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## **Diaspora Engagement and the Global Initiative on Somali Refugees--Emerging Possibilities**

Dianna Shandy

Professor of Anthropology, Macalester College and  
2015-2016 Executive Leadership Fellow, Center for Integrative Leadership  
University of Minnesota

Shobha Das  
Coordinator

High Commissioner's Global Initiative on Somali Refugees  
UNHCR

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**United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees  
P.O. Box 2500, 1211 Geneva 2  
Switzerland**

**E-mail: [hqpd00@unhcr.org](mailto:hqpd00@unhcr.org)  
Web Site: [www.unhcr.org](http://www.unhcr.org)**

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## **Introduction<sup>12</sup>**

In 2013, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees launched the Global Initiative on Somali Refugees (GISR). The initiative recognizes that more than a quarter century after Somalis first fled civil war in large numbers, more than two million Somalis remain displaced within and beyond the borders of Somalia. In light of this reality, GISR has initiated international dialogue in a fresh search for innovative solutions. One dimension that has emerged repeatedly in high-level consultations with Somali and non-Somali academic, policy, and NGO experts, and refugees has been the importance of engaging the global Somali diaspora in the search for solutions. Engaging diasporas to address the needs of refugees in protracted refugee settings is not an established approach at UNHCR. This paper reviews the literature on diaspora engagement, including best practices for diaspora populations assisting refugees remaining in the region of origin, and reports new findings from focus groups with Somali diaspora populations in Europe and North America regarding possible modes of support from diaspora populations to Somali refugees who remain in the Eastern Africa region.

## **Diaspora Engagement**

This section provides an overview of the concept of diaspora and summarizes what is known about the roles of diaspora populations assisting refugees remaining in the region of origin.

### *What is diaspora?*

Diaspora, from the Greek, meaning a scattered or dispersed population from a common geographic origin has been theorized extensively (Clifford 1994; Cohen 2008; Hall 1990; van Hear 1998). Purists argue for a narrow definition whose criteria only apply to a subset of global population movements over time (e.g. the Jewish diaspora or the Armenian diaspora). More colloquial usages of diaspora have described any social grouping dispersed over territory, e.g. the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender diaspora (Brubaker 2005:3). Here, we chart a middle path and conceptualize diaspora as having three fundamental features: dispersal of a population from an original homeland, retention of an ongoing orientation toward that, or an imagined, homeland, and an internally- or externally-generated separation between the population and its host society (Cohen 2008:25).

### *Why diaspora now?*

Diaspora is not a new concept. In academic circles, diaspora received a lot of attention as a part of a larger 1990s post-modern intellectual project, delinking

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<sup>2</sup> The ideas and opinions contained in this paper do not necessarily reflect those of UNHCR as an organization.

people from place and culture from territory. Social theorist James Clifford (1994:302) asked, “How do diaspora discourses represent experiences of displacement, of constructing homes away from home? What experiences do they reject, replace, or marginalize? How do these discourses attain comparative scope while remaining rooted/routed in specific, discrepant histories?” In these settings, identity dominated discussions of diaspora (Braziel and Mannur 2008, Hall 1990).

Recently, however, diaspora has taken a pragmatic and utilitarian turn and found new footing in policy circles (Newland and Tanaka 2010). Gamlen (2006) probes the nature of diaspora engagement policies and asks what kinds of states use them? For example, in 2009 the US Agency for International Development established the Diaspora Network Alliance; in 2015 Sweden established the Somali Diaspora Program; and diaspora work has become increasingly prominent in the work done by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the International Organization of Migration (IOM 2013).

While diaspora engagement has become a mainstay in the development world, it is not clear that the same is true in the humanitarian world. Recent initiatives, however, suggest that this may be changing. For example, in 2015 the Diaspora Emergency Action and Coordination group (DEMAC) was launched, aiming to improve “diaspora emergency response capacity and coordination with the conventional humanitarian system” (DEMAC 2015). As DEMAC (2015) notes, “Diasporas are key actors in disaster and man-made crisis response, with an ability to quickly mobilize assistance, channel information, analyse and advocate; yet, diaspora emergency response is mainly provided in parallel to existing international and national systems and mechanisms seeking to coordinate responses to humanitarian disasters.” And, a UNDP report (Sheikh and Healy 2009) noted, “Another form of intervention, often linked to business networks, is the provision of emergency relief in times of natural or man-made crises. The Diaspora has proven capacity to send immediate cash and supplies to address the emergency needs of the victims. Funds are often mobilized by and distributed through the private media. Contributions of this kind stretch beyond local affiliation and are given from a sense of patriotism or religious obligation towards the affected” (UNDP 2009:4).

