

# **NEW ISSUES IN REFUGEE RESEARCH**

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**Connected lives:  
Somalis in Minneapolis, family responsibilities and  
the migration dreams of relatives**

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## **Introduction**

Somalis have migrated and dispersed globally for centuries, but especially since the civil war, they can be found in almost every country. A lot of research has been done on Somalis across the world, focusing on stayees, Internally Displaced People (IDPs), returnees, urban refugees, refugees in regional camps and resettled refugees. Yet there are many connections between the lives and livelihoods of these people in different positions. As such, a more integrated approach that studies their connectedness from the point of view of Somalis in different places is vital; both for an increased understanding of their situation as well as in order to improve the policies that affect their lives.

Research has shown how transnational networks and flows of remittances, goods and information are essential for the livelihoods of Somalis in the Dadaab refugee camps of Kenya (Horst 2003). Since an important part of these exchanges take place between the camps and resettlement countries, the question rises how resettled Somalis view these exchanges. In order to understand this, I developed a post-doc research proposal on the position of Somalis in the USA, and more specifically Minneapolis, and the Netherlands, for which research is ongoing.

The focus is on three types of connections. In the first place, what kind of *material assistance* is provided, what are the capacities and constraints that Somalis in the West face in this respect, and does their current position change their willingness to remit (see also Al-Ali et al. 2001)? Secondly, what *information exchanges* take place, and how does this affect images of lives in the West and the migration dreams that are termed ‘buufis’ in Kenya? Also, does the exchange of such information lead to shared decision making on livelihood strategies in general and migration options in particular by family members, across borders? And thirdly, what *migration processes* are taking place, related to historical patterns as well as current opportunities?

This paper will first outline the importance of transnational networks for the survival of Somali refugees in Kenyan refugee camps, discussing both remittance sending and migration dreams. Then, some first impressions will be presented of life in Minneapolis, where the largest Somali community in the USA currently can be found, based on preliminary fieldwork.

## **Somali survival in Dadaab**

The Dadaab refugee camps are situated in Kenya’s Northeastern Province, a vast stretch of semi-arid land that has been the object of dispute between Kenya and Somalia since independence. The area is unsuitable for agricultural production and is mainly occupied by Kenyan Somali pastoralists. The province has a very poor infrastructure and on top of that is insecure due to frequent attacks by *shifto*; Somali ‘bandits’ (Crisp 1999).

Approximately 120,000 refugees are estimated to be living in the Dadaab area. The majority of these refugees are from Somalia, most of them originated from the regions of ‘Jubadda Hoose’ and ‘Shabeellaha Hoose’ the lowlands of the two main rivers in South Somalia. There are also smaller groups of refugees from Ethiopia, Sudan,

Uganda and a few individuals from Zaire. Inside the camps, UNHCR and various international NGOs provide assistance to the refugees. During my stay in the camps, this assistance often consisted only of three kilograms of maize per person per fifteen days (approximately 800 Kcal per day); though the refugees were supposed to get three kilograms of maize, three kilograms of wheat flour and a cup of oil per person. And even this last diet, which is quite common for African refugees, is insufficient not only in caloric terms but also in terms of micronutrient content.

Jobs and other livelihood opportunities are very limited in the area. The activities of NGOs in Dadaab provide over 2,000 jobs, of which 24 go to expatriates and 383 to Kenyans (Montclos and Kagwanja 2000: 218)<sup>1</sup>. Refugees are employed in a variety of jobs with different levels of responsibility, but no matter the weight of their position, the payment continues to be no more than an incentive, varying between 22 and 40 euros a month. Such incentives do not correspond to salaries paid to Kenyans for the same job, because it is said that in that case, refugees would require a work permit from the Kenyan authorities (Verdirame 1999: 66). Since relatively only few incentive jobs are available, the large majority of people cannot benefit from being on an agency's payroll. Nevertheless, most families do have a source of income to supplement the rations, however small it is.

