The Somali Diaspora in the Twin Cities: Engagement & Implications for Return
Policy Report

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Key Findings

- With the increasing stability in Somalia in recent years, Somali diaspora from North America and Europe appear to be making return trips to the country in substantial numbers. Interviews with members of the diaspora from the Twin Cities suggest that so far these trips tend to be temporary in nature. The fragile nature of the stability Somalia has achieved and the lack of important infrastructure, such as health care, in Somalia help to explain the lack of permanent return on the part of many Somalis in the diaspora.

- Return migrants from the Twin Cities Somali diaspora tended to be self-selected individuals with high levels of human capital and substantial records of civic engagement achievements in the Twin Cities community.

- Members of the Somali diaspora in the Twin Cities of Minnesota who had made a return trip to Somalia often found positions in the government and civil society sectors, with relatively few starting new businesses. On the other hand, many Somali diaspora who had made a return trip had ideas about potential business ventures in Somalia.

- Somali diaspora from the Twin Cities who had made a return trip to Somalia recognized the lack of capacity that characterizes many institutions in Somalia and sought to increase capacity through their efforts in government and civil society institutions.

- There may be room for the U.S. government, working on its own or in partnership with other governments or appropriate civil society organizations, to support Somali diaspora who wish to make contributions to Somalia. This support could involve facilitating the return of skilled Somali diaspora as a development strategy; increasing access to venture capital for Somali diaspora who return with ideas for new businesses; working to diffuse tensions between return migrants from the diaspora and non-diaspora in Somalia; sponsoring new infrastructure projects in Somalia; and engaging the Somali diaspora community more deeply to address important community issues within the U.S.

Background

Anecdotal evidence from the media, conversations within the Somali diaspora community and observations on the ground in Somalia reveal that significant numbers of Somalis who left the country following the civil war have returned since conditions in the country have become more secure. The return of members of the diaspora to Somalia may have important implications for the Somali government, economy and civil society institutions, but how return migrants will affect these aspects of Somalia remains an open question. While it remains unclear how many members of the Somali diaspora have made a return trip to Somalia, the phenomenon of return migration may be a bellwether of increased stability and prosperity for the country.

This policy report presents the findings of a multi-national research project that focused on the phenomenon of return among the Somali diaspora. Funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, this project included researchers from the Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota, Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) in Oslo, Norway, and the Heritage Institute for Policy Studies (HIPS) in Mogadishu, Somalia. At the Humphrey School, the project sought to answer four primary questions:

1. How do Somalis involve themselves in short-term, circular or more permanent return to Somalia? What are the motivations for return?
The findings and recommendations presented in this report are based on interviews conducted between September 2013 and September 2014 with members of the Somali diaspora who had made a recent return trip to Somalia. Interviews focused on motivations for returning to Somalia, contributions that returnees made or intended to make while in Somalia, and larger impressions about the impact of diaspora engagement in Somalia. The findings and policy recommendations highlighted by this report are based mostly on interviews with 27 Somali-Americans who had recently traveled to Somalia and were living in the Twin Cities of Minnesota at the time of the interview. About one-third of the Somalis selected for inclusion in the sample in the Twin Cities volunteered to participate in the project after hearing about it through social media or through presentations by members of the research team at various community events. Two-thirds of Somalis included in the Twin Cities sample agreed to participate after a member of the research team learned they had returned to Somalia and invited them to participate. Nearly all of these interviews were conducted by researchers from the Somali diaspora community. Some areas of the report also incorporate relevant findings from interviews conducted by PRIO and HIPS and compare the experiences of Somalis from Oslo and the Twin Cities.

Overall, the interviews provide deep insights into the personal experiences and observations of return migrants. Excerpts, including direct quotes, from these interviews are highlighted here as representative perspectives from the interviewees. Interview excerpts were carefully selected to illustrate commonly noted reflections and are presented along with relevant context.

Somalis who were interviewed for the project represented a select group within the Twin Cities Somali diaspora community. About half of the Somalis interviewed in the Twin Cities were older than 40 and one-third were women. Somalis interviewed in the Twin Cities for this project tended to be very well educated. The vast majority of the Somalis who were interviewed in the Twin Cities had at least some college. Given the expense and length of time associated with a return trip to Somalia it is perhaps not surprising that the Somalis interviewed for this project had high levels of human capital, which is associated with more wealth and access to jobs that allowed them to take an extended leave of absence.