This thinking dovetails with the shift in discourse by governments and international organizations, like UNHCR, that better recognize the ways in which populations are in many ways self-reliant, before, during, and after external actors have provided protection and/or humanitarian relief and the growing awareness of the roles diasporas play in these forms of self-reliance (Aleinikoff 2015). Volker Türk, UNHCR’s Director of International Protection, noted in a speech at the 64th Session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner’s Programme that, “Our understanding of solutions has evolved and now acknowledges the importance of self-reliance and community-based activities from the onset of displacement” (2013:7). Furthermore, on a more global scale there is a growing appreciation of the

skills and economic power migrants possess (Corrie 2015) and, thus, the roles they can play in host societies to sustain not only themselves, but also compatriots left behind in home regions.

It is, perhaps, not coincidental that we are seeing these shifts at a time when the reality of ongoing and protracted refugee situations are coinciding with changes in donor funding behavior (Newland and Tanaka 2010) and as we see sharp increases in numbers of forced migrants. The shift toward diaspora engagement can be viewed, in part, as an example of necessity breeding innovation in the face of shrinking resources relative to global need.

This movement toward greater reliance on diaspora engagement has not been without its critics. With respect to refugees, diaspora engagement has long been suspect because of concerns about the potential for diasporas to fuel strife in ongoing conflict situations (van Hear 2004, Terry 2002). It has also been argued that relying on diaspora populations is an abrogation by states of their responsibilities. Another strain of critique relates more to the development discourse but has relevance for humanitarian interventions as well. Put succinctly, this critique hinges on the notion that these new top-down approaches to diaspora engagement are at risk of co-opting long-existing forms of support. Individuals and groups who send financial support to their home countries are uncomfortable when governments label these organic initiatives in a way that suggests government sponsorship. And there is some evidence to suggest that when governments get involved diaspora giving decreases (McDiarmid 2014).

In this paper we consider current and possible future Somali diaspora engagement in the Eastern Africa region, how this intersects with refugee needs, and what role, if any, UNHCR and GISR might play.

#### *Situating diaspora engagement and diaspora philanthropy*

First, it is helpful to explain some of the commonly-encountered terminology. *Diaspora engagement* is an umbrella term that contains the sub-categories of *diaspora philanthropy* and *remittances*. These admittedly imprecise terms are widely used, even if there's not a common understanding of what they mean and how they are distinct. IOM describes diaspora engagement as: "The resources of diaspora populations that flow across borders are immensely varied and range from skills, knowledge and ideas to cultural capital, to financial capital to trade (IOM 2013:12). Diaspora philanthropy can be seen as: "the private donations of diasporas to a wide range of causes in their countries of origin" (Newland and Tanaka 2010:2). While diaspora philanthropy might be perceived to overwrite the concept of remittances, we still see remittances as distinctive because of their narrower focus on giving to members of a family or other social grouping and their more restricted scope of intended outcomes--supporting individuals and families. Remittances are often used to meet immediate needs for consumables (food, medicine, firewood, school fees).

Diaspora philanthropy often moves beyond individual streams of remittance flows to consider the collective pooling of resources, often to achieve outcomes that benefit the public good, like schools, hospitals, or other livelihood initiatives that can potentially help recipients to become more self-sustaining.

While remittances have been studied for many years, diaspora engagement and diaspora philanthropy are more recent areas of inquiry. Clearly, there is overlap among these categories, but there is value in treating them separately.

Geographically, diaspora philanthropy research has been dominated by South Asian, and to a lesser degree, East Asian case studies (Yong and Rahman 2013). A relatively robust body of work also exists for Latin America, but in that setting one tends to see reference to “hometown associations,” which look a lot like diaspora philanthropy in other settings. In African settings, by comparison with these other regions, there is a lot of literature in a broad sense on diaspora engagement (more likely referred to as “transnational connections” (Coe 2014, Lindley 2007, Lindley 2010, Shandy 2007), but relatively less literature on diaspora philanthropy as such. (For some notable exceptions, see: Ahmed, 2000, Copeland-Carson 2007, Mercer 2008, Mahamoud 2010).

Aside from geographic parameters, another under-researched conceptual domain within diaspora philanthropy has been transfers initiated by refugees. (For exceptions, see Van Hear 2009, Hammond 2007, Hammond et al. 2011, Hammond 2014, Horst 2001, Horst 2004, Horst 2008a, Horst 2008b, Horst and Van Hear 2002, Lindley 2007, Lindley 2010, Shandy 2003, Shandy 2006, Shandy 2007). This discussion is, admittedly, muddled by definitional and conceptual tangles regarding how both refugees and diasporas are defined outside of legal-institutional contexts. Those questions raised by earlier scholars about the nature of diasporas and identities become particularly salient (Clifford 1993; Hall 1990). When does a refugee become a part of a diaspora? Can one inhabit both categories simultaneously? Who decides? Often used in the policy literature as discrete categories, diaspora and refugee overlap significantly and are neither linear, nor static categories. The terms “refugee” and “diaspora” are situational identities that overlap and shift over time and depending on context. There is no bright line demarcation.