But the search for a livelihood is complicated by two factors. Firstly, the Somali refugees are forced into the 'informal sector', because their economic activities are considered 'illegal', given the fact that they are not granted work permits. This reality is contrary to Articles 17 and 18 of the 1951 Convention, which provide that refugees should be allowed to engage in wage-earning employment and in agriculture, industry, handicrafts and commerce. They should also be allowed to establish commercial and industrial companies (Verdirame 1999: 69). Secondly, their location in the Dadaab camps complicates the attempts of the Somali refugees to secure a livelihood. It is common for refugee populations to be concentrated in camps that are located in ecologically marginal areas. This has negative consequences for their welfare because refugees usually rely heavily on natural resources to meet their basic livelihood needs (Wilson 1992: 229-30).

CARE and other NGOs have tried to promote income-generating activities like mat and basket weaving, soap production and shoe making, but these projects have a rather limited impact. According to Wilson (1992: 232), it is probably more effective to support refugees' own institutions. One way of doing this is through providing small loans and it seems that this has indeed assisted refugees in Dadaab. From August 1997, CARE provided cash and materials for small-scale refugee initiatives that enabled groups of refugees to start up a small business or craft activity.

Within the community itself, 'money-go-round' systems exist, mainly among women, which similarly provide an individual with enough money to invest in any income-gaining activity. Some of the income-generating activities that the women undertake are baking bread or *sambusa* to sell in the market, or starting a small business. The business competition with local Somalis is intense, however, and many of the refugees have adapted to a market of less well-off customers by selling goods in

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<sup>1</sup> Montclos does not take into account, however, that although specific jobs are clearly earmarked either for locals or for refugees, quite a number of Kenyan Somalis manage to get 'incentive' jobs that were meant for refugees.

smaller quantities such as individual packets of detergent and single tea bags and cigarettes (Montclos and Kagwanja 2000: 214).

There are also income-generating activities that do not need any form of financial investment at all. Some families send their young daughters to work as maids for others, which earns them about three euros a month. Bantu women go to fetch water for wealthier Somali families and Bantu men construct houses or pit latrines for the Somali refugees. The Bantu residents in Hagadera at times work as casual labourers, at a distance of ten to fifteen kilometres from the camp. Other Somalis may instead be engaged in herding activities for those who own cattle.

The returns on such kind of labour are typically low, but the precarious situation of the refugees demands that they engage in these activities (Wilson 1992: 228). Some women go into the area surrounding the camps to collect firewood for their own consumption or for sale, although this brings very little profit and involves great risks. *Shifto* operate in the area and may rape these women during firewood collection, making it one of the riskiest income-generating activities.

#### *Xawilaad: the importance of remittances*

Knowing that international assistance is highly insufficient in Dadaab and regional livelihood opportunities are limited, the question remains how the refugees are able to survive there. In a recent study in Dadaab, it was found that the main determinant of wealth in the camps is a household's connections (CASA Consulting 2001: 320). Those refugees who are 'well-connected' have access to remittances from outside Kenya, to relatives who have an incentive job or are involved in extensive trade, or to well-off Kenyan Somalis.

According to the study, these wealthier households assist their relatives in earning an income and increasing their wealth, particularly through giving them credit to operate a small business. Households without access to wealthier people on the other hand, remain poor. Being interested in similar issues, I worked with participatory matrices to learn in which situations refugees needed assistance from others, and whom they would ask for that assistance (see table below).

After they had listed the occasions on which money could be requested and from whom, I proceeded by asking the participants to look at each occasion, for example marriage or debt, and indicate the three most likely groups of people or institutions to ask assistance from. The exercise confirmed that kinship plays a very important role in providing assistance, though relatives are not the only people that Somalis can fall back on in times of need.

The remittances sent by Somali refugees in western countries through the *xawilaad* are very important for the livelihoods of refugees in Dadaab. Often, the most successful migrant businesses arise in the very interstices created by transnationalism; for example in shipping and cargo companies, import and export firms, labour contractors and money transfer houses (Glick Schiller et al. 1995: 55).

