

Divergences and convergences between diaspora and home: the Somaliland diaspora in the UK

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The ability and inclination of diasporas to engage in the homeland depends on the degree and nature of connection between the diaspora and those that have been left or who have stayed at home (Van Hear 2014). As Van Hear argues in this collection, the disaggregation of diaspora engagement into three different spheres (the household, the ‘known community’ and the ‘imagined community’) can help to tease out these different orders of connection and disconnection, and explore some of the circumstances and conditions that generate these patterns.¹

In what follows I show how such convergences or divergences are shaped through dominant narratives about the diaspora, which are forged through government policies, or civil society initiatives, and how these narratives play out across the three different spheres outlined above. I explore these patterns drawing on my recent research on the Somali diaspora’s campaigning efforts to maintain remittance flows to the Somali regions in response to the shut-down of Somali remittance companies in 2013–14. Based on fieldwork conducted in the UK and Somaliland, this project also traces the responses and perceptions by the UK and Somaliland governments to the diaspora’s involvement.

Diaspora as community representatives

In protest at the decision by Barclays Bank in May 2013 to close the UK accounts of 250 money transfer operators (MTOs), including Dahabshiil, the largest in the Somali remittance market, Somali diaspora groups, remittance companies, NGOs and politicians



Somalilanders in London celebrate independence day on 18 May 2014.
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mounted a campaign against the bank and the UK government to find a durable solution to the issue. After several months of protest the UK government recognised the potential humanitarian effect of the account closures and agreed to set up an Action Group on Cross Border Remittances. Part of this initiative involved a UK-Somali

Safer Corridor Pilot Project, coordinated by the UK Department for International Development in consultation with various stakeholders including three Somali community representatives and the coordinator of the Somali Money Services Association (SOMSA).

Over the last several years there has been marked shift in the ways in which the UK government has engaged with the Somali diaspora; the community representatives included in the pilot project were also selected due to their involvement in organisations which have recently begun to collaborate closely with the government. This change is partly guided by a growing threat of Al-Shabaab recruits, and the Home Office's involvement of the diaspora in its various counter-terrorism and integration projects. It also coincides with the period leading up to the Somalia Conference of 2012 during which the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) sought to engage with and consult diaspora groups. 'We started to realise that there was this huge group of people, this big Somali community in the UK that was really involved back home... and that we needed to talk to them,' a representative from the FCO's Somalia Unit explained. One of the legacies of this consultation was the establishment, within the Somalia Unit, of the first and only 'diaspora outreach role' in the FCO.

The UK government's attitude towards the diaspora throughout this pilot project can be discerned by untangling the way in which the diaspora's engagement was viewed across the three different spheres. First, the involvement of the Somali diaspora through these community representatives was driven in part by a growing recognition by the government of the crucial role played by Somalis in the UK, at the level of the 'household', in sending remittance flows back home. This was also informed by various policy reports on remittances that had been commissioned preceding the crisis (e.g. Hammond et al. 2013; Hassan et al. 2013), and which pointed to the way in which remittance flows serve as a 'lifeline' to the region. Second, at the level of the 'known community', the representatives involved in the pilot were treated as the spokespersons of the Somali community in the UK. Their role was considered through the lens of a multicultural model which depoliticises the diaspora, and also conflates ethnicity, culture and notions of bounded communities (Baumann 1996). As community members they were regarded

as independent from business interests (a concern designated to SOMSA), as well as from regional and clan politics.

As noted by the FCO representative mentioned above, one of the main hurdles of the diaspora is its inability to work across regional and clan lines. Promoting unity is crucial to the government's involvement with diaspora groups; the term 'Somali diaspora' is most often used to refer to communities sharing a group identity rooted in a national home (Sinatti and Horst 2014), and thus encompassing people from across the Somali-speaking territories. Similarly to what Horst describes with reference to the attitude of donor organisations (Horst 2013), diaspora organisations are expected by the government to engage at the nationwide level to alleviate the highest levels of suffering, rather than support their clan or region of origin. The 'imagined community' envisaged here is that of a national community engaged in a peaceful and unified Somali homeland. It is not surprising therefore, that the community representatives involved in the pilot project are also members of Somali organisations that, amongst other things, emphasise pan-Somali unity.

Diaspora as skilled entrepreneurs

Researching the remittance issue in Somaliland revealed a different attitude towards the diaspora. The diaspora's political involvement around the remittance crisis was little known in the Somali regions, and the issue was framed as a problem for the money transfer sector to resolve. Part of the reason for this may be down to the ways in which the diaspora is viewed by the government. Many times when I interviewed public officials on the issue, I was given figures on the diaspora's contributions at the 'household' level, and 'known community' level, emphasising their public and private investments; the diaspora brought skills and capital to the country, I was told repeatedly. Rarely did the diaspora feature as community activists or representatives, and no one had heard of the diaspora groups in the UK who had taken part in the campaign.

This conception of the diaspora is also related to the government's recent shift towards the diaspora. In Somaliland, the election of President Axmed Maxamed Maxamuud 'Siilaanyo' – a British national – in 2012 marked a new chapter in the country's politics, and

the government's relationship with its UK-based diaspora (Hammond 2012). As an 'absent but active constituency' the diaspora had played a vital role in the election campaign and in determining the country's political landscape and leadership (Hammond 2012: 157). Around the same time the Somaliland Diaspora Agency was set up and entrusted with collaborating with government institutions and diaspora host countries, creating a database of diaspora groups, and coordinating and supporting diaspora communities. The government's attitude towards the diaspora is aptly captured by the current work of the Somaliland Diaspora Agency. Shortly after its launch, the agency organised in partnership with Somaliland Non State Actors Forum (SONSAF) the first meeting for diaspora communities in Somaliland entitled 'Strengthening the Role of Diaspora in Economic Growth and Development'. The agency is currently developing a National Diaspora Policy and considering the implementation of a 'diaspora fundraising for development account', which involves a \$1 tax on each remittance transaction. For the government, the diaspora are key economic and political players, who contribute not to an imagined Somali homeland, but to the building of the Somaliland nation-state.

In recent years African diasporas have emerged as the new 'agents of change' within development mantra (Turner and Kleist 2013). An emphasis on bottom-up approaches coupled with a depoliticisation and individualisation of development efforts has led governments, NGOs and civil society groups to celebrate diaspora for their remittance contributions, skills and knowledge transfers (Turner and Kleist 2013: 192). Following this trend, governments in both home and host countries have sought to work with diasporas in various ways, as illustrated by the examples presented above.

As we have seen, these efforts have taken different forms in the diaspora and the homeland, which have shaped and reinforced divergent understandings of what 'diaspora engagement' and 'agent of change' entails. In Somaliland, where many from the diaspora have returned to work in politics or set up their own businesses, the government approach the diaspora as skilled entrepreneurs and drivers of economic and political change. In the UK, the diaspora is viewed through the lens of a unified, depoliticised community, which contributes to the development of the homeland.

Disaggregating spheres of engagement has helped unpack and reveal contrasting narratives of diaspora engagement in the host and home countries. These narratives are important because they are shaped by, but also shape, the nature of diaspora activities in both settings. Analysing these dominant notions of diaspora engagement, therefore, is crucial to understanding the conditions and circumstances which generate connections and disconnections between those in the diaspora and those at home. □

Endnotes

1. See Van Hear (this collection pp. 32–35) for the conceptual framework underlying this contribution, and Van Hear and Liberatore (this collection pp. 211–216) for another empirical case deploying a similar approach.

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