For present purposes, however, we operationalize Somali diaspora, as it was used by participants in our project, where the “Somali diaspora” tended to refer to Somalis in Europe, North America, Australia, and parts of the Middle East (like UAE and Saudi Arabia) as members of the diaspora. People acknowledged that Somalis in Sudan, Egypt, or South Africa could likely fit standard definitions of diaspora, but that Somalis themselves did not tend to think in those terms (Al-Sharmani 2004, Al-Sharmani 2006, Mursal 2014). One participant offered the contrast set of “regional diaspora” and “global diaspora.” Clearly, this is an area that merits further study and demonstrates that even as more pragmatic and utilitarian discussions of diaspora

get underway, those earlier questions scholars raised about the nature and composition of diaspora are still with us and need to be addressed (Clifford 1993).

Both diaspora engagement and diaspora philanthropy, however, suffer from the limitation of a tacit assumption of unidirectional flows—often from north to south—when empirical research on the transnational lives of refugees demonstrates more complicated and multidirectional flows (Abdi 2015, Shandy 2003, Shandy 2006, Shandy 2007). Thus, we hope to push these concepts in two ways:

First, we want to emphasize that diaspora engagement and diaspora philanthropy are not just a matter of bilateral links between dispersed populations and “home,” but rather need to be seen as web-like networks spanning multiple sites. For example, Somali diaspora engagement needs to consider the ways in which Somalis in Sweden, for example, send financial and in-kind resources not only to Eastern Africa, but also to Somalis arriving as asylum seekers in southern Europe.

Second, while diaspora is often conceived as emanating from shared ancestral linkages, we propose, instead, that we think of diaspora much in the way that anthropologist Jack David Eller (1999) describes ethnicity, whereby the past is deployed in light of present and future considerations. Accordingly, we also encourage conceptualizations to not focus only on the ways those in the diaspora retain and maintain connections with those who remain in the “homeland,” with a focus on the past, but also the ways that those in the diaspora also *initiate* new ties, e.g. through marriage, births, and so on.

### **The Project:**

During high-level consultations, GISR was encouraged to look more closely at the existing and potential role of the global Somali diaspora in addressing the needs of refugees in the Eastern Africa region. Here, we present the results of these consultations describing the opportunities, challenges, and possible modalities of diaspora engagement.<sup>3</sup> We begin with a brief background on Somalia, including an overview of displacement, and the methodology used to obtain the findings.

### The Somali Case Study

#### *Overview of displacement*

As numerous scholars (Abdi 2015; Kliest 2004; Majok and Schwabe 1996:35-37) have documented, migration is not new to Somalis. As a migratory pastoral population, historically, movement has long been a strategy to maximize resources and work within a specific set of environmental conditions.<sup>4</sup> Emigration to Europe is

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<sup>3</sup> This project was reviewed and approved by the Macalester College Institutional Review Board.

<sup>4</sup> While “pastoralism” is a broad term that refers to a range of human-environment engagements, here it is used advisedly because Somalis practice both nomadic (in the North) and transhumant (in the

traced back to the movement of early twentieth century seamen working on colonial ships (Gundel 2002; Kleist 2004). Another wave of Somali out-migration occurred in the 1960s, with students migrating abroad for tertiary-level education. An overlapping wave of migration occurred with the emigration of Somali workers to Gulf countries (Gundel 2002). The 1980s saw emigration by those opposing the Siad Barre regime and who later went into political exile in many Western countries (Kleist 2004). The 1990s witnessed full-scale civil war, giving rise to the current situation of mass global displacement. When shifting the frame from Somali refugees to the Somali diaspora, we need to incorporate the lens of “mixed flows,” appreciating the range of reasons Somalis have left Somalia over time, while still appreciating that “insecurity from conflict” is likely the overall dominant driver of the Somali global diaspora (Jureidini 2010:4; Kusow et al 2007).

In a similar vein, as UNDP (Sheikh and Healy 2009) in an extensive study of the Somali diaspora has demonstrated, reliable estimates of the global dispersal of Somalis are difficult to obtain. This is a population very much in motion—with continuing outflows as well as a smaller stream of return migrants and the other kinds of continuing crosscutting global flows of Somalis within the global diaspora. The population within Somalia is estimated at around 12 million people. There are an estimated 1 to 1.5 million Somalis living outside of Somalia, with concentrations in the Horn of Africa and Yemen; the Gulf States; and Western Europe and North America (Sheikh and Healy 2009). As Jureidini (2010: 46) notes, “While the emphasis tends to be on remitters in Western countries, there are significant amounts also from the Middle East and Africa (Al-Sharmani 2006). What has not been adequately addressed in the literature so far are the multiple transnational sources and destinations of remittance money (Al-Sharmani 2006).”

