



Bristol to Bosaso

Supporting Voluntary Returns to Somalia

**A Summary Report of the Research Study Funded by the UK Foreign
and Commonwealth Office 2014**

Transparency Solutions

“You feel very Somali when you are away but once you come back to Somalia you realise how British you are” Keltoon, Sheffield

Introduction

This research study investigated the current rate of ethnic Somalis returning to Somalia from the UK, and what factors encourage, discourage, facilitate and impede this process. The movement of returnees from the UK is part of a larger trend: 2014 was the first year that the number of people returning to Somalia exceeded those leaving since the late 1980s. Increased stability and an increase in opportunities is encouraging people to return, and with the Somali global diaspora estimated at around one million, this may indicate the start of a large movement of people. Over 100,000 people in the UK were born in Somalia, with the vast majority having come due to war rather than an active desire to settle in another country. Yet the Somalia the diaspora now return to is different from the one they left, and they themselves have often changed through living in other countries. This inevitably means that the return of the diaspora to Somalia brings challenges, for example resentment from local people who see jobs going to those recently returned. This study examines how the process of returning should be managed so that the diaspora can integrate and have a positive impact on Somali society as a whole.

This study is primarily based on semi-structured interviews with representative samples of the following groups: Somalis living in Britain, members of the diaspora who have returned to Somalia, local people and members of the business community in Somalia, representatives of public, statutory and other agencies in Somalia and those in the UK. All interviewers were bilingual and interviewees were given the choice of which language they preferred to speak in. There is a distinct lack of data about many of these groups- there are even uncertain figures about the number of Somalis living in Britain, as many have reasons for avoiding official registration and censuses. Transparency Solutions’ local knowledge and connections within the diaspora and Somalia thus proved essential during fieldwork.

Summary of Key Findings

Of the 80 Somalis interviewed in Britain:

- The majority of interviewees who stated they wished to return to Somalia were aged 31-50. This age group have strong memories of Somalia and tend to maintain ties to family and community there.
- When asked their nationality
- Almost a third of interviewees had lived in another European country before deciding to settle in Britain.
- There have been considerably less new arrivals to the UK in the last five years
- The average number of children of those who are or were married is 4.1, with over a third having more than 6 children. This is considerably higher than the UK average of 1.8
- Many Somalis have extremely low household income, especially considering their larger than average families and that many live in London. 81% of interviewees stated their annual household income was less than £25,000, and 55% said it was

below £15,000 (this may not account for some government benefits)

“There are families who have 7 or 8 children who want to return to Somalia, but they could not financially”. Roda, Bristol

- 45% of Somalis hold a degree, in contrast to 25% of the overall UK population
- Somalis are self employed (38%) more often than they are employed (18%), and there are high rates of unemployment (24%), a trend which is mirrored in other diaspora communities in Europe.
- Somalis in the UK stay up to date with Somali affairs, with the internet, cable TV and family and friends all stated as primary sources of information.
- Of those who stated they planned to return to Somalia permanently, many gave a reserved yes (provided the security situation does not deteriorate). This is indicative of the uncertainty which still prevails due to the conditions on the ground in Somalia.
- Half of interviewees wanted to return to Mogadishu, with 30% saying Somaliland and the remaining 20% other regions of Somalia.
- The top five reasons given for wanting to return to Somalia in order of popularity were:
 1. To be close to family
 2. To take advantage of the opportunities which exist
 3. To contribute skills and experience
 4. Because it's home
 5. To raise children there

However, when the reasons of those actively planning to return were analysed, these reasons appeared in a different order of priority:

1. To contribute skills and experience
 2. To raise children there
 3. To take advantage of the opportunities which exist
 4. To be close to family
 5. Because it's home
- 55% of interviewees stated that the primary opportunity in Somalia was business.