**Table : Patterns of assistance in Dadaab (Horst 2003)**

From whom / Occasion	Neighbours	Clan	Religious Institutes	NGOs	Relatives <sup>2</sup>	Money Lenders
Marriage	1	3			2	
Death	2	3			1	
Robbery	3	1			2	
Travel		1	2		3	
Education			1	3	2	
Communication		2			3	1
<i>Diya</i>		3	1		2	
Sickness	1			3	2	
Debt		3	1		2	
No ration card	2	1			3	
Total	9	17	5	6	22	1

The same applies to the establishment of the *xawilaad* companies by Somalis. *Xawil* is a Somali word derived from Arabic meaning transfer; usually of money or responsibilities. The *xawilaad* is an informal system of value transfer that operates in almost every part of the world (Horst and Van Hear 2002). It is run by Somalis and mainly used by Somalis; both for remittance sending and business transactions. Since the system overwhelmingly relies on telecommunications, these companies have invested heavily in telephones, mobile radio systems, computer networks and even satellite telecommunication facilities (see e.g. Montclos and Kagwanja 2000: 216; Gundel 2003: 246). Whereas transnational links between Somalis have enabled the success of the *xawilaad*, at the same time these businesses facilitate the deepening of transnational relations.

Remittances have, for decades, played a crucial part in the Somali economy, but the sheer size of the current diaspora combined with recent technological developments in the field of telecommunications and the collapse of the Somali formal economy, have added weight to their importance. In Dadaab, remittances are both essential in enabling basic survival as well as in dealing with contingency situations. At the same time, they are contributing to development in the area. Quite a number of refugees receive remittances from Europe, Australia, Canada and especially the USA.

Based on anthropological data, I estimated that on average, at least ten to fifteen percent of the population in the camps benefited directly from the *xawilaad*. One group of people receives remittances only occasionally, mostly when they ask for it in response to a contingency. They receive an amount of roughly two hundred to five hundred dollars once, twice or maximally five times a year. The frequency depends on the number of relatives who stay overseas, their willingness and ability to send money and the kind of situation that money is needed for. Yunis Ahmed for example, had worked for the agencies as teacher and translator on a number of short-term

<sup>2</sup> Inside and outside the camps. The difference between clan members and relatives is of course not absolute, as clan members are always related and all relatives from father's side are also clan members. The distinction is based on the closeness of the kinship and whether or not it is still traceable.

assignments<sup>3</sup>. He lived in the camp with his aged mother, close to the house where his brother and wife lived. The brother was having mental problems that were aggravated to the point where he became a danger to his wife, threatening to kill her. Yunis tried to do whatever was in his power, even giving up his teaching position to keep an eye on the family. He also went to the local hospital for assistance but was told that they could do nothing for his brother.

When matters got out of hand he contacted a cousin in Nairobi who passed the message to their relatives in different places around the world, collecting one hundred dollars from one family, three thousand shillings from another, and so on. Eventually, he was able to send a total amount of six hundred dollars, which Yunis used to take his brother for treatment to Nairobi.

Besides the group of people who receive occasional sums, whether asked for or not, there is a group that receives regular (mostly monthly) remittances. The maximum amount that refugees receive is about two hundred dollars, whereas most people receive monthly allowances of fifty or one hundred dollars. In Dadaab, these are considerable amounts to spend and remittances hardly stay within the nuclear family. They are spread and benefit a much wider group of people, thus enabling the subsistence of many refugees who could not have survived otherwise in the region, considering current levels of humanitarian aid provision.

Beyond helping Somalis to survive, the remittances transferred give people a choice. The money can be invested in business, it might be used to assist others or for educational purposes. The recipient can decide to use it to move: away from insecure areas, towards economic opportunities, towards a better life or family members. These resources give refugees in difficult conditions the capacity to assist themselves, and others. They also lead to development initiatives, for example by improving training opportunities in the region. A refugee in Hagadera used the money received from a cousin in Canada to buy computers and provided computer training in the market. Unfortunately, very recently the whole market burned down, which indicates how fragile such investments may be if the larger political-economic structures remain unchanged.

