

# Diaspora Return to Somalia

## Perceptions and Implications

### Key Messages

- The recent return of many diaspora Somalis represents a new phase of diaspora engagement with Somalia. Financial remittances still constitute a crucial instrument through which the diaspora is able to support communities across Somalia. However, through their return the diverse and globally dispersed diaspora are also able to offer vital assistance to the country's reconstruction and development efforts.
- Return is growing increasingly viable among members of the diaspora. This is inspiring many diaspora Somalis to consider putting expertise and resources gained in their host countries to use in their country of origin. Return remains, however, a viable option only for those with citizenship in their host countries, significant resources, and existing professional networks in Somalia.
- Diaspora returnees are growing increasingly visible in Somalia. Their increasing presence is prompting numerous debates on the issue of return and how to maximize the potential of the 'diaspora resource' both in Somalia and beyond.
- Diaspora Somalis often initiate dialogues with those that remained in the country throughout the civil war. Non-diaspora Somalis, likewise, acknowledge the importance of engaging with returnees in an effort to bridge differences and lay the foundations for rebuilding Somalia together.
- Tensions between diaspora and non-diaspora Somalis continue to exist and are due to perceptions of a sense of superiority among the diaspora, employment advantages, and segregation in society. These tensions may deepen if they are not sufficiently addressed by all stakeholders.
- Return is rarely permanent but often circular in nature, further exacerbating tensions between diaspora Somalis and locals. Government entities in Somalia have a responsibility to ensure that conditions are conducive for the permanent return of diaspora Somalis by improving security conditions, and providing adequate health and education services.

### Background

Data on the scale of diaspora return is lacking. It is, however, broadly acknowledged, based on the increasing visibility of the diaspora in society, that there has been a steady increase in returns in the past few years. This increase marks a new phase of diaspora engagement in Somalia. Remittances sent by the globally dispersed diaspora continue to provide vital support to Somali families. Debates regarding the role the diaspora can play in reconstruction efforts upon their return to Somalia are now increasing.

The increasing visibility of the diaspora in society is further reflected by the establishment of diaspora

departments under government ministries. In October 2013, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Mogadishu established the Department of Diaspora Affairs to deal specifically with diaspora engagement. The Somaliland Diaspora Agency, housed under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation was established by Presidential Decree in 2010. The Puntland Diaspora Department, housed under the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation was also established in 2010.

This Briefing is based on a study which set out to explore the motivations behind the burgeoning return of the diaspora from the United States and Norway, the types of return, and the nature of

returnees' contributions to reconstruction and development efforts.<sup>1</sup> The study sought also to examine common non-diaspora perceptions of the impact of diaspora contributions to reconstruction and development efforts, whilst also considering the extent to which diaspora returnees' experiences in their host countries inform the decision to return.

Information and recommendations presented in this Briefing are based on 29 interviews with diaspora returnees and three focus group discussions with non-diaspora Somalis, in Mogadishu, Garowe, and Hargeisa. 23 interviews were also conducted with members of the Somali diaspora in Oslo, Norway, and a further 21 interviews were conducted in Minneapolis, United States. These cities were chosen due both to their large Somali diaspora communities and to the presence of partner institutions - The Humphrey School of Public Affairs in Minneapolis and the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) in Oslo.

The term 'diaspora' stimulates debate and contestation in Somalia. Non-diaspora Somalis usually reserve the term for Somalis holding citizenship of western countries only. Government officials in Somalia are now encouraging an expanded and more accurate definition to include communities based elsewhere in the world.<sup>2</sup> Returnees and locals agree, however, that the term is also fluid. Returnees often consider themselves to be 'locals' only months after moving back to Somalia. Similarly, non-diaspora Somalis often refer to prominent and respected returnees as fellow 'locals' within a relatively short period of time.

## Motivations and triggers

**“We have a duty to come back and improve our own country, and to bring back what we have learned abroad.”**

**“You can't just return... You have to be able to show what you did when you were away... I feel that I have been able to make a difference.”**

Diaspora returnees frequently emphasize the sense of obligation and responsibility they feel towards their country of origin with the education and expertise acquired in their countries of resettlement. While such sentiments appear to resonate with many diaspora Somalis, however, without specific opportunities – a job offer, a business initiative, or a political position, for example – return is not feasible.

A major facilitator of return is western citizenship. Citizenship enables mobility to and from Somalia. Many diaspora Somalis have families in their host countries unable or unwilling to return to Somalia yet. Citizenship enables frequent return trips to visit family members. In the event of a sudden deterioration of security in Somalia foreign citizenship may also support evacuation.