Recent Returnees to Somalia from the UK (40 interviewees split between Mogadishu and Hargeisa):

- When asked which statement best described their circumstances, interviewees selected the following:
 - A) I have recently returned to Somalia and I intend to stay here permanently (19)
 - B) I have recently returned to Somalia temporarily but I intend to go back to my host country to settle (3)
 - C) I intend to divide my time between Somalia and my host country (16)
 - D) I came intending to stay but am now undecided/have changed my mind (2)
- The percentage of those returnees who stated they were in Somalia temporarily is a similar proportion to those diaspora in the UK who stated they planned to return

temporarily. This group tend to be younger, university educated and with less personal memories/ties to Somalia.

- The vast majority of returnees had European or North American passports as an 'insurance policy' in case the situation deteriorated. This would suggest that those without western passports are less likely to return.
- Almost 90% of returnees had lived abroad for more than 16 years. Somali migration came in two waves- refugees in the early 1990s and again as European migrants a decade later.
- Returns have increased sharply since 2011, particularly in Mogadishu. This is likely related to the creation of the Transitional Federal Government in 2012 and efforts to combat insecurity.
- Most returnees moved with their families or hope their families will join them. The most common factor in this not occurring was adult children not wishing to return to Somalia.
- 62% of returnees have a degree, which supports the argument that a level of wealth is required to return.
- More returnees are in work than diaspora in the UK, with unemployment being only 12% (compared to 24%). This is likely because returnees are considered attractive employees and/or have capital to invest in business.
- The primary reasons for returning given by returnees are different from those given by diaspora in Britain:
 1. To contribute skills and experience
 2. To take advantage of the opportunities that exist
 3. Came as a visitor and decided to stay
 4. To reconnect with country/culture/religion
 5. Because life in the West is too hard

"My children see themselves more as British than as Somalis"
Mohamed, Bristol

It is worth noting that 15% came to visit and decided to remain, and also that 'Somalia as home' has been rephrased as 'the west is too hard'

Perceptions of Numbers of People Returning

When asked 'how many Somalis do you know who have returned?' answers varied widely, from none to over 200. The average was around 5. A similar number was given for the amount of people known to be actively planning on returning. The overwhelming consensus was that a huge number of people want to return but how many will be able to is another matter.

The Practicalities

Most Somalis who stated they were actively looking to return could point to measures they were taking to smooth the transition, such as searches for jobs and housing. 81% said there was no organisation that they were relying on to help them, though many said such an organisation would be welcome.

"The difficulty is getting the right information. There is no database for the people to base their planning on and this is one of the main reasons why many people are not going back"

M.C, Birmingham

Barriers to Returning

As well as the lack of information practical support, other difficulties people mentioned included the lack of stability, healthcare and education, and persuading family members to actually make the move. Finances were also a major factor. When we asked what would help make the planning process easier the most popular answer was credible or reliable data; followed by having a job to go to and in third place, better infrastructure. When asked what they were concerned about should they return, reintegration with the local population and 'cultural clashes' were common.

The barriers to returning amongst those respondents not yet ready to return highlighted different priorities although security worries was still the most common concern, and by far the most popular:

1. Security
2. Lack of funds
3. Currently studying
4. Lack of an effective government
5. Lack of jobs
6. Reintegration concerns
7. Corruption

Reintegration

Many returnees named reintegration as one of their biggest challenges. The top three examples of cultural difference given were the attitude of locals towards work, a lack of skilled labour and an environment where corruption is rife. Those from Mogadishu named security as a big concern, while in Hargeisa infrastructure and healthcare were more of an issue.

"I employ eleven people, all locals. Some of them are really nice people who want to work but I have ongoing issues with most of them. They don't turn up on time; they don't treat customers politely or wear clean uniforms." Abdul, Mogadishu

Interviewees reported they were treated quite differently upon their return in Hargeisa compared to Mogadishu. In Hargeisa over half of returnees said their relations with locals were generally good, compared to 6 out of 20 from Mogadishu, although another 4 said they improved over time. Perhaps the most revealing way to describe the relationship is to use two local terms common in Somalia (especially in the South) where the word 'diaspora' has been changed and corrupted to 'dayuusbaro', a similar sounding word but one which means an idiot or a fool and is derogatory in meaning. The diaspora in response call the locals 'dumisbaro' meaning 'one who destroys things' although in this context it has come to specifically mean 'one who destroys the country'.