Recognizing the contested nature of population estimates for the Somali diaspora (not to mention the conceptual associated with the term diaspora noted earlier), the chart below synthesizes available data and illustrates, in broad strokes, the global dispersal of Somalis. This overview faces several methodological limitations, chiefly because it pieces together data from a variety of sources. Nonetheless, by using relative numbers (instead of actual numbers), it provides a way of conceptualizing the global Somali diaspora. (See Jureidini 2010 who also employs this approach of using relative numbers.) Following the approach used by others (Hassan et al. 2013), the terms Somali or Somali-origin refers to those born in Somaliland, Puntland and South Central Somalia and their descendants who were born elsewhere.

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South) pastoralism. See (Majok and Schwabe 1996: 35-37) for a fuller description of pastoralism practiced in Somalia.

**Table 1: Global Somali Diaspora Population Estimates for Select Countries, 2014<sup>5</sup>**

> 100K	20-99K	5-19K	1-5K*
Canada	Djibouti	Australia	Austria
Ethiopia**	Netherlands	Denmark	Belgium
Kenya**	Norway	Djibouti**	Eritrea
United Arab Emirates	Saudi Arabia	Egypt	Ireland
United Kingdom	South Africa	Finland	Malaysia
United States	Sweden	Germany	New Zealand
Yemen**	Tanzania	Greece	Nicaragua
United Kingdom	Uganda	Italy	Pakistan
		South Africa	Slovakia
		Sudan	Tanzania
		Switzerland	
		Turkey	

\*This may not be a comprehensive list of countries that are home to 1000-5000 Somalis. These are, however, the countries that surface in the literature.

\*\*The “Somali” population in these countries is particularly challenging to document due to historical processes such as colonialism and the making of the Somali nation-state which meant that these countries have substantial autochthonous Somali populations, current migratory and refugee flows, as well as the contested nature of the term “diaspora.”

### *Somali diaspora engagement*

Somali diaspora engagement takes place “through several mechanisms – through the nuclear family, clan networks, charitable associations and transnational business partnerships” (UNDP 2009). Estimates place Somali remittances at US\$1 to 3 billion annually (Sheikh and Healy 2009; Hammond 2014:13). Most of these flows coincide with categories that also surfaced during our project. To this, we would add the role of remittances used to support candidates running for political office in Somalia or in diasporic host countries. Many of our focus groups had at least one participant who was a candidate for, or an elected member of, government in Somalia or in their

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<sup>5</sup> Sources include: Hassan et al. 2013; Jureidini 2010; Kusow and Bjork 2007; Moret 2006; Open Society Foundation 2014; Sheikh, and Healy 2009; Young n.d., as well as reports from focus group participants.

diasporic home country in Europe or North America. We flag this particular mode of diaspora engagement because while it is seldom noted in the literature it surfaced both in the focus groups and in informal conversations within UNHCR as a possible way to link diaspora engagement to a solutions framework, or a way to think of how diaspora might work to not just mediate the problems faced by refugees but to create opportunities for long-term solutions.

#### *Methods and Sample*

During 2014 and 2015, roundtables, or focus groups, were held with Somali diaspora community members in select sites in Europe and North America: London, United Kingdom; Minneapolis, Minnesota, United States; Toronto, Canada (two groups); Bern, Switzerland; Malmö, Sweden; Amsterdam, The Netherlands, and Helsinki, Finland.<sup>6</sup> Most sites were chosen because they were known to be key nodes in the global Somali diaspora. (See Table 1.) Additional sites were included to provide contrast and additional perspectives.

Each of the eight focus groups comprised 15-25 individuals invited by the local host, for a total sample of 130 Somali-origin individuals, of whom 30 percent (or 39 individuals) were women, with the remainder being men.

Local hosts endeavored to invite diaspora members from all regions of Somalia. In one site, as a part of the formal discussion, participants were given the option to identify a specific region of origin, if any, in Somalia. In the other settings where people were not asked formally to identify their region of origin in Somalia, it emerged organically from the discussion. Thus, while we did not record demographic data on regional origins and we deliberately did not seek to identify people by the category of “clan,” it is our assessment that all of the focus groups reflected regional diversity from within Somalia. We will return to this point below in our findings.

Participants in our sample were a well-educated group, with eight out of 10 individuals having an undergraduate degree or higher. A quarter of our sample held a Masters, PhD, or other professional degree. Two out of 10 had a vocational degree, a high school degree, or were still enrolled in high school. The sample came from a range of professions and were rather evenly distributed across the following fields, going from most to least represented: social services/NGOs; law/policy maker; business/management; youth services/student; media/journalist; medicine/dentistry; engineer/technology; and librarian/teacher.

