Lisa Åkeson and Maria Eriksson Baaz, 44–63. London: Zed Books, 2015.
- , Mustafa Awad, Ali Ibrahim Dagane, Peter Hansen, Cindy Horst, Ken Menkhaus and Lynette Obare. 'Cash and Compassion: The Somali Diaspora's Role in Relief, Development and Peace-building'. Nairobi: UNDP Somalia, 2011.
- Hansen, Peter. 'Revolving Returnees. Meanings and Practices of Transnational Return Among Somalilanders'. PhD dissertation, University of Copenhagen, 2007.
- . 'Diaspora returnees in Somaliland's displacement economy'. In *Displacement Economies: Paradoxes of Crisis and Creativity*, edited by Amanda Hammar, 145–160. London: Zed Books, 2014.
- Hassan, Mohamed Aden and Guilia Liberatore. 'Global Remittances: Update on the UK–Somali Corridor'. *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies* 15 (2016): 34–45.
- Mohammed Aden Hassan, Sahra Ahmed Koshin, Peter Albrect, Mark Bradbury, Fatima Dahir Mohamed, Abdirahman Edle Ali, Karuti Kanyinga, Nauja Kleist, George Michuki, Ahmed M. Musa, Jethro Norman, and Obadia Okinda. 2021. "Recognising Diaspora Humanitarianism. What we know and what we need to know more about." *DIIS Policy Briefs: 1-4*.
- Hoehne, Markus Virgil. 'The Rupture of Territoriality and the Diminishing Relevance of Cross-cutting Ties in Somalia after 1990'. *Development and Change* 47/6 (2016): 1379–1411.
- Horst, Cindy. *Transnational Nomads: How Somalis Cope with Refugee Life in the Dadaab Camps of Kenya*. Oxford & New York: Berghan Books, 2006.
- . 'The Somali Diaspora in Minneapolis: Expectations and Realities'. In *From Mogadishu to Dixon: The Somali Diaspora in a Global Context*, edited by Abdi Kusow and Stephanie Bjork, 275–294. Asmara: Red Sea Press, Inc., 2007.
- . 'A monopoly on assistance: International aid to refugee camps and the neglected role of the Somali diaspora'. *Africa Spectrum* 43/1 (2008): 121–131.
- , Faiza Kassim Ibrahim, Brandon Baumbach, Marian Hussein, Hawa Muuse and Sundus Osman. 'Somalis in Oslo'. New York, USA: Open Society Foundations, 2013.
- , Stephen Lubkemann and Robtel Neajai Pailey. 'The Invisibility of a Third Humanitarian Domain'. In *The New Humanitarians in International Practices: Emerging actors and contested principles*, edited by Zeynep Sezgin and Dennis Dijkzeul, 213–231. London and New York: Routledge, 2016.

- Kleist, Nauja. 'Nomads, Sailors and Refugees: A brief history of Somali migration'. Sussex Centre for Migration Working Paper 23. Brighton, University of Sussex, 2004.
- . 'Ambivalent Encounters: Negotiating boundaries of Danishness, Somaliness, and belonging'. In *From Mogadishu to Dixon. The Somali Diaspora in a Global Perspective*, edited by Abdi M. Kusow and Stephanie Bjørk, 159–179. Lawrenceville, NJ: Africa World Press/Red Sea Press, 2007.
- . 'In the Name of Diaspora: Between Struggles for Recognition and Political Aspirations', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 34/7 (2008): 1127-1143.
- . 'Negotiating Respectable Masculinity: Gender and recognition in the Somali Diaspora'. *African Diaspora* 3/2 (2010): 185–206.
- . 'Somali Diaspora Groups in Sweden: Engagement in Development and Relief in the Horn of Africa'. Stockholm: Delmi, 2018.
- Lewis, Ioan M. *Blood and Bone: The Call of Kinship in Somali Society*. Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 1994.
- van Liempt, Ilse. "And then one day they all moved to Leicester": the relocation of Somalis from the Netherlands to the UK explained'. *Population, Space, Place* 17 (2011): 254–266.
- Lindley, Anna. 'The Early-Morning Phonecall: Remittances from a Refugee Diaspora Perspective'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 35/8 (2009): 1315–1334.
- . 'Displacement in contested places: governance, movement and settlement in the Somali territories'. *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 7/2 (2013): 291–313.
- Majid, Nisar and Khalif Abdirahman. 'Diaspora Drought Response'. Copenhagen: DEMAC, 2017.
- Majid, Nisar, Khalif Abdirahman and Shamsa Hassan. 'Remittances and Vulnerability in Somalia'. Rift Valley Institute Briefing Paper, 2018.
- Maxwell, Daniel and Nisar Majid, eds. *Famine in Somalia: Competing Imperatives, Collective Failures, 2011–12*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Mazzucato, Valentina. 'Reverse Remittances in the Migration–Development Nexus: Two-Way Flows between Ghana and the Netherlands', *Population, Space & Place* 17 (2011): 454–468.
- Meester, Jos, Ana Uzelac and Claire Elder. 'Transnational capital in Somalia: Blue desert strategy'. Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael', 2019.
- Mohamoud, Maimuna. 'Diaspora Return to Somalia: Perceptions and Implications'. HIPS Policy Brief. Mogadishu: Heritage Institute for Policy Studies (HIPS), 2014.
- Moret, Joëlle. *European Somalis' Post-Migration Movements: Mobility Capital and the Transnationalisation of Resources*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018.
- Nielsen, Katrine Bang. 'Next Stop Britain: The Influence of Transnational Networks on the Secondary Movement of Danish Somalis'. Sussex Centre for Migration Working Paper 23. Brighton, University of Sussex, 2004.