"They see us as arrogant, not genuine Somalis. Here today, gone tomorrow. They say we have lost our culture, they see us as wealthy and corrupt, people who just want to take the resources. People who want the cream but don't want to risk anything. People with no connection or feelings for the country" Farah, Mogadishu

Further questioning led to more detail concerning the relationship between the diaspora and the locals. The general view of the diaspora across the country is that they are wealthy, have lost their culture/religion and are 'know-alls'. Some said they were envied and revered, others said they were simply seen as different. 80% of local Somalis interviewed said that returnees took available jobs. While returnee unemployment is 12%, among the Somali population it is estimated to be 57%, and 67% among 14-29 year olds. Some view returnees as having fled when times were difficult, and now returning to take opportunities and make things harder for locals- for example young men complain Somali women are more likely to marry those with foreign passports. Returnees often said they preferred to socialise with other returnees as there was more of a cultural understanding.

Making a Living

Many interviewees stated that it was relatively easy to set up businesses, a major profession of choice among Somalis. However, they frequently pointed to the lack of regulation, skilled labour, banking system and poor infrastructure.

"In Somaliland there is a free trade economy and it is very easy to start up but the challenges include a lack of commercial banks, a lack of skilled workers and poor infrastructure"

Name withheld, Hargeisa

Some interviewees also said that competitors were not constrained by the law, making it potentially dangerous to set up new businesses. One man even said his restaurant was attacked on the orders of a rival.

Being Somali in the UK

In the final part of our interviews we asked diaspora in the UK about their experience of Britain. There were 98 positive comments and only 20 negatives ones. Top positive reasons included good health care and education, multiculturalism and developing personal skills such as hard work and time keeping.

Negative comments included feeling they did not belong, language problems and discrimination. When asked what the biggest issues for Somalis in the UK are, the responses were:

"I have learned what a government is and what I should expect from a government" Daha, Birmingham

1. High unemployment
2. Poverty
3. Language
4. Lack of integration
5. Discrimination
6. Lack of education/skills

We asked respondents what three changes they would make to life in Britain. The responses were as follows:

1. More opportunities for Somalis (overwhelmingly)
2. Better education system
3. More affordable housing

Life in Somalia

We asked returnees what they believed to be the biggest problems facing people returning from the diaspora. The results were:

1. Reintegration
2. No place to go for help
3. Lack of social activities
4. Arriving with unrealistic expectations

When asked what three things would improve life in Somalia the most popular three were:

1. Improve security (overwhelmingly)
2. Improve infrastructure
3. More effective government

The Role of Governments

We asked all 120 interviewees what the British Government could do to assist returnees. The most popular responses were:

1. Provide financial assistance
2. Help the Somali Government be more effective
3. Provide information
4. Provide loans/grants for people setting up in business
5. Provide skills training
6. Target aid more effectively

Returnees particularly believed Britain could help through:

1. A diaspora support centre
2. An embassy
3. Financial assistance

When asked what the Somali Authorities could do (incorporating both the Somali Government and the authorities in Somaliland), the most popular responses were:

1. Improve security
2. There is nothing the Somali government can do
3. Improve the government/regulatory environment
4. Set up a support centre for returnees
5. Provide land/houses
6. Be more welcoming to returnees
7. Create jobs
8. Tackle corruption
9. No tax

Among returnees the answer was over whelmingly to support returnees.