The moderator, and in some cases participants as well, took contemporaneous notes. Moderator notes were typed and returned to participants in each focus group

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<sup>6</sup> In some cases, refreshments were offered and in one setting participants received a \$25 stipend to defray local travel costs. No other incentives were offered. In each setting, participants completed a sign-up sheet and brief demographic questionnaire.

for additional comments or modification. Final versions of the notes were coded and analyzed, first by using componential analysis (Spradley 1979) and then by using Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software package. The broad coding categories that emerged from the data were: reasons for the Somali community to engage, ways to partner effectively with the Somali community on diaspora engagement, kinds of proposed engagement (broken down into advice/policy, infrastructure, financial, skills transfer, and support services), potential barriers to increased engagement, ways to address potential barriers to increased engagement, and recommendations for UNHCR.

The focus groups took slightly different form in each of the settings, but the general goals of the focus groups were:

- To assess levels of interest in refugee-diaspora engagement.
- To identify barriers and opportunities in refugee-diaspora engagement.
- To identify contours and modalities of a refugee-diaspora engagement mechanism.
- To remain open to related topics that should be taken into consideration.

## **Findings**

Focus groups are useful in exploring the range and breadth of opinions, ideas, and topical areas advanced by participants. Focus groups can also be useful as a basis for more systematic survey-based research (Krueger 1998). Where relevant, we do indicate if an idea had broad support across focus groups; however, the methodology does not allow us to make inferences about a lack of support for an idea, unless that was explicitly stated. For example, if a new idea surfaced in the fourth focus group, we cannot evaluate the degree of support for that idea during previous focus groups.

### *Current and Potential Future Interest in Diaspora Engagement*

A guiding question for this project was to assess levels of current and potential future interest among members of the Somali diaspora in “engaging” with Somali refugees in the Eastern Africa region (which includes Yemen). The focus groups demonstrated that many, if not most, Somalis are already “engaged” in assisting those in the region largely through financial remittances and in some cases through diaspora philanthropy, as defined above. The focus groups also revealed that remittances sent to Somalia can also be intended for distribution among those living beyond Somalia’s borders, including those living in refugee camps. Similarly, funds sent to camp residents can be intended for use in Somalia, particularly amongst those embarking on return to Somalia. This suggests that diaspora engagement models that adhere too tightly to paradigms of giving inside or outside of the borders of Somalia may fail to capture the ways diaspora engagement transcends national borders among recipients.

With this caveat in mind, many focus group participants did express an overall preference for sending money to Somalia over refugees in camps. They gave three main reasons for this: First, there is an interest in investing in and building Somalia. Second, money sent to individuals in Somalia goes further than money sent to people in surrounding countries, e.g. Kenya. In other words, it is less expensive to support a family living in Somalia than in a neighboring country. Third, some people perceive that camp-based refugees' needs are met by the international community; whereas, other Somalis may have even greater need. However, even with these caveats in place, focus group participants voiced a clear interest in engaging with refugee populations, especially if engagement is framed as engaging with those living in Somalia AND in refugee camps, instead of Somalia OR refugee camps. This was particularly true among those who take a longer view of post-conflict reconstruction in Somalia and see investment in refugees as investment in Somalia's future. The desire to engage with refugees is enhanced if these initiatives are articulated with efforts in Somalia, ie, that they do not replace efforts in Somalia but complement and supplement them. For example, vocational education efforts in camps should be geared toward specific economic sectors in Somalia. One way to achieve this articulation is through better communication between UNHCR and its NGO partners in refugee camps.

With respect to ongoing engagement, Somali diaspora members express a strong interest in finding new ways to engage more "sustainably" with those back home. By sustainably, they described the need to work collectively to create opportunities for remittance recipients to be more self-sufficient. Sustainable support was an idea that was advanced most passionately by Somalis who call themselves "Somali 1.5" (born in Africa but migrated to Europe/North America as a young child) and second generation (born in Europe/North America after family migrated) Somalis. Some focus group participants see partnering with UNHCR as one possible way to engage more sustainably.

### *Partnering with UNHCR*

Somali diaspora members represent a dynamic and highly skilled population with a strong motivation to be involved in developing solutions for Somalis in East Africa. Focus group participants expressed a desire to partner with UNHCR to improve the lives of refugees. Focus group participants frequently noted that Somali remittances top \$1 billion annually. Yet, it is important to note that with varying degrees of intensity and emphasis that each of the focus groups devoted at least some time to airing general grievances participants had with UNHCR. These concerns ranged from the immediate and practical to the chronic and philosophical regarding the United Nations system as a whole. While these concerns are important to recognize and were duly recorded and shared with UNHCR leadership, the upshot tended to be a pragmatic realization that UNHCR's size, resources, and relationships with

states make it a necessary partner in creating large-scale, long-term positive impact. Overall, there is a sense that UNHCR—both Geneva HQ and national offices in countries where the consultations were held—is very powerful and acts as a gatekeeper between refugees in camps and members of the diaspora. While the diaspora is engaged with refugees through individual remittances, it is likely that more robust and organized engagement between camp-based refugees and diaspora populations would have to come at the behest of UNHCR. Two specific initiatives that had a lot of traction across all consultations were:

- a) create a digital platform linking refugee needs with the diaspora's financial and in-kind resources.<sup>7</sup>
- b) create an advisory board to guide any ongoing process, comprising representatives from the diaspora, UNHCR (HQ and national offices), and, *critically*, refugees themselves.

