

Research Brief

Diasporas - Mediating Actors in Development

A Case Study about Somali Diasporas in Denmark

Authors:

Linnea Lue Kessing

Una Marquard-Busk

African
Diaspora
POLICY CENTRE



December 2014

development of Africa.

**Diasporas - Mediating Actors in Development
A Case Study about Somali Diasporas in Denmark**

ADPC Research Brief
No. 2014/01

Authors:
Linnea Lue Kessing
Una Marquard-Busk

Department of Society and Globalisation
Roskilde University, Denmark

Published by:
The African Diaspora Policy Centre (ADPC)
Laan van Meerdevoort 70
2517 AN, The Hague
The Netherlands
Office: +31 70 753 7730
Email: info@diaspora-centre.org
URL: <http://www.diaspora-centre.org/>

This research brief presents findings from a master thesis authored by two students of the International Development Studies Programme at the Department of Society and Globalisation, Roskilde University in Denmark, and is based on qualitative research with Somali diasporas in Denmark.

The research was conducted in spring 2014 in co-operation with the Danish Refugee Council's Diaspora Programme ¹.

ADPC reserves the right to publish and distribute the content limited to this research brief on a full-access basis. Authorship and intellectual ownership remains wholly with the two authors.



Research Brief

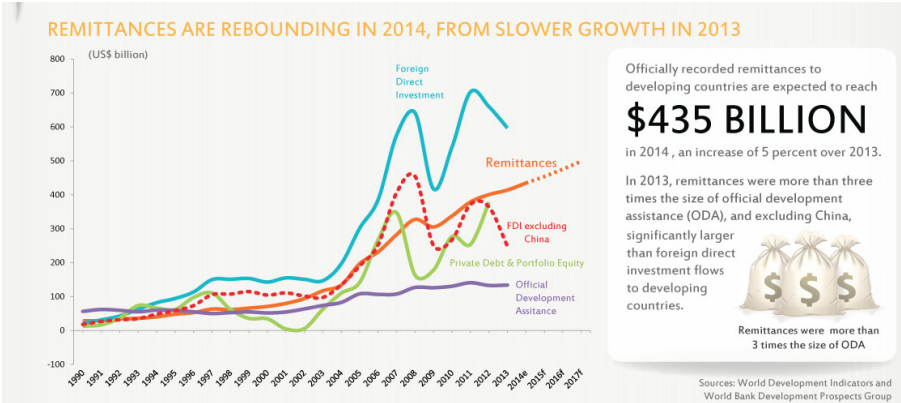
*Diasporas - Mediating
Actors in Development*

A Case Study about Somali Diasporas in Denmark

Context: diasporas' perspectives on development

Diasporas' contributions to their country of origin have increasingly triggered awareness about their potential in development, poverty reduction and economic growth in the South. Consequently, numerous diaspora-led development programmes have been established in recent years. Despite this increased attention for diasporas in development, there is little knowledge about diasporas in the country of immigration and how, or whether, they identify themselves as development actors. Understanding diaspora perspectives and motivations for being involved in development is utterly important for policy makers and practitioners engaged in diaspora-led development in order to continuously seek to strengthen collaboration with diasporas.

The objective of this research brief is to document Somali diasporas in Denmark on their engagement in development. The brief will conclude with a number of recommendations for supporting diaspora-led development.



Diasporas have been recognised as powerful actors in their country of origin largely due to the high numbers of remittances that is sent back every year. Many diaspora-led development initiatives are designed with the aim of channelling personal remittances into larger developmental activities.

In Denmark, the Somali migrant population is one of the largest non-European groups.² Most of them arrived as refugees after the breakout of the civil war in Somalia and thus increasingly from the beginning of the 1990's followed by a growing number of Somalis coming to Denmark through family reunification (Statistics Denmark Web 2014). Somalis as a migrant group are known for their strong associational practices and for upholding strong kinship relations to relatives in Somalia. Thus, many of the Somali-established associations engage in activities directed to Somalia. This study focuses on Somali diasporas engaged in associations that conduct non-profit development activities³ directed to Somalia as these are the associations that Danish donors currently reach out to.