- Nimkar, Ruta. 'Split Loyalties: Mixed Migration and the Diaspora Connection. An analysis of Somali and Afghan Diasporas in Denmark and their connections to the new wave of mixed migration'. Danish Refugee Council, 2017.
- Orozco, Manuel and Julia Yansura. 'Keeping the lifeline open: Remittances and markets in Somalia'. Oxfam America/Adeso/Inter-American Dialogue, 2013.
- Osman, Idil. *Media, Diaspora and the Somali Conflict*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- Paul, Scott, Anne-Marie Schryer-Roy, Ben Murphy and Ed Pomfret. 'Hanging by a thread: The ongoing threat to Somalia's remittance lifeline'. Oxford: Adeso/Global Center for Cooperative Security/Oxfam International, 2015.
- Peutz, Nathalie. "'Criminal Alien" Deportees in Somaliland: An Ethnography of Removal'. In *The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space and the Freedom of Movement*, edited by Nicolas De Genova and Nathalie Peutz, 371–409. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2010.
- Pirkkalainen, Päivi, Petra Mezzetti and Matteo Guglielmo. 'Somali Associations' Trajectories in Italy and Finland: Leaders Building Trust and Finding Legitimation'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 39/8 (2013): 1261–1279.
- Schlee, Guenther. 'Regional political history and the production of diasporas'. In *Diasporas, Development and Peacemaking in the Horn of Africa*, edited by Liisa Laakso and Petri Hautaniemi. London: Zed Books, 2014.
- Shaffer, Marnie, Giulia Ferrato and Zaheera Jinnah. 'Routes, locations, and social imaginary: a comparative study of the on-going production of geographies in Somali forced migration'. *African Geographical Review* 37/2 (2018).
- Stenum, Helle and Abdulkadir Osman Farah. 'Somalis in Copenhagen'. New York and London: Open Society Foundations, 2014.
- Tilikainen, Marja. 'Failed Diaspora: Experiences of *Dhaqan Celis* and Mentally Ill Returnees in Somaliland'. *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 20/1 (2011): 71–89.
- UNDP. *Human Development Report Somalia 2001*. Nairobi: United Nations Development Programme, 2001.
- . 'Somalia's missing million: The Somali diaspora and its role in development'. Nairobi: UNDP Somalia, 2009.
- UNHCR. 'Operational Update March 2020'. Geneva: UNHCR, 2020.
- Wasuge, Mahad. 'Youth Migration in Somalia: Causes, Consequences and Possible Remedies'. Mogadishu: Heritage Institute for Policy Studies, 2018.
- World Bank Group. *Somali Poverty and Vulnerability Assessment: Findings from Wave 2 of the Somali High Frequency Survey*. Washington, DC: World Bank, 2019.



With an estimated two million people of Somali descent living outside Somalia—the Somali diaspora—an understanding of migration and transnational practices is crucial to understanding Somali society. The majority of diaspora Somalis live in neighbouring countries, but many others are dispersed across the globe. *Global Connections: Somali diaspora practices and their effects* shows how the living conditions and political opportunity structures in different parts of the world can affect Somali diaspora engagement, and hence life in the Somali regions. The report emphasizes the importance of safe and secure transnational interactions—including legal mobility and remittance transfer—as well as addressing the potential opportunities and challenges of diaspora return migration.

The report was originally prepared for the World Bank’s Somalia Social Assessment and is published in a revised version with the permission of the World Bank.