The decision to return to Somalia may be motivated by a desire to contribute to the country's reconstruction, but is ultimately triggered by specific opportunities enabling them to do so. Returnees tend to balance fulfilling personal goals with a

desire to make an impact in Somalia. Educated diaspora Somalis often face difficulties accessing employment in their countries of resettlement and acknowledge that expertise gained abroad are in greater demand in Somalia.

Diaspora youth also balance personal goals with a desire to support reconstruction efforts though they are also often drawn to Somalia to rediscover their heritage and to reconnect with an important part of their identity. Many young diaspora Somalis further seek to gain valuable experience in Somalia with which to return to their countries of resettlement or to gain employment with international development agencies.

There remains an awareness among the diaspora, however, of the significant challenges of working in Somalia, including continuing security concerns and the weak capacity of government institutions to enforce law and order. In recent months al-Shabaab has issued specific threats against diaspora returnees. While such conditions may serve to increase determination to continue supporting fragile gains in the country they often also deter returnees from resettling permanently. As a result, return often follows a circular pattern between Somalia and host countries.

Host countries often appear to misunderstand return dynamics. There appears to be an assumption that when return is viable it will be permanent. Moreover, host countries are concerned by potential radicalization of diaspora youth and, subsequently, the security implications of circular returns. Engagement with the Somali diaspora is now a component of the United States' National Strategy for Counterterrorism.<sup>3</sup> Increasingly there is an awareness that the diaspora can play an important role in counter-radicalization both in Somalia and within host countries.

Various non-governmental organizations (NGOs), foreign governments, and United Nations agencies already offer programs sponsoring the return of diaspora Somalis with the specific intention of building institutional capacity in Somalia. These programs serve as effective vehicles to bring qualified individuals back to Somalia, benefiting local institutions while also providing valuable work experience.

For example, the Qualified Expatriate Somali Technical Support - Migration for Development in Africa (QUESTS-MIDA) project is a joint initiative between the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) designed to enable diaspora Somalis to share and transfer their acquired skills with civil servants in public institutions through short term assignments.<sup>4</sup> Countries supporting the project include the United States, Japan, the Netherlands, Finland, and Sweden.

The Swedish International Development Agency's Results strategy for cooperation with Somalia 2013-2017 highlights its position on diaspora engagement in development efforts: “Focus should be on quickly promoting, in a cost-effective and result-oriented manner, increased participation by the Somali diaspora in the development of Somalia.”<sup>5</sup>

## Contributions and resources

**“We’re in the early stages of really seeing the impact of the diaspora... People who are coming back to the country are trying to help out in any capacity they can... We are involved in all aspects of life, and it takes time for it to develop.”**

**“There isn’t a measurement [for] how much I have contributed. I think I contribute in the long run to the framework of the country... I feel [I am] part of the long systematic change of the country.”**

Equipped with relevant education, expertise, and financial capital from their countries of resettlement diaspora returnees engage in multiple sectors in Somalia. Contributions are not formulaic and cannot be clearly defined. Trying to quantifiably measure the impact of diaspora returnees falls outside of the scope of this study. Different camps – government officials, diaspora returnees, and non-diaspora communities – privilege and prioritize certain needs over others and subsequently attempt to identify ways of addressing them.

The public and non-profit sectors attract most diaspora returnees with a desire to contribute towards the reconstruction and development of Somalia. Following years of conflict, capacity within the public sector throughout Somalia remains weak. In the absence of public health and education services, the non-profit sector plays an extremely important role as Somalia emerges from prolonged conflict.

The non-profit sector also attracts many diaspora returnees who believe that development initiatives should be ‘Somali-led’. Employment within this sector is also widely acknowledged as being particularly rewarding among the diaspora, offering opportunities to proactively engage with the poorer elements of Somali society. Many diaspora Somalia stress the importance of returning with values adopted in their host countries, particularly with regards to work ethics and societal responsibilities.

Re-building state institutions is broadly considered to be one of the most important areas in which to contribute. Many Somalis, particularly older men, are unable to access politics in their host societies. For these older men in particular, returning to Somalia provides an opportunity to re-engage in politics, both regional and national. Many will also return seeking to introduce the international norms they have grown accustomed to in their countries of resettlement, particularly in areas such as accountability and transparency.

The political sphere in Somalia remains dominated by an older male elite. Diaspora women and youth experience significantly greater barriers to entering high-level politics and are therefore less likely to return for this reason. Diaspora women and youth are, however, increasingly finding employment in the civil service or in advisory positions with senior government officials. Others also engage in contractual short-term research and consulting positions.

Some returnees have also made contributions to the already vibrant business sector. Older men may also dominate the business sector in Somalia but increasingly diaspora women

and youth are returning to invest and establish businesses too. Improving security and increased access to social and professional networks in Somalia enables the diaspora to conduct business in their country of origin with relative ease. The current weak tax systems and absence of regulations create greater incentives to engage in business activities in Somalia.