Focus Group with the Somali Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCI)

We held a focus group in Mogadishu with some of the businesspeople who had been helped by the SCCI upon their return to the country. These people recognised the positive contribution returnees can make to Somali society, particularly with regard to investment and skills. However, they also recognised that the local people should not have to cope with a rush of returnees who were unprepared for their new lives or could offer little to the community. As the Managing Director of SCCI put it:

“We say to them, ‘soo noqo, lakiin wax la soo noqo’ – come back, but come back with something”

There was common agreement that both the Somali authorities and the Governments of host countries have a responsibility to facilitate a smooth return should people wish to come back. It was emphasised that policies should be guided by Somalis though. There was also strong opposition to host countries returning criminals or those considered ‘undesirable’, as the view was that Somalia is not yet strong enough to cope with additional problems.

Support for Returnees in Somalia

There are a number of organisations which claim to help facilitate the return of Somalis. We spoke to 6 of these, including a local school funded by diaspora, money transfer companies and a freight/shipping company. All claimed to offer informal advice, contacts, etc, and were keen to develop the options available to returnees further. Other organisations such as the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) also offer some assistance. The DRC’s Diaspora Program has two strands:

1. Providing funding to diaspora organisations in Denmark which contribute to relief, rehabilitation and development
2. Building evidence-based knowledge of the comparative value of diaspora engagement in development in Somalia

The United Nations Political Office for Somalia (UNPOS) was established in 1995 to help the Secretary General advance peace and reconciliation in Somalia through contact with Somali leaders, civic organizations and states and organizations. As part of their work they regularly invite representatives from the diaspora and diaspora organisations to reconciliation conferences as non-state actors and like the DRC are supportive of initiatives which connect not just diaspora organisations with projects in Somalia but ones that (whilst rare) involve mainstream organisations and NGO’s.

As previously stated, the Somali Chamber of Commerce & Industry told us that they are offering a number of services to their members including: trade information, government liaison, arbitration of business disputes, and free access to the SCCI resource centre

amongst other things. They also claim they are able to invest up to 80% of the capital required for any viable business plan from a member of the diaspora.

The Heritage Institute for Policy Studies (HIPS) is an independent, non-partisan, non-profit policy research and analysis institute based in Mogadishu, Somalia. Even though it has only been going for just over a year it has gained a reputation as a credible organisation with produces very high quality literature on various sectors e.g. education, politics and international involvement in Somalia. The publications they produce and the forums they run can be a valuable source of information for the diaspora.

The Government is clearly the biggest stakeholder in terms of diaspora engagement and we met with both the Office for Diaspora Affairs (ODA) in Mogadishu and the Ministry of Resettlement, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction in Hargeisa (MoRRR). While these authorities are aware of the challenges faced by diaspora and are making some steps towards aiding them, a lack of severe lack of funding and experience are at present limiting their ability to provide the services returnees require.

A Returnee Strategy

Fortunately, there is a great deal of experience, literature and support available to assist in the development of a national diaspora strategy. There is a growing recognition of the importance of including diaspora engagement at national policy level. The Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD) was launched in 2007 by United Nations Member States to address the migration and development interconnections in practical and action-oriented ways. More recently the GFMD have initiated the Africa-Europe Platform Project (AEP) to develop a network of the 27 EU member states plus Norway and Switzerland to enhance the capacity of the African diaspora in Europe.

The African Foundation for Development (AFFORD) is an AEP partner organisation based in London. A senior manager from AFFORD was part of the Project's mission to Ethiopia and shared the key findings with us ahead of the final report, due to be published in 2014. They found a range of impressive structures and schemes in place to support diaspora engagement and participation in the development of Ethiopia and even felt that there was much that European governments could learn in this regard. Diaspora engagement is managed through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs but every government department has a diaspora co-ordinator. Examples of specific support include land and housing schemes available to returnees. Conversely they found that communication flows was the biggest issue citing significant gaps in trust, image and credibility between the FDRE government and the Ethiopian diaspora.

In 2012 the International Organization for Migration (IOM) produced a publication entitled 'Developing a Road Map for Engaging Diasporas in Development' with the sub-heading 'A handbook for policymakers and practitioners in home and host countries' with the intention of providing governments with a strategic road map to help them establish a clear sense of direction. It has a vast amount of relevant information.