The operations of *taar* and *xawilaad* not only bring benefits to the camps but also disadvantages. If the refugees hope or expect to receive remittances from their close or distant relatives overseas, they may spend scarce resources trying to contact them. Having hopes for a better future is very important in an opportunity-scarce place like Dadaab, but if these hopes are false and lead to risky investments, they may at the same time be quite damaging.

Even those refugees without relatives overseas may be affected, because of the improved livelihoods they can observe from others. As Yasiin Hussein pointed out in a workshop in Dagahaley: 'Most people do not benefit from the *xawilaad* because only a small number of the refugees have relatives overseas and receive remittances. In fact, the *xawilaad* is bad because it increases inequality amongst the refugees in the camps. It frustrates those who do not get assistance from outside'. This is an effect of remittance sending that has been observed in other situations as well. Russell (1986)

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<sup>3</sup> All names of those who participated in the research are pseudonyms, so as to respect the privacy of informants.

for example mentions an increase in social and economic tensions and rifts between households receiving and those not receiving remittances. However, at the same time, I observed that these effects were mitigated in Dadaab by the fact that many people beyond the receiver alone benefit from remittance sending. Indirect beneficiaries include, for example, relatives and neighbours of those receiving remittances, who are usually assisted in money or kind, *xawilaad* owners and workers, business people and those employed as maids or labourers by the refugees who receive money.

One of the most important benefits that the *xawilaad* system has brought to the refugee camps is that it has improved social security. In times of contingency, at least a section of the camp population has relatives in the West to call upon. Those who receive regular remittances are also more easily given credit by businesspeople when necessary.

On the other hand, according to some, this can lead to an attitude of dependency. Since it is easy to take things on credit, patterns of expenditure change. A related problem is that those receiving remittances are even said to stop working for their daily bread (Russell 1986). This may be caused by the fact that they know their relatives in the West will provide for them, but the reason may also be that they start 'suffering' from *buufis*. Some of the refugees who see the flows of money coming into the camps want to go to the source of that money in order to live an independent life in freedom.

#### *Migration dreams: buufis*

During my stay in the camps, I learned about and was fascinated by the existence of *buufis* amongst the refugees. *Buufi* means 'to blow into or to inflate' (Zorc and Osman 1993). In Dadaab, whereas *buufis* is mostly used to refer to someone's hope, longing, desire or dream to go for resettlement, it is also applied in a number of other, closely related, ways. The Somali refugees in the camps use it in three other meanings: resettlement itself, the people who long to go overseas and the madness that at times occurs when the dream to go overseas is shattered.

One of the reasons why many Somali refugees are suffering from *buufis*, is related simply to the poor conditions of their life in the camps. A lady explained: 'When the refugees came to Dadaab, they soon realized that life in this area is very problematic. Basic necessities like food, water, education and health care were missing, and the refugees faced insecurity and found their movements restricted. That is when they started to look for alternatives, and *buufis* developed. Every distribution, I cry when I wait for my ration and see how the respected *guddoomiyaasha* and religious leaders of Somalia are standing in line. I weep when I witness how a man cannot even consider a pregnant woman, but pushes her aside to be first in line'. I was told how over the years *buufis* has increased, since the situation in the camps is getting worse and a solution to the war in Somalia seems far.

Another factor that makes the Somali refugees dream of resettlement, is their need for peace and security. There is no real hope for a speedy solution to their plight, as the refugees have no prospect of being allowed to remain and settle in Kenya, whereas lasting peace in Somalia seems unlikely in the near future (Crisp 1999: 22). According to some, the level of *buufis* was directly related to the state of security in

the camps and in Somalia. During the peace negotiations in Djibouti I was told how *buufis* was reducing in the camps, since the Somali refugees were hoping for peace in Somalia.

At the same time, feelings of insecurity in Dadaab may rise as a consequence of clan fighting or *shifto* activities, increasing the wish to go elsewhere. When Abukar Warsame was asked what was the first time he thought of resettlement, he replied: 'I thought of it first here in Hagadera, when bandits came to the blocks at night; killing an old man and raping and torturing a virgin lady. Some days later, five of them came to my own block and went out with a heavy load on their backs; having robbed my neighbours. Since I have recently married, fear and worry have multiplied in me because if bandits attempt to rape my wife in my presence, I will definitely defend her, which may be my death. On top of that, I do not want to lose my children's future, though mine has already been lost'.