When looking at ways for UNHCR to partner effectively with members of the Somali diaspora community, a number of themes emerged. There is robust support for increased diaspora-refugee "action", not 'engagement'." There was a strong and persistent theme across groups that people are ready to take concrete steps toward improving the situation of Somalis instead of just engaging in more discussion. One way this issue manifested in some of the focus groups was in an expression of "research fatigue" associated with being scrutinized as research "subjects" but without ever seeing positive change come out of these interactions. In other settings, however, the opposite seemed to be the case where participants were eager to be asked to share their opinion and were even keener to be a part of ongoing efforts working toward solutions. One final caveat related to the theme for a preference for "action" was a countervailing theme that emerged in several of the focus groups that new initiatives take the time to map what is already happening so as to not overwrite effective and existing, often bilateral, initiatives that are currently in place. These bilateral initiatives could be generated by individuals, but they, more likely, involved partnerships between a specific institution (e.g. a university) and a population in Eastern Africa. This point dovetails with the critique in the larger literature regarding diaspora engagement that top-down initiatives not co-opt efforts that are currently in place and functioning effectively.

In all of the focus groups, it was deemed essential that the Somali diaspora and Somali refugees be a part of the conversation to find a solution. In the words of one participant, "if you are not at the table, you are on the menu." Significantly, most diaspora members, avoided positioning themselves as experts on all Somalis, and

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<sup>7</sup> The Center for Integrative Leadership at the University of Minnesota, which hosted the second Roundtable, is spearheading a digital platform initiative to achieve this goal. It is anticipated that new initiatives to create internet connectivity in refugee camps announced recently by Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg would align with these efforts (Sengupta 2015).

noted that to be effective, UNHCR needed to “ask the refugees directly” about their needs. One participant noted, “We are not there. We do not know what they need. You need to ask them. Even ourselves, we just send the money so they can buy what they need.” That said, when asked to identify specific projects where the diaspora could be helpful, focus group participants demonstrated a high degree of sophistication regarding the complexity of issues and possible solutions. Many focus group participants indicated that they would be interested in serving as a part of a needs assessment team involving travel to Eastern Africa to solicit refugee input.

Diaspora members reported being strongly motivated to work across social divides. One of the major critiques made by outsiders about the possible success of a diaspora-driven initiative is whether Somalis could bridge their own social (described by outsiders as largely clan-based) divides in an effort to work collaboratively toward a shared goal. Clearly, clan remains a salient socio-political variable, among others, in Somalia, but, according to roundtable participants in all sites, these divides, while still present in diaspora contexts, are muted. Some diaspora members even suggested that one contribution the diaspora could make in terms of skills transfer for refugees in Eastern Africa would be to model and discuss these strategies for bridging social difference and to be leaders in other reconciliation efforts.

Finally, there was a concern raised that members of the Somali diaspora not be used as a “tool” to access dangerous areas where the UN will not go and that the UN not only see this as an opportunity for bilateral partnering with the Somali diaspora community but that it also create and support opportunities for more intra-diaspora engagement to look for solutions. A common theme across groups was the need for the creation of a web of support for refugees rather than a nexus with UNHCR as the sole gatekeeper between refugees and the diaspora.

#### *Modalities of Engagement*

Under the broad framing question of what diaspora engagement in support of refugees would look like, a range of ideas for initiatives surfaced, with strong patterning around key areas of education, health, livelihoods, youth-focused programming, and media. These areas align with the *Addis Ababa Commitment Toward Somali Refugees* adopted at the August 2014 Ministerial Meeting for GISR.<sup>8</sup>

While financial remittances are an important part of diaspora engagement, a focus on these kinds of transfers alone would fail to capture the breadth and potential of diaspora involvement in their home region. Roundtable participants enthusiastically embraced the idea of skills transfer as a part of their diaspora engagement repertoire. As one roundtable participant put it, “People give what they can. Those who have skills share them; those who have money send it.” Significantly, skills transfers are not limited only to the highly educated. We heard robust interest on the

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<sup>8</sup> A link to the Addis Ababa Commitment can be found here: <http://www.unhcr.org/540dac2c6.html>.

part of the highly educated, e.g. a Health Sciences PhD and a Pharmacist who are interested in returning to East Africa to teach and mentor during breaks from their regular jobs. We also heard widespread interest from those with less formal schooling but a good deal of experience setting up initiatives, such as one female entrepreneur would like to return to establish sewing collectives for women in camps or another youth activist who would like to return to work on youth engagement initiatives. It should be noted that some of these individuals are already returning to Eastern Africa, largely to Somalia, for visits but also sometimes on IOM-sponsored consultancies (see also Hammond 2014). Some of these individuals who have visited Somalia would also like to do this kind of work in camps--perhaps combined with a return trip to Somalia or perhaps only to work on a camp-based project. Again, that theme of engaging with efforts in Somalia AND in camps surfaced (instead of seeing this as a camps vs. Somalia framework).