Diaspora returnees are often attracted to particular business sectors that further contribute to the reconstruction and development of Somalia. Investment in the agricultural sector, for example, generates local employment opportunities while gradually reducing the country’s dependency on food aid. Government officials are actively encouraging the diaspora to return and invest in various sectors considered to be integral to the country’s recovery.

## Diaspora-local relations

**“I support diasporas coming back. When they were not here, they were still sending financial remittances to us... They are still our brothers and sisters despite differences in the way of thinking and language problems. I think that they are good for our country.”**

**“Those who come from abroad, some have capacity and [others] don’t... They are not all educated. And there is a lack of understanding, and little interactions with the locals. People need to be reunited.”**

The relationship between returnees and locals in Somalia is complex. Scantly explored, this topic merits greater understanding and debate amongst Somalis both inside and outside of the country. Local Somalis demonstrate an appreciation of the long-standing contributions of the Somali diasporas. Indeed, financial remittances continue to be a vital source of income for households across the Somali regions. According to the 2012 Somalia Human Development Report, the Somali diaspora continue to remit approximately US\$1.6 billion each year.

Generally non-diaspora Somali communities grasp the diversity among diaspora returnees. They distinguish, for example, between the ‘good diaspora’ who have been successful in their host countries, and the ‘bad’ ones who failed to take advantage of the opportunities that were available to them. As mentioned above, return is often dependent on a degree of success in host countries. However, tensions between diaspora returnees and locals do exist and can be attributed to a number of factors.

First, many diaspora returnees are unable to have meaningful and daily interactions with locals due to security concerns that discourage them from living in or frequenting certain neighborhoods. Non-diaspora Somalis often perceive returnees as having feelings of superiority. This disconnect is further exacerbated by the circular return patterns of the diaspora which non-diaspora Somalis see as an indication of a lack of commitment to Somalia.

Second, returnees often find it easier – and more

advantageous from a professional networking point of view – to socialize disproportionately with other diaspora returnees. They will often reside in more secure neighborhoods. Returnees, therefore, often gravitate toward each other and particularly toward those returning from the same host country.

Third, non-diaspora Somalis often perceive returnees as having advantages in employment opportunities due to their western education and work experience. This creates a disparity in wages, benefits, and prestige. The combination of these reasons and broader misconceptions that many non-diaspora Somalis have about returnees' adopted values threaten to deepen tensions between the two groups.

## Conclusions

Unless widespread conflict re-emerges in Somalia, the diaspora will continue to return to their country of origin. Indeed, with sustained peace throughout the country the rate of return would be expected to increase. The degree to which the diaspora are able to reintegrate into Somali society will ultimately define their contribution to its development. This requires a willingness on behalf of the diaspora to desegregate and pro-actively engage with the non-diaspora. It also requires the non-diaspora to embrace the return of family and friends that left Somalia during the prolonged conflict.

This Briefing demonstrates the importance of proactively engaging with the issue of diaspora return. The federal government – itself largely comprised of diaspora Somalis – recognizes the potential that 'diaspora capital' holds for the reconstruction and development of the country. Thus far, however, insufficient attention has thus been paid to fostering integration between diaspora and non-diaspora communities. Failure to foster integration will exacerbate divisions between the two communities.

## Policy Considerations

- Government departments dedicated to diaspora affairs undertaking outreach activities to globally dispersed diaspora already exist in Mogadishu, Garowe, and Hargeisa. Efforts should be taken to harmonize efforts between these departments and to avoid duplication.
- The federal Department of Diaspora Affairs should coordinate efforts with affiliate agencies in Somaliland and

Puntland to establish a region-wide database to effectively catalogue the skills and expertise of the Somali diaspora interested in contributing to reconstruction and development efforts.

- Government institutions should implement public education campaigns to foster closer relations between diaspora and non-diaspora communities in Somalia. Local NGOs and CSOs should initiate opportunities for dialogue between the two communities.
- Host countries should make efforts to better understand the rationale behind diaspora return to Somalia. They should encourage the return of skilled and qualified Somalis through supporting more programs that enable diaspora individuals to promote development and entrepreneurship activities in Somalia, such as the QUESTS-MIDA project.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Somalia is used throughout this paper to refer to all regions of the former Republic of Somalia including the autonomous Republic of Somaliland and the semi-autonomous Puntland State of Somalia.

<sup>2</sup> There are, for example, large and influential Somali communities living in sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and South-East Asia.

<sup>3</sup> Richardson, J. (2011) "The Somali Diaspora: A Key Counterterrorism Ally." *CTC Sentinel* 4(7): 12-14.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.quests-mida.org>

<sup>5</sup> Accessed via <http://www.swedenabroad.com/en-GB/Embassies/Nairobi/Development-Cooperation/Development-Cooperation-Somalia/>

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