The refugees in Dadaab do not only want to migrate in order to leave their harsh living conditions behind, but also because they anticipate certain opportunities and conditions elsewhere. As Collinson (1999: 5) states, the global communications revolution and the expansion of global electronic mass media and global mass marketing might encourage more people to move from the South to the North. The media produce and disseminate information and images about the world, providing large and complex repertoires of representation and narrative.

According to some authors, this has led to a fundamental change in the nature of imaginations over the past decades. Images of the lives of others and a rich, ever-changing store of possible lives to be lived are presented (Appadurai 1986). The lines between the realistic and the fictional are blurred; especially for those far from the reality described. Besides the media, other important sources of imagination are 'contacts with, news of and rumours about others in one's social neighbourhood who have become inhabitants of these faraway worlds' (Appadurai 1991: 197-8).

Being exposed to these two sources of information, more people in more parts of the world see their lives through the prisms of the lives of others. This is not necessarily a positive observation, implying more happiness or more choices to more people around the world. Rather, inequality has become more obvious and ordinary lives are tied up with images, ideas and opportunities from elsewhere. This may stimulate agency, by allowing people to consider migration; but it may also lead to many frustrations, when dreams cannot be realized or their accomplishment does not bring the solution hoped for.

### **Impressions from Minneapolis**

It is clear from the above that transnational links with relatives in resettlement countries are vital for the ability of Somalis to cope with their refugee lives in the camps. Yet, a number of remarks made by Somalis in the diaspora gave me the impression that the transnationality of their lives and livelihoods was not always easy for them. At times, there seemed to be a clash between their individual hopes and dreams and the communal obligations they faced and it was not always easy to deal with that clash. As such, Al-Ali's concept of 'forced transnationalism' (Al-Ali 2001:

115) is a very interesting aspect of studying transnational networks from the perspectives of Somalis in the West.

The views of Somalis of different age and gender are vital in this respect, as research in Dadaab indicated possible divergence in views of women versus men and older versus younger people. This also relates to the potential of transnational communities as 'durable solutions' to protracted refugee situations, as Van Hear (2002) suggests. In order to evaluate whether transnational networks can provide such durable solutions by contributing to development and peace processes in the Horn, it is important to study the level of endurance of these networks, particularly as they last or do not last across generations (Portes et al. 1999).

I conducted research amongst Somalis in and around Minneapolis, Minnesota to answer these and related questions. This paper will first provide background information on the Somali community in Minnesota, after which issues of remittance sending and migration dreams versus realities will be discussed.

### *The Somali Community in Minnesota*

Minnesota is amongst the top destinations for Somalis, and in recent years, Minneapolis is said to host the largest number of Somalis in the US. The problem however is that there are no precise figures on the Somali population here or anywhere else. One of the difficulties encountered in identifying exact numbers is that Somalis who reside outside their home country fall under several statistical categories. There are those who migrated before the war, for education, job opportunities and a number of other reasons; who hold various types of residence permits or are now nationals of their new country. Then, there are those who fled after the war; some of whom are still registered as asylum seekers, others who hold temporary permits, others with full refugee status and yet others who are nationals. On top of all this, there is a grey mass of unregistered and illegal migrants. As a consequence, estimates of exact numbers vary widely.

The 2000 Census data for the state of Minnesota indicated that 11,164 Somalis live in Minnesota; 0,2 percent of the total state population (United States Census 2000). By far the highest concentration can be found in the 'Twin Cities' Minneapolis and Saint Paul, but small towns like Rochester, Marshall and Owatanna also attracted considerable numbers in recent years. It is likely that official census figures greatly underestimate actual numbers, as many extended Somali families live in one house with larger numbers than allowed, so they underreport their numbers. Public school enrolment and welfare statistics suggest a range of 15,000 to 30,000 Somalis in Minnesota; a number that is still growing.