While we do not claim that the sample of Somalis interviewed for this project represents the actual population of Somalis from the diaspora who have made a return trip to Somalia in recent years, the characteristics of the Twin Cities sample suggest that returnees tend to be skewed toward older male Somalis who have relatively high levels of education. Of women who had made a return trip to Somalia it is notable that they tended to be either younger without children or older with grown children.

Types of Return

Almost universally, return migration within our sample occurred among Somalis who had obtained citizenship in either Norway or the U.S. In interviews, Somali diaspora reported that citizenship status was a necessary precursor before a return trip could occur. Somali diaspora believed that without a Norwegian or American passport their ability to return eventually to their country of resettlement became more difficult. This was a particular concern given that the security situation in Somalia is fragile and could deteriorate relatively quickly, making return to the West an important option. Because of uninterrupted residency requirements for applying for citizenship, leaving Norway or the U.S. for an extended period of time prior to undergoing naturalization may jeopardize the ability of Somalis to obtain citizenship, making it less likely that they return to Somalia prior to obtaining citizenship. Finally, without citizenship Somali felt that obtaining visas became much more difficult (and expensive) and as a result their ability to cross multiple national borders was more limited.

Overwhelmingly, Somalis from the diaspora returned for limited periods of time rather than permanently. The vast majority of Somalis from the diaspora returned to Somalia for less than three years, with most returning for less than one year. A common type of return was characterized by circular migration where Somalis from the diaspora returned to Somalia for a month or less on a regular basis. When combined with the fact that very few return migrants interviewed in Somalia by the HIPS research team had settled permanently in Somalia, these findings suggest that temporary return is currently the most common type of return for Somalis from the diaspora who have made a return trip.

The duration of stay in Somalia for return migrants was influenced by a number of factors. First, a lack of security still pervades many parts of the country and can make freedom of movement difficult for many Somalis from the diaspora who believe that they are especially vulnerable to security threats. While the establishment of a permanent government and the departure of Al-Shabaab from most major urban areas of Somalia have significantly decreased the incidence of violence, security threats remain a concern. Second, many of the opportunities that Somalis from the diaspora took advantage of once they were in Somalia, such as working for the Somali government or working for an international non-governmental organization, were temporary positions. Without more permanent employment opportunities, long-term or permanent stays were not an option for most. Third, many So-
Somalis from the diaspora retained jobs and families in the Twin Cities and were hesitant to uproot their families and resign from employment positions that often times provided comfortable salaries. Fourth, and perhaps most influential, educational institutions, health care systems, and a variety of urban infrastructure (transportation, telecommunications and internet, sanitation, etc.) are still being rebuilt in Somalia. Without these amenities, Somalis from the diaspora expressed an unwillingness to permanently relocate themselves or their families to Somalia.

An important area of divergence between Norwegian-Somalis and Somali-Americans was the extent to which they used the governments from their countries of reception to facilitate their return to Somalia. Norwegian-Somalis tended to have a close relationship with Norwegian embassies and consulates. In contrast, Somali-Americans tended to not have contact with the closest U.S. embassy. There are at least two possible explanations for this divergent behavior.

First, Norway does not have the same reputation as the U.S. when it comes to supporting security and anti-terrorist programs. Somali-Americans perceive that closely identifying with the U.S. government could make them a target of Al-Shabaab. Somali-Americans also believed that being identified as someone who had made a return trip to Somalia was likely to increase the likelihood that they would be selected for additional scrutiny by the American government, which may believe that they are a potential security threat because of their travel to Somalia. Second, some Norwegian-Somalis use government programs, or programs offered by non-governmental organizations like the Norwegian Refugee Council, as the vehicle for their return trip. With the exception of U.S. support for the Qualified Expatriate Somali Technical Support – Migration for Development in Africa (QUEST-MIDA) program, the U.S. government does not currently offer any programs that facilitate travel to Somalia. QUEST-MIDA sponsors Somalis from the diaspora for short-term trips to Somalia in order to facilitate the transfer of specific skills and technical capacity to Somali government institutions.

Motivations for Return

Reasons for returning to Somalia varied significantly for return migrants, but a common thread was a desire to contribute to the rebuilding of the country. Somalis interviewed for this project spoke in clear terms about the obligation they felt to give something back to the country of their birth. According to one Somali who had made a return trip, “I love America but I feel that I have a duty to my people that I have to sacrifice this American Dream to help build the Somali Dream, to help rebuild and reconstruct the country.”