Not only were focus group participants prepared to engage with refugees through providing in-kind services, they made a compelling case for why they were ideal candidates to assist with capacity-building interventions because they had the necessary language and cultural background to be better matched with learners' needs. Overall, focus group participants were interested in models that promoted sustainability over "one-off" endeavors. They proposed that, where appropriate, programs should harness family networks to train larger groups, where one family member will transfer skills to others. Despite this interest in long-term programs, focus group participants cautioned against disregarding some kinds of one-off programs, e.g. a surgeon coming in to treat acute conditions. Even with this, however, participants acknowledged that these kinds of service provision could also be leveraged to provide continuing medical education for local professionals. Another innovative idea meant to address the needs of Somali diaspora and camp-based youth was to create a version of a Somali "Peace Corps," facilitating the return of Somalis to East Africa for a period of service. While this idea originated in a site where Somali youth unemployment is relatively low, it got a lot of support in focus group settings where youth unemployment (even for university-educated and diaspora-born Somalis) is high.

Education was a key focus area in all groups, and diaspora members expressed an interest in the following skills transfer or training: curriculum development, lesson planning, classroom management, teacher training/mentoring and pastoral support, research skills, developing cross-border frameworks (between camps and Somalia settings), school governance, quality assurance, creating learning materials (including online training), empowering and supporting leadership and engagement with youth, adult education, promoting civil rights and responsibilities in camps, and developing skills training programs specifically for women (who are household heads).

Another area of focus was related to livelihoods, especially skills training, including: micro-finance, ongoing mentoring and business support (via skype or online), diaspora-developed designs to be made in fabrication units in refugee camps and Somalia, fisheries training for future application in Somalia, providing scientific training (appropriate to infrastructure), developing education in camps (with attention to differentiated skills training for long and short-term, resettlement and repatriation).

Health was another key area of concern. Skills training initiatives linked to health that were generated by the focus groups included: health-building, psycho-social support networks and mental health services, web-based skills sharing in the form of a medical “grand rounds” style professional development for physicians (where, importantly, Somalia-based physicians should also serve as presenters), set up phone or web-based helpline, provide health care training, launch public health awareness campaigns on relevant health concerns, e.g. Ebola spread, and increase capacity to provide services to the disabled.

Another sphere that in some ways cuts across many of the suggestions related to “advice or policy initiatives”. Some of these focused directly on work in camps, but others were global in scope and involved the diaspora directly. These initiatives included: working with the diaspora and refugees to set up an advisory board to guide diaspora-engagement initiatives, working with the diaspora to raise awareness and do advocacy on behalf of refugee issues globally as well as advocacy training for refugees in camps, working with the diaspora to carry out fact-finding missions in Eastern Africa to assess on-the-ground needs before planning new initiatives, and empowering and supporting leadership with respect to gender matters and with respect to larger decision-making processes in camps. A persistent theme that cut across nearly all advice or policy initiatives was the importance of asking those who would be on the receiving end of initiatives--in this case refugees--to provide their own perspective on their needs.

Another cross-cutting area was the role of media and other digital technologies. Focus group participants shared a wealth of ideas related to the role of media, as it relates to skills transfer in topical areas. They also saw media as a tool related to intra-Somali dialogue on a number of issues, such as reconciliation, civil society formation, advocacy, anti-radicalization efforts, and, as one woman put it to, “make Somalis love their own country and stay in the region.” Overall, there was a clear message repeated at various roundtables that the media would have a big part to play in changing perceptions of and about Somalis.

Gender was also a topic that surfaced organically across all groups. Both male and female Somali participants broached the topic of gender and ways diaspora could engage with the Somali community in Eastern Africa on gender-based initiatives or to ensure that gender was incorporated into other planned efforts. Again, both male and female focus group participants conveyed that women in the diaspora were

particularly important as role models because they embodied achievement and success in a way that could be helpful in shifting social norms in camps and in Somalia.

The area of discussion that generated the most controversy, however, was the idea of diaspora engagement in building permanent infrastructures in camps. While most people were comfortable with the idea of providing funding and in-kind services to support initiatives in camps, a number of focus group participants were uncomfortable with the idea of diaspora-driven bricks and mortar infrastructure creation in camps. The reason behind this is simple: people would rather see that kind of development happening in Somalia. That said, there was a realization among many focus group participants that current conditions in Somalia do not necessarily support wide-scale return. Prolonged time spent in camps without access to necessary educational and vocational opportunities and health services could, in the long term, be harmful to Somalia's future. Put another way, an investment in refugees in camps now can be seen as a long-term investment in Somalia's future. Some forms of (possibly mobile) infrastructure, e.g. a training center, libraries, media resources were strongly supported--just not the development of long-term infrastructure in camps.