An often overlooked issue is generational differences within diaspora communities. Findings from our study elucidate that there exist large

variations among younger and elder Somali diasporas with regard to how and why they claim their position as development agents.⁴ These differences will be discussed throughout the following findings along with an understanding of diasporas as brokers in development.

Diaspora perspectives: motivations for engaging in development

Motivations to engage in developing Somalia are often closely linked to kinship relations in Somalia along with political and geographical interests in the country. These motivations are intertwined with ties to Somalia and perceptions of Somalia as 'home'. Many elder diasporas have strong ties to Somalia and have a sense of belonging to the country and for some there exist a dream of eventually returning to the country. By contrast, the younger members of the Somali diaspora have limited ties to Somalia and often lack a sense of belonging to, and knowledge about, the country. Some describe Somalia as something culturally distant or even imagined. Accordingly, motivations and practices for young diasporas are to a lesser extent connected to kinship relations in Somalia and largely expressed as a wish to develop all of Somalia.

The youth however still wish to rebuild Somalia and help the people living there because of their heritage.

The diaspora concept and its implied understanding of diasporas as a unitary group constituting unique knowledge about, and ties to a 'homeland' can be problematic (Sinatti & Horst 2014). The categorisation of diasporas often used by mainstream development actors can be too simplistic and in relation to this study the assumed link between diasporas and their place of origin is critical. The link between diasporas and their country of origin is sometimes limited and the categorisation can come to uphold a simplistic idea of belongingness and identity. While diasporas live in the North, they are perceived to truly belong to their country of origin (Turner & Kleist 2013), which is being reproduced by the enthusiasm from mainstream development actors on diasporas' contribution to development of their 'homeland'. The ties to Somalia are especially questionable and complex for the young diasporas. They describe themselves as Danish-Somali emphasising their belongingness to Denmark. Generally, the younger diasporas struggle to define their cultural identity, while constantly being required to do so.

Diasporas do not merely contribute to the development of Somalia through direct transnational practices from Denmark to Somalia. Rather, diasporas operate in a transnational web of connections maintained across the diaspora community and national borders (Bakewell 2008), also referred to as intradiasporic transnationalism (Lee 2011). This is especially the case for the younger diasporas with less direct ties to Somalia who provide support through a network of

“People always question ‘where [in Somalia] I come from’, but I don’t care. These people need help no matter what and there is no one who helps them.”

Zaynab, 24 years old

connections. Oftentimes Somali youth diasporas work in associations that contain diaspora members in several countries and that operate to support development in all of Somalia as well as in other countries. Additionally, some are engaged in associations with members mixed in terms of country backgrounds. Some young diasporas even identify more with 'the diaspora' by sharing the experience of being young migrants in the country of immigration and they focus on activities in Denmark rather than Somalia.



The Nordic Somali Youth Summit hosted by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs gathering young people with Somali background. The participants focused primarily on knowledge sharing with regard to succeeding in societies in the North rather than activities directed to Somalia (6th of June, 2014). Photo: www.nordicsomaliyouthsummit.com

Becoming a development agent: claims and competition

Concurrently with the increased attention for diasporas as development agents, Somali diasporas in Denmark collectively highlight their potential in development despite variations in ties to Somalia and modes of engagement in the country. They position themselves as someone acting in line with humanitarian approaches as framed by policymakers and practitioners supporting diaspora-led development. Claims and positioning as development agents also take place on an individual level where competition is likely to occur among diasporas. For some, the partaking in development activities becomes an opportunity to enhance one's position in Somalia and Denmark e.g. in relation to future job prospects, to gain self-esteem in the host country and to be respected in the diaspora community.