Given the high levels of educational attainment among Somalis who had returned, many expected to use their skills to improve conditions in Somalia. In addition to intentions around contributing to the rebuilding of Somalia, older Somalis from the diaspora indicated a personal desire to reconnect to relatives and friends in their homelands, while younger Somalis from the diaspora wanted to experience a country and a culture of which they had only faint memories. A small proportion of Somalis who returned to Somalia expressed frustration at their inability to use their skills and expertise in the West because of language barriers, lack of recognition of their educational or professional credentials, or simply their inability to find employment. These Somalis saw a return to Somalia as a way to reclaim some of their lost status in a context that desperately needed skilled workers.

No matter the motivation for a return trip to Somalia, most Somalis making a return trip required a specific opportunity to create a vehicle for their return. Some of the Somalis interviewed for this project returned to take political positions in either the transitional government or the permanent government that is in place as of the writing of this report. Others took positions within the government bureaucracy. The most prevalent opportunity that interviewees engaged in upon their return was employment in civil society organizations, including aid organizations and various offices of the United Nations. In some cases, Somalis took advantage of specific programs, such as QUEST-MIDA. Despite substantial interest on the part of Somalis from the diaspora in the economic opportunities they observed in Somalia, very few Somalis interviewed for this project had returned to create a business. In part this may be explained by lack of knowledge about how to go about starting a business in Somalia. It was also apparent that many Somalis with business ideas may lack the capital to make the idea a reality or view the country as still too unstable to justify such an investment.

Contributions

A common thread for Somalis who returned to Somalia is a strong commitment to civic engagement. From volunteering at mosques to speaking at youth conferences, many of the Somalis were exceptionally involved within the Somali communities of Oslo and the Twin Cities. At the same time, a significant proportion also involved themselves in larger community issues in Oslo and the Twin Cities, such as serving on neighborhood association committees and running for political office. As we show below, this strong interest in civic engagement transcended borders for Somalis who were interviewed for this project.

The majority of Somalis who returned sought positions in the government or the civil society sectors with a focus on state building. A particularly important aspect of state building was the initiation of democratic practices in a country that had lived under a dictatorship or lacked a functional government for decades. As one Somali from the diaspora who worked for a civil society organization in Puntland revealed, “[i]n the area of good governance, we worked very closely in the most recent election and the democratization process. The peaceful outcome of the election didn’t just happen. It
was the work of the civil society which we are critical member that prevented spiraling political violence from taking place.” In some cases return migrants had strong emotional connections to state building. For example, a Somali who had returned to Somaliland to act as an election observer in 2010 reported, “[i]t was June 26, 2010, and Somali Independence day is June 26, 1960. And so, it was 50 years of independence and I was in the town my father was born in, observing the return of democracy. So, it was kind of sentimental to me.”

Other Somalis who returned worked to strengthen civil society institutions. In many cases this effort occurred by working in the health care field and establishing health clinics, and raising funds to pay for medicine and other health supplies. Return migrants also engaged in the area of education, by working in schools, ensuring that schools had necessary supplies, and establishing much larger projects, such as new libraries.

Lessons from their time in the West made clear impressions on Somalis from the diaspora and they often attempted to transmit some of these lessons to Somalia in the form of capacity building. These efforts included transmitting new ideas about leadership that some Somalis from the diaspora believed were not present in Somalia. For example, one Somali who returned related how he wanted to develop “a plan where I educate the locals about different types of leadership….leadership that is compatible in the twenty first century.” He went on to explain that:

...in Somalia and perhaps in most of Africa, leadership is defined as win and loses. So I wanted to create a new approach that offers dynamic leadership that is common in the West and particularly in the U.S. where leadership is different and one doesn't need to be the President to assume a leadership position.

Other contributions sought to alter norms of behavior that Somalis from the diaspora observed when they arrived in Somalia. In many cases the desire to change norms of behavior in Somalia originated out of an experience that frustrated Somalis who returned because it conflicted with norms they had grown accustomed to in the West. For example, a number of the Somali diaspora interviewees complained about a perceived lack of work ethic on the part of government workers in Somalia. As one Somali who had returned explained, “what really shocked me was the amount of hours that people work. I lived [in the U.S.] and we work at least eight hours a day. Somali Parliament works from 10 am to noon. Two hours! I was shocked…The people are very optimistic and resilient but the government people are not responsive. It is completely opposite of what one expects [in the U.S.]” Other Somalis who were interviewed for this project and held a similar sentiment about the work ethic in Somalia also noted the limited capacity present in the Somali government and questioned whether it was possible to make much progress on the major challenges facing the country in such an under resourced environment.