Thus, it is indeed likely that the Somali community in Minneapolis is larger than the one in Columbus, Ohio and Seattle, San Diego; other towns with major concentrations of Somalis. It is the second largest immigrant community in the city, after the Hmong, who have been in Minnesota since the 70s and 80s. Somalis on the other hand, arrived mainly in the mid to late 90s (Layman and Basnyat 2003). In 1994 and 1995, larger groups of Somalis (amongst whom mainly Benadiri) were officially resettled to Minneapolis. The total number of officially resettled Somalis is estimated at

approximately 6,000. But the large majority of Somalis currently residing in Minneapolis, at least sixty percent, came from other states (Mattessich 2000).

Secondary movement within the US largely took place in recent years, from 1998 – 1999 onwards. When asked for the reason for the steady increase of the Somali population in Minneapolis, a number of factors are usually mentioned. Minnesota has a healthy economy with low unemployment rates, so job opportunities are quite good. The Twin Cities were in fact founded by business entrepreneurs from New England as a moneymaking venture, attracting waves of immigrants from early ages (Adams and Van Drasek 1993: 56).

Somalis work there in various low-skilled jobs that require little knowledge of English and often give the possibility of working many over-hours. Such jobs include work in assembly plants, meat factories, especially many turkey plants in the region, as security guards, parking attendants, cleaners and taxi drivers. Furthermore, higher educated Somalis with excellent English skills work inter alia as teachers, social workers, lawyers, managers, professors or doctors.

A second reason mentioned for the mass migration to Minneapolis is its more open, welcoming climate towards migrants and better social welfare system in general, although some changes may be occurring in this respect. Minnesota is a state with a large Scandinavian originated population, and this translates itself in better social security arrangements and services provided for example in education and health care. Its history of dealing with large groups of migrants also assists in the creation of a welcoming attitude.

A further very important reason for the migration flows is the fact that the word about the virtues of Minnesota spread and a Somali community established itself there. A parallel economy was created that enables Somalis nowadays to do everything ‘the Somali way’: there are Somali shops, malls, NGOs, travel agents, hairdressers, restaurants, Quranic schools, mosques etc. For businessmen and –women, providing goods and services to the now well-established Somali community in the area may be a good alternative or addition to having a regular job. And as the community grows, more Somalis move to Minnesota to be near their families.

Many choose to live in the Twin Cities, because of the urban setting and Somali economy available. Others stay in small towns with large concentrations of Somalis, because life is cheaper there and the environment is more safe and less threatening e.g. in terms of upbringing of the children. American factories in these towns with large percentages of Somalis even provide facilities like Somali translators and bi-lingual notices, thus enabling non-English speakers to work there without difficulties.

So in short, Somalis live in Minnesota because of the opportunities and services provided there, the fact that it is a welcoming and relatively safe place to live in and because of the large Somali community there. Yet, how comfortable are they really? In order to answer this question, it is vital to understand the heterogeneity of the population. There are students, young men and women in their twenties who often came to the US alone though assisted by (distant) relatives and friends. Many have at least one but more often two or even three jobs besides their studies and / or operate a business to earn money to send back home. While working very hard, most of them are settling well in town and live a rather comfortable life. There are single mothers

with three to six children, who may not speak English and nowadays have to work twenty hours and go to school twenty hours in order to be eligible for well-fare that hardly provides them with sufficient financial means to sustain their family.

Most of the lower income group in Minneapolis live in the Riverside-Cedar area, in large, run-down flats with cheap rents that are mainly occupied by Somalis. Others, like professionals or successful businessmen and –women, are clearly doing very well and live in the suburbs in nicely decorated mansions, driving comfortable family cars. Then, I also met men and women working in poultry factories in small Minnesota towns, single or with families that were left behind in the region or came with them. Most of these men and women spoke highly insufficient English for other types of jobs and often also did not have the required education. They worked many over-hours, doing very filthy jobs, and lived extremely sober lives in empty flats.