The competition among diasporas and reasons why it becomes attractive to claim the diaspora position is interlinked with a wish to qualify for donor funding. The young diasporas seem to be involved in development on more professional terms than the elders and more easily align their projects with humanitarian approaches to development. Hereby, the youth appear more capable of approaching donors whereas elder diasporas are struggling to act accordingly, which in the end has an impact on who qualifies for donor funding and who does not. Variations in the ability to claim a diaspora position are not

only related to generational differences but also because some members of the Somali diaspora have more financial as well as human capital to act than others. The diasporas that have more capital are more capable of acquiring funding by succeeding in legitimising and claiming a diaspora position compared to the rest of the Somali diaspora community. It raises concerns as to what extent development institutions merely reach out to and collaborate with diasporas that have the resources to claim their added value.

The professionalization of diasporas

Identifying with- and practicing a role as a development agent means that diaspora members de facto act as mediators between Denmark and Somalia. Diasporas position themselves as capable of identifying the needs in Somalia and its population. This makes diasporas act as brokers in development when interacting with donors and requires translating identified needs into an institutionalised language (Oliver de Sardan 2005). Another mediating role in which diasporas act as development agents is through knowledge transfer from Denmark to Somalia based on an ability to navigate between the two places. The ability to make needs assessments in Somalia and to transfer skills and knowledge from Denmark to Somalia are some of the skills highlighted by and about diasporas in their contribution to development. In order to improve one's qualification, and to better qualify for funding, diasporas attend courses and trainings provided by donors.

This points to an increasing professionalization of diaspora engagement in development and one such tendency of having to live up to specific ways of conducting development can be problematic. Institutional requirements for implementation and documentation of projects do not always correlate with realities on the ground and may create unrealistic expectations to diasporas if challenges are not carefully considered. Challenges of implementation are described by the diasporas as related to a lack of security in Somalia and that they work voluntarily on limited time and money.

Room for innovative approaches

How then, do the current approaches allow for innovative development activities?

The notion of diasporas contributing with innovative approaches to development is part of the enthusiasm from policymakers and practitioners reaching out to diasporas in development. Based on our insights from fieldwork/interviews it is particularly young diasporas that articulate that they can contribute with innovative initiatives to development, which is sometimes proclaimed based on a critique of already existing approaches. But the training and courses provided for diasporas by development practitioners indicate a notion of diasporas not possessing the needed technical skills to conduct development professionally. When diasporas become professionalized in development it can result in development institutions engaging with diaspo-

“The diaspora will find the resources, collect the information and needs and convert this into project style or format (...)”

Baashi, 59 year old

ras based on already established discourses in development rather than utilizing diasporas' potential innovative contributions. It critically seems to constrain diasporas' room for manoeuvre as innovative agents of development. This is partly due to development institutions working from a pre-defined set of criteria about how and who are able to conduct development and define needs.

Box 1. 'Best practice' example

Danish Refugee Council's Diaspora Programme

(<http://drc.dk/relief-work/diaspora-programme/>)

The Diaspora Programme seeks to strengthen and support the role of Diaspora as development agents. The Programme 1) administers a fund for diaspora-led relief and development projects; 2) seeks to build evidence-based knowledge of the comparative value of diaspora engagement in development.

Diaspora Advisory Board: consist of five elected members and two substitute members from the diaspora. The mandate of the Advisory board is to advise the Programme on overall issues and guidelines. Also, it is their role to screen project applications and provide recommendations for approval or rejection and in general to ensure transparency towards the Somali diaspora in the process.

Conclusions and recommendations

Three recommendations for policymakers and practitioners engaging with diaspora-led development can be drawn from these findings:

1. Embrace diversity

Recognising differences among members of the Somali diaspora can strengthen the cooperation with diasporas. Related to the critique of perceiving diasporas as a homogeneous group, it should not be assumed that all diasporas engage in development with similar interests and agendas. Therefore, acknowledge the differences among diasporas' motivations and perspectives in development and strive to gain from them rather than having one defined strategy when approaching diasporas. Only by acknowledging the differences one can utilise the diverse potentials and create an honest and sustainable collaboration. More specifically, it is essential to address generational variations and to re-consider approaches when engaging with young members of the Somali diaspora that have spent little or no time in 'homeland'. Relatedly, intradiasporic connections should be taken into consideration in order to meet the organisational behaviour from many of the young diasporas creating international and mixed associations. This

"[In our organisation] we have one from Morocco, then we have one Palestinian, two Danes, two Afghans and the rest are Somalis."