Challenges to Making Contributions

Somalis who returned were not always successful in making the contributions that they had hoped to make in Somalia. One barrier to making a contribution was a lack of appropriate social connections that would allow members of the diaspora to access key decision makers in Somalia. This was particularly problematic for young Somalis who did not have the same amount of experience and social networks in Somalia as older Somalis who had left the country as adults. Unfamiliarity with the culture and, in some cases, language in Somalia made it difficult for many young Somalis to connect to non-diaspora peers. When inadequate local social networks and unfamiliarity with local Somali culture intersected with security concerns on the part of Somalis from the diaspora, it often meant that they limited their social interactions to other members of the diaspora and remained within the more secure areas of the country. This led to increased isolation for some Somalis from the diaspora from the non-diaspora population. Based on findings from the HIPS interviewees in Somalia, the isolation of the diaspora that sometimes occurred increased the perception among some non-diaspora Somalis that members of the diaspora had returned to take jobs but not truly integrate into the community.

Other difficulties in making intended contributions are linked to lack of capacity within various institutions in Somalia. One important but under-resourced institution is the Somali government itself. For example, one Somali-American who is also a member of Parliament related:

[we] are always overloaded. Sometimes I have a bill that will be discussed this week and I need to read it. There are two or three others that I need to read, study, consult with other members and subject matter experts before I make a decision and vote on it…[a]s you know leaders don't do everything alone. They have secretaries. They have advisors. They have aids. I don't have anybody.

Without adequate staff members, politicians may struggle to draft appropriate legislation and position themselves to effectively debate legislation under consideration. Government offices had similar capacity issues. Certainly the Somali government is not alone in being under resourced: Somali interviewed for this project observed inadequate supplies and capacity in a variety of civil society organizations, including medical clinics and schools. While return migrants from the diaspora seemed to have brought a substantial supply of human capital with them, the lack of resources within important institutions in Somalia meant they could not exercise this human capital to its fullest capacity.

Another significant barrier to making contributions was the friction present between members of the diaspora who returned to Somalia and non-diaspora Somalis. A very large proportion of Somali politicians came from the diaspora (more than half of the federal parliament are Somali diaspora) and observations suggest that some of the best jobs with international non-governmental organizations and institutions
like the United Nations are held by members of the diaspora. The dominance of Somali diaspora in these positions has created resentment among non-diaspora.

This resentment may be especially high among the professional class of non-diaspora residents who feel that they are qualified for these positions, but overlooked because they lack Western educational credentials and the English fluency that many members of the Somalia diaspora possess. One Somali who had returned to Somalia related the following story that illustrates this friction: “This guy, one day I was talking to him next to the airport so he can see planes coming in and out. He said ‘sister, every time I see a plane landing, I get scared.’ I say why? He said ‘I just believe that someone who is about to take my job is on that plane.’ This was a simple administrator for an NGO and not even holding a high position, but that is the feeling amongst the locals.” This friction may make it difficult for Somalis from the diaspora and non-diaspora Somalis to work together on common projects and increases the challenge that Somalis from the diaspora face as they attempt to integrate themselves into the local community. On the other hand, it was also apparent that many non-diaspora Somalis appreciate the willingness of Somalis from the diaspora to send financial remittances and contribute their expertise as the country rebuilds its infrastructure and institutions. There was widespread agreement that members of the diaspora should concentrate more on establishing businesses in order to create jobs and strengthen the Somali economy.

Finally, another set of challenges relate to perceptions among members of the diaspora that Somalia was too corrupt and beholden to clan politics to get anything done. Many diaspora bemoaned the fact that they perceived hiring decisions within the government bureaucracy privileged clan affiliation over the qualifications of a job applicant. One Somali diaspora summed this feeling up with the following quote:

“I saw in Mogadishu very young, educated and talented people from the diaspora who really wanted to change something and those people were working hard day and night, making sure that they sacrificed and put their life on the line. Unfortunately, there’s a pattern of systems and strategies and cultures, and norms that is preventing [them] from making a change. Corruption is widespread, the culture, the habit, the norms, abuse of power, same thing. You know, sometimes you feel, you know, you’re staying here far away from your family and your children and...your hard work and sacrifice cannot make a difference at the end of the day.”

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Interviews with members of the Somali diaspora who had made a return trip to Somalia suggest an important potential role for diaspora in the country. These same interviews also indicate the exceptionally challenging conditions that diaspora who return to Somalia face as they attempt to contribute to the continued growth and stability of the country.