Support in the UK

There are no organisations, agencies or programmes in the UK specifically with the remit of supporting voluntary returnees from Britain to Somalia. Anecdotally, Refugee Action has told us that they receive a number of enquiries from ethnic Somalis in Britain who are legally entitled to stay in the UK but who want to return to Somalia and are seeking support. Under previous Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) contract agreements this service had been possible but has now been cut. Since they are unable to provide assistance they do not keep records of the number of enquiries.

The number of Somali asylum applications in the UK peaked in 2003 and has since declined. This, combined with the difficulties faced by European Governments in forcibly returning Somalis (illegal according to the EU and UN), is causing some to demand European Governments look at granting Somalis passports in order to give them the security to return to Somalia. Those without the security of citizenship in the West are very unlikely to return voluntarily.

UNHCR is currently overseeing the safe return and rehabilitation of internally displaced persons (IDP's) in the region. Whilst this is outside of the scope of this study the recent TriPartite Agreement to repatriate up to 500,000 refugees from Kenya to Somalia over the next three years will clearly have an impact on a country already struggling with capacity and resources.

Conclusion

The number of ethnic Somalis returning to Somalia has risen over the past two years and all the indications are that this trend will continue. The overall picture not a simple one but from the research we have been able to categorise a number of key groups of returnees from the UK as follows:

- Those who are returning or who have returned permanently to resettle. These people typically seek to work or start a business in Somalia.
- Those who are returning or who have returned permanently to actively contribute. These people typically have professional skills and experience and seek to work for NGO's, Government or similar agencies.
- Those who seek to divide their time between the UK and Somalia. These people typically have business interests in Somalia.
- Those who are returning or have returned for a period of time but who aim to settle permanently in their host country. These people typically are motivated by helping to rebuild Somalia and seek voluntary positions.
- Those who are returning or who have returned for family reasons. This can mean returning to care for family members in Somalia or accompanying family returning from Britain.

Another important group of people are those with a strong desire to return but who are unable to do so for financial, familial or other reasons. This group probably comprises the largest number of all.

It must be said that many Somalis are struggling with life in the UK. They are poorer than the average citizen and face discrimination and language barriers. Yet Somalis have also taken advantage of the education system and many express great pride in their British identity.

Awareness that challenges exist is high amongst those planning to return but access to useful and relevant information, advice and guidance is limited to family and close networks. Somalis living in Britain are conscious of the need to plan effectively to return but have little recourse to up-to-date and credible information, relying for the greater part on family on the ground.

Recommendations

- Credible, reliable, pre-departure information, data, advice and guidance to help people to make informed choices and effectively plan to return to Somalia which addresses all aspects of their work and life. This should be done through **an Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) programme for persons planning to return to Somalia**
- Reintegration support which takes account of the needs of local people as well as the needs of returnees, and recognises the priorities of the different regions. This may be in the form of **a Diaspora Welcome Centre in Mogadishu**
- There is a need for all agencies working to support returnees to share information, ideas and best practice to effect the best possible transition and reintegration for all returnees into Somalia and Somali society
- There is a need for a carefully planned, cohesive and effective **Diaspora Engagement Strategy** which is jointly owned by the Somali state, the diaspora at home and abroad, and the local people
- There is a need to strengthen and effectively regulate the business enabling environment to facilitate healthy local, national and international trade
- Returnees need to feel that they continue to be supported by their host governments for an initial transitional period
- Continued recognition of the part that volunteers and the 'part-time diaspora' can play in the reconstruction of Somalia, particularly with schemes that promote the former.

"I am returning to Somalia because it needs me. It is my birthplace. I am educated and qualified. My wife encouraged me. She is an educated woman who cares about Somalia. She told me to 'get up and go'. She also wants our children to return so I need to pave the way for them" Abdi, London