



SOMALI LOCAL-DIASPORA MUTUAL COEXISTENCE: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Summary

Over the last 30 years, Somalia has experienced political insecurity, a weak economy, and recurring natural disasters. During this period, remittances from its diaspora have helped local Somalis to survive. In 2014, remittances were estimated to be US\$1.4 billion, representing 23 percent of the GDP.¹ The diaspora have also contributed to the development of social, educational and economic institutions, improving the lives of local Somalis. Despite the positive contributions made by the diaspora to facilitate the economic development of the nation, resentment is growing among those who are now returning to the country. Locals complain that members of the diaspora are taking their jobs, struggle to comprehend the local situation, and fail to understand the context and contemporary realities in Somalia. This policy brief draws from academic sources and two focus group discussions held in Mogadishu in February 2018. It examines the **role of the diaspora**, presenting **seven** concerns expressed by Somalis and offering **five practical recommendations** for actions to unite and integrate Somalia.

KEY MESSAGES

- Local Somalis are harbouring anger and mistrust towards the diaspora returning to the country
- Local /diaspora dialogues could create trust
- Local/ diaspora equal opportunities could ease tensions
- Addressing land related problems could accelerate progress towards recovery

Roles and Concerns

The Somali diaspora has been, and remains, a key factor in the collapse of the state, the prolonged conflict and recovery efforts. “In the area of conflict and peace building, the diaspora is a double-edged sword, contributing significantly to both. Clan-based financial support has been one of the most important sources for the perpetuation of political conflict in Somalia. Yet diaspora intervention in support of local reconciliation and state building has been a key ingredient for success.”²

The current and previous Somali governments, at both the federal and state levels, have acknowledged the influence of the diaspora. In October 2013, the Somali Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs established the Department of Diaspora Affairs, mandating it to monitor and gauge the level of engagement by the Somali diaspora. In May 2017, at the London Conference, President Mohamed Abdullahi Farmajo pledged that the federal government would establish a national diaspora agency to spearhead its engagement in the country’s economic development, as well as its peace and state building efforts. In Somaliland, The Somaliland Diaspora Agency was created in 2010, and the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation of Puntland has had a diaspora department since 2010.

Despite these efforts, *the relationship between the diaspora and local Somalis remains challenging, and tensions are increasing every day*. Locals and returning diaspora are in fierce competition for both political influence and essential resources. This brief evaluates the

diaspora’s role in current developments in Somalia, exploring the concerns of local people over the extent of their influence.

1. Livelihoods

Sources of revenue in Somalia are extremely limited, and therefore remittances from the diaspora help relatives remaining in the country pay for food, clothing and housing. Remittances have served to reduce poverty levels, by providing low-income families with a sustainable living. However, this can also result in unintended negative consequences, by creating a culture of dependence on remittances. Locals complain when remittances are reduced or stopped, and some have developed a sense of entitlement, as if they have the right to receive the money, regardless of the circumstances of their relatives in the diaspora.

2. Education

The education system, which collapsed along with the state, has been undergoing a slow revival, and the diaspora has been at the centre of this. Recipients of remittances can now afford to access education, to send their children to school, and to pay for training and professional development, which gives them access to a wealth of employment skills not available to those who do not receive money from abroad.

Members of the diaspora have also invested in development projects, such as schools. However, this has led to the development of different educational systems, resulting in diverse approaches to locally-run educational services. Both the diaspora and local Somalis have adopted

different curriculums, imported from multiple countries.

Within the diaspora community there is a belief that those who studied abroad are more educated than their counterparts who attended schools and universities in Somalia. Politicians originating from the diaspora have echoed this message, creating tension between the two groups.

3. Health

In the early years of the conflict, access to health services was almost non-existent. However, during the last few years, private initiatives have begun to address the health crisis, with members of the diaspora at the forefront of the efforts. To manage the health care burden, they are playing three important roles. Firstly, members of the diaspora who have trained as health care workers are providing much needed skills. Secondly, remittances enable families to access private healthcare. Thirdly, the proliferation of private medical facilities and pharmacies in major cities and towns is partly attributable to remittances. However, there are concerns among some locals that the aim of these efforts is to make money, rather than to provide quality health care. Locals point out that members of the diaspora working in the sector do not trust their own health services for their own treatment, and return abroad when they need medical attention.