Due to on-going questions about security and the lack of important amenities in Somalia, we could find little evidence of permanent return among diaspora who had made a return trip to Somalia. Instead, members of the diaspora elected to return for temporary stays in the country or engaged in circular migration.

Motivated by a desire to give something back to Somalia, members of the diaspora worked in the Somali government and civil society institutions, but relatively few of them started businesses or worked in the private sector. It is important to point out that many media accounts highlight the economic contributions of diaspora through the creation of new businesses, so more research to determine how Somali diaspora engage in business creation is in order. In serving in these capacities, Somali diaspora continued a commitment to civic engagement activity that was common in their lives while living in their countries of reception. In general, members of the diaspora who returned to Somalia sought to work through institutions to increase the capacity of the government and civil society sectors. In some cases members of the diaspora saw a path toward increased governmental and civil society capacity that involved changes to Somali institutions and societal norms to make them more closely resemble those found in the West. Members of the diaspora who returned to Somalia encountered significant challenges, including difficulty knowing where or how to insert themselves into Somali institutions in order to make a contribution; lack of resources and capacity in institutions to make changes; and on-going friction with non-diaspora Somalis.

These findings suggest a series of potential policy considerations that are relevant for government and civil society institutions in the U.S.

- In addition to financing development efforts in Somalia through direct aid and the support of international non-governmental organizations, the U.S. government might consider more vigorously supporting programs that provide a short-term opportunity for members of the Somali diaspora to return and insert themselves into appropriate government or civil society institutions. In short, the U.S. government might consider the short-term return of highly skilled members of the Somali diaspora as a development strategy and support it accordingly.

- The U.S. government, acting alone or in partnership with appropriate civil society institutions, might help to provide access to sources of venture capital to support entrepreneurs from the Somali diaspora who would like to open businesses in Somalia. Without a well-developed financial sector in Somalia, entrepreneurs have few sources of financial support for fledgling business ideas. With access to start-up capital, diaspora entrepreneurs might be more successful in establishing businesses that create jobs and strengthen the Somali economy.
Under the auspices of USAID and the variety of aid organizations in Somalia that the U.S. government supports, the U.S. could indirectly support the establishment of dialogues between returning members of the diaspora and non-diaspora who live in Somalia to diffuse some of the tensions that are common between these two groups. Resolving these tensions could go a long way toward increasing the cohesion among skilled workers in Somalia and improving potential collaborative projects that support the vitality of the country.

The U.S. government has been a strong force in stabilizing Somalia and making it more secure through its support of the Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG), the current Somali government, and various peacekeeping forces operating in the country. The U.S. government might extend its role in Somalia by increasing its support of infrastructure projects, such as roads, health clinics and water and sanitation systems that will improve the quality of life for residents of Somalia and increase the potential economic growth of the country.

Various departments of the U.S. federal government, including the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and Department of State, should consider expanding partnerships with local government offices and civil society institutions in the Twin Cities to deepen the opportunities for Somali diaspora engagement. Specifically, these engagement opportunities could give the Somali diaspora community an opportunity to help set the agenda and play an authentic role in the decision-making process on issues related to support for Somalia, security within the U.S. and other important community issues at the national and local levels.

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**Notes**

1. Though the definition of the term is contested, by “diaspora,” the authors of this report mean individuals who were born in Somalia, but have since left Somalia and taken up permanent residence in another country.
2. HIPS has released a similar policy brief (http://www.heritageinstitute.org/diaspora-return-somalia/) and PRIIO will also release a policy brief at a future date.
3. In the overall project, which included researchers from the Humphrey School, PRIIO and HIPS, researchers interviewed a total of 78 Somalis that lived in Oslo, Norway or the Twin Cities of Minnesota. These interviews occurred in different contexts, depending upon where the individuals were living at the time of the interview. A total of 22 interviews occurred in Oslo, Norway; 29 interviews in Somalia (in Mogadishu, Hargeisa or Garowe) and 27 interviews in the Twin Cities of the U.S. Of the 78 Somali diaspora interviewed, 30 were citizens of Norway, 45 were citizens of the U.S., and three had a permanent residence in Norway but were not yet citizens.
4. Follow-on research on the civic engagement efforts by government agencies and civil society organizations in the Twin Cities, as well as the experiences of Somalis in engaging with these entities, is currently being conducted. The findings from this work are expected to reveal further insights into how engagement and broader capacity building in the Somali community affect aspirations for and contributions upon return.