### *Barriers and Their Solutions*

An important element to consider in diaspora engagement are barriers. Throughout the paper thus far, we have considered focus group feedback on the level of diaspora interest in engaging with refugees. While not universal, most focus group members expressed an interest in engaging with, or learning more about, opportunities to engage with, refugees in some manner. Here, we consider the barriers, as well as possible solutions, to Somali diaspora engagement with refugees that surfaced during focus groups. As noted above, some of the concerns are principled and philosophical, or concerns about the ability of the UN system to be effective. Other concerns were specific and practical.

Time and finances are potential barriers. There was enough variation in individual situations, however, to suggest that making assumptions about how time and finances affect people's ability to contribute would be ill-advised. For some, time (away from jobs and other responsibilities) was a problem and for others not. For others, finances were an obstacle and they would need to be paid to contribute, but others just needed their expenses covered if they traveled to Eastern Africa. Some saw diaspora engagement working alongside UNHCR as a form of volunteerism; others saw it as a possible way to get a foot in the door for future potential paid work or as a way to "test the waters" in Eastern Africa, as they thought about their own potential return. Others saw this as extension of work they were already doing, and still others thought about combining diaspora engagement with their research and incorporating Eastern Africa as a field site. In sum, there was not clear patterning

around how members of the Somali diaspora would see time and finances as barriers, and, to the extent to which these are barriers, they are not insurmountable.

Other barriers related to concerns about travel restrictions, security concerns, and access to the camps. If diaspora engagement involved Somali diaspora return to Eastern Africa, there would be a need to put in place good mitigation measures to reassure people, to the extent possible, of safety. Brokerage, particularly with the Kenyan government, would also need to occur both to facilitate transit through Nairobi and to the camps. One somewhat counter-intuitive suggestion that surfaced was the possibility of using new travel routes through Turkey to Mogadishu, accessing the camps via Somalia. Another set of concerns were raised related to how return travel to Eastern Africa might impact them in their host countries.

While the concerns raised here merit careful consideration, there was not clear patterning across groups related to these concerns. And, in fact, many focus group participants are already traveling to Somalia. Those who had made this journey tended to offer real-life experiences to others in the focus group, which served to allay some concerns. More consideration of barriers is needed if UNHCR opts to move forward with specific diaspora engagement programming.

### **The Diaspora and GISR - Next Steps:**

UNHCR recognizes that diaspora members possess a unique understanding of the situation of Somali refugees as well as of Somalia itself. Members of the diaspora were present at the international UNHCR's ministerial pledging conference for Somalia which was held in Brussels in October 2015. While the diaspora, as a collectivity, were unable to make a pledge at the conference, it is hoped that further liaison will lead to valuable commitments from them to transfer skills, knowledge and resources to Somali refugees in the East and Horn of Africa.

GISR will continue as a forum for dialogue in the near future under the stewardship of the Regional Bureau for Africa in UNHCR.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have presented findings from a multi-sited focus-group-based study of the global Somali diaspora in North America and Europe. From this study, we conclude that:

“Diaspora engagement” is of increasing interest to policy makers and states and, accordingly, is gaining the interest of researchers. The past few years have seen a dramatic uptick in the creation of new organizations and state-based entities devoted to diaspora-related matters. Much of this interest is concentrated in the development sphere, but we see increasing interest in the humanitarian sphere as well.

With respect to the Somali case study, it is clear that substantial financial and social capital flows occur, with an estimated value of these flows at between US\$1.2 and 3 billion annually. Therefore, the question really revolves, within a context of stretched resources, around whether and how UNHCR might partner with the Somali diaspora to benefit populations of concern. The ideas of the diaspora have been explored in this paper – including establishing an advisory committee, and using a digital platform through which diaspora members could find practical opportunities, facilitated by UNHCR and partners, to transfer their skills and resources to Somali refugees in Eastern Africa.

The Somali diaspora expresses strong interest in finding new ways to engage more “sustainably” with those back home. By this they mean working collectively to create opportunities for remittance recipients to be more self-sufficient. While there is a preference for investing in Somalia itself, there is also interest in engaging with refugee populations, particularly by those who take a longer view of post-conflict reconstruction in Somalia and see investment in refugees as investment in a future Somalia.

Somali diaspora members have rich and novel ideas about how best to better the lives of refugees living in East Africa. This paper has presented a sample of those ideas, but, clearly, the best way to tap into this knowledge source is to remain in sustained conversation with members of the Somali diaspora community through various fora and platforms.

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