Dacaad, 25 years old

can for example be done by approving funding applications from diaspora organisations of mixed diasporas, or that are constituted across host country borders.

2. Consider challenges

Potential challenges for implementing diaspora-led development projects are important to take under serious consideration. Project descriptions and intentions have limited impact without evaluations of the implementation phase including risk assessments. Allow diasporas to be honest about challenges of implementation that, according to the fieldwork with Somali diasporas, can be related to a lack of security and the level of conflicts in the country. Therefore, it should not naturally be assumed that diasporas always can implement projects where other development actors may have limited access. Instead, focus should be on building mutual trust and continuously improving the establishment of projects by understanding realities on ground for diasporas. The Somali diasporas also pointed to the fact that they work on limited time and money which sets limitations for the projects. Thus, considering challenges for implementation also entails to be realistic about the diasporas' contributions and to adjust the expectations to the diaspora accordingly.

3. Ensure ownership

The objective when engaging with diasporas should be to support the diaspora projects rather than imposing own perceptions of how development projects should be managed and implemented. It is essential to preserve diasporas' ownership and leadership in order for their innovative potential to flourish and allow for new approaches in development. Such ownership can be facilitated and maintained by including diasporas at all stages, from planning capacity building courses to formulating project criteria and setting up requirements for receiving funding. One example on how to include diasporas in programming is the Danish Refugee Council's Diaspora Programme. Here, a diaspora Advisory Board (Box 1) has been established with the aim of taking account of diasporas' voices in programme development and grant management. At project level, room for diaspora ownership and inclusion would entail allowing grants for those less experienced in the development field. It is suggested to provide small grants tied to a large package of capacity building that is developed in collaboration with diasporas to allow for their perspectives and support their respective needs. It could further be relevant to establish support groups that are building on generational differences within the Somali diaspora community. Both sub-groups, elder and younger, can learn from each other as they have different competences for engaging in development. Thus, knowledge sharing in this regard should be enhanced e.g. through facilitation of support groups. Finally, to ensure ownership at project level we encourage policy makers and

practitioners to continue to encourage own financial contributions to development projects from members of the Somali diaspora to uphold ownership over projects and avoid funding dependence. However, note that own contributions will not replace personal remittances as members of the Somali diaspora engage in collective development efforts while continuing to assist relatives.

References

- Bakewell, O. (2008). In Search of the Diasporas within Africa. In: *African Diaspora* (1) 1: 5-27.
- Lee, H. (2011). Rethinking transnationalism through the second generation. In: *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* (22) 3: 295-313.
- Sinatti, G. & Horst, C. (2014). *Migrants as Agents of Development: Diaspora Engagement Discourse and Practise in Europe*. Ethnicities. Published online April 7.
- Statistics Denmark Web (2014). *Immigrants and Descendants*. [Danmarks Statistik. Indvandrere og efterkommere.] <http://www.dst.dk/da/Statistik/emner/indvandrere-og-efterkommere.aspx> Accessed 31.5.14
- Turner, S. & Kleist, N. (2013). Introduction: Agents of Change? Staging and Governing Diasporas and the African State. In: *African Studies* (72) 2: 192-206.

Notes

- 1 Title of master thesis: Actors between Places: Voices from the Somali Diaspora in Denmark identified as agents of development. Link to full publication: <http://rudar.ruc.dk/handle/1800/15620>
The views expressed in this policy brief are solely those of the authors and do not reflect the views of the Danish Refugee Council.
- 2 As of 2014, 18.930 Somalis and their descendants, excluding asylum seekers, are living in Denmark (Statistics Denmark Web).
- 3 Excluding e.g. business and political initiatives.
- 4 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Somali diasporas in Denmark with an age ranging from 22 to 64 years old.



December 2014