4. Sacrifices

Both local and diaspora groups have been targeted by al-Shabaab's indiscriminate attacks. However, the diaspora has been specifically targeted. Over the past 15 years, many diaspora returnees have paid the ultimate price for serving

their nation. These individuals include ministers and MPs, such as Ibrahim Hassan Adow, Minister of Higher Education; Qamar Aden Ali, Minister of Health; Burci Hamza, Minister of State for Environment; Ali Sharmarke founder and director of Hornafrik radio; Saado Ali Warsame, a famous singer and MP; and Mohamud Mohamed Gure and Abdullahi Jama, two vocal MPs expressing nationalist sentiments.

Politicians are not the only individuals to have suffered at the hands of terrorists. The founder and co-owner of HornAfrik, Ali Iman Sharmarke, was killed in 2007. Abullahi Ali Anshur, an engineer with expertise in urban planning and drainage systems, a rare skill among Somali professionals, was shot to death.

However, not all diaspora contributions to Somalia have been positive or motivated by altruistic intentions. Some returnees have introduced the local people to jihadism, and participated in funding and recruiting terrorists. There is also evidence of intent to commit terrorist acts among the diaspora.

5. Employment

According to a young female graduate from Mogadishu University, present at one of the focus groups, "The diaspora makes business and social investments, which result in employment opportunities for local people. Yet local graduates feel that they do not have job opportunities that are similar or close to that of the diaspora. I don't think I will get a job with the government, because I don't have a foreign passport. The government prefers and gives job opportunities to the people from abroad." ³ Others echoed the view that the diaspora are

given preferential treatment in terms of accessing jobs, as they are better educated and can travel more easily.

The term diaspora has become a status symbol. One member of the diaspora who had returned to Mogadishu told a focus group, “The returned diaspora believe that they are the only educated ones. There is egotism in them and those in the country believe this.”

The fact that the diaspora is welcomed into high level government and international NGOs positions when they return has inspired many locals to migrate with the intention of coming back themselves after securing citizenship elsewhere and a foreign passport. One focus group participant claimed, “*Today’s migrants are the diaspora of tomorrow.*”

6. Politics

People from the diaspora continue to wield enormous influence in Somali politics. In the 1980s, the country saw the rise of opposition-armed movements, either started and/or funded by the diaspora. Since the collapse of the state, they have also played an active role in peace talks aimed at restoring a functioning government. The diaspora is a significant presence in both national and state governments. As of May 2018, Somalia’s President, Prime Minister and many of the cabinet ministers of the federal government are all from the diaspora. Moreover, 38 percent of the members of the new bicameral parliament are dual citizens. Local people argue that the diaspora Somalis do not “understand the political dynamics and practical realities of living in present day Somalia.”⁴ In addition, the majority

of diaspora politicians return to their adopted countries upon leaving office.

7. Property Ownership

Property ownership is a significant challenge, with security implications, that is widening the gap between the diaspora and locals. When many fled the country during the war, those who remained occupied their homes. When the people from the diaspora returned and tried to reclaim their properties the new residents resisted. A further concern fuelling tensions across the country is the emergence of gated communities occupied by returnees. Locals believe that diaspora people want to live apart from other Somalis.

Recommendations

If the rebuilding of Somalia is to be successfully realised, then the country requires its diaspora and locals to work together as a team. To this end, SIPAM has collated the following recommendations based on two focus group discussions.

1. Dialogue

Transparent and effective institutionalised mechanisms, in the form of *local-diaspora dialogue initiatives* to help locals and the diaspora communicate, would enable the two groups to work together to address difficulties arising between “dal joog” (locals) and “dibad joog” (diaspora).

2. Reconciliation

A permanent body, such as a reconciliation committee, could facilitate dialogue and appeasement by helping opposing sides identify shared aims. This committee could advise public institutions of issues relating to the unification of locals and the diaspora.

3. Land

Land-related problems need to be addressed urgently, as resolving land ownership disputes is central to peace building. Determining prescriptions for right of return would end tensions between locals and the diaspora on this matter.

4. Diversity

It is now standard in Somalia to argue for diversity and promote workforce inclusivity according to the 4.5 formula or by gender. It is also important to correct the local-diaspora imbalance, especially that present in top government positions.

5. Transition

Allowing for transition is essential, to ensure the diaspora understand the local context, before they are given the opportunity to occupy key government positions. An interim period could improve the integration of the diaspora into their local communities.

References

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- ⁴ Hammond, L. (2012). *What role for the diaspora in Somalia's future?* [online] Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/poverty-matters/2012/feb/20/what-role-somalia-diaspora-rebuilding>> [Accessed 2 Feb 2018].

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