### *Remittance sending*

Age, gender, education, English proficiency, length of stay, type of employment, social network and number of dependants were all vital factors in determining whether someone was successful. In general, only a small percentage of Somali professionals and top businessmen formed a highly successful elite; then, a reasonably large middle class was formed by social workers, teachers, university students etc.; the group of (non-English speaking) Somalis with low-skilled jobs leading sober lives was similar in size; and finally, a small percentage of the Somali community, mainly consisting of single mothers and some elderly without relatives, were really struggling to make ends meet. Yet, financially stable or not, almost all Somalis in Minneapolis at least sent some money to their relatives left behind. Dahabo Abdulahi, a single mother of four, works at the food shelf for needy people for 20 hours a week and goes to adult High School for 20 hours, receiving social welfare.

She told me: ‘We have to send. We know that life in Somalia and Kenya and those regions is very difficult. So if my mother calls and tells me that she does not have food on the table that night, I will have to send something. I know their difficulties. But it is not easy for me, having four daughters to take care of. At times, I send 50 dollars, at times 100, at times nothing; it depends on the expenses I had that month’.

Others are able to send much more, with amounts ranging from 200 up to even 1,000 dollars a month; larger amounts being sent to a number of families. Sending large amounts of money home does not necessarily indicate the wealth of the sender. In particular many of those who send very high amounts seem to be working young men and women whose main aim it is to provide an income for their family members left behind. One case that provides good insight into this is a small village close to Minneapolis, where a large group of Somalis had migrated to work in a turkey factory.

A tour through the factory gave an impression of the monotone and filthy jobs people had. Afterwards, we visited a number of men who worked there at their home; an empty apartment (‘our table and chairs are in the laundry’) decorated with a huge flag of Somalia. I asked them about remittances, and they all informed me they sent 400 dollars home monthly, volunteering to tell me that women usually sent double that amount, because they worked over-hours and did not spend money like men did.

Hassan Aden said in this respect: 'I thought about working over-hours, but whether I have 1,000 or 400 in my pocket, I will send it anyway. So I might as well send the 400 and not over-work myself'.

I wanted to know whether people 'back home' knew where the money came from. Hassan told me that he had visited relatives in Kenya recently, telling them he sold mobiles and cars for a living. The contrast between the image being created and the actual life these people lived to me was very shocking. I imagined that on the one hand they created dreams to deal with reality and add to their status as successful migrants, but on the other hand these dreams made the reality of life in 'turkey town' much more unbearable.

This example illustrates some of the complexities of remittance sending for Somalis in the diaspora. Their life - and livelihood choices are to a certain extent determined by the responsibilities they have towards relatives elsewhere. At times, one may get the impression that this transnationalism is indeed 'forced', with people having no option but to send to those left behind in far worse circumstances. Yet, at the same time fulfilling family obligations is not only a matter of having no option, but it is also related to the status acquired when assisting others. I will provide some more examples to illustrate these points.

Somalis in Minneapolis make decisions about their lives that are not only determined by local factors, but also by transnational ones. Khadija Osman for example explains how the 150 dollars she sends to her brother in Kakuma refugee camp and the 150 she sends to relatives in Somalia are part of her monthly bill and she always pays them before even paying the rent: 'If I cannot pay the rent, I will still manage. But if those people do not get the money I send them, life will be too tough for them'. Besides affecting patterns of expenditure, family obligations affect migration decisions.

I met quite a number of Somalis who had moved from the Netherlands, and one of the reasons they mentioned for their migration was the difficulty of sending remittances from the Netherlands<sup>4</sup>. Abdulkadir Warsame told me that he had lived in the Netherlands from 1992 to 1998, and only in the last years was he able to send a small amount of money to his relatives in Bosaso occasionally. Others rather indicate how family responsibilities restricted their movements: even if they wanted to, they could not go back to some of the African cities they lived before. Rashid Kasim told me: 'I cannot go back to Cairo, because my family is there and I have to take care of them. No matter how difficult life may be here, at least I can provide for my family. In Cairo, I could not send them anything, now I send money to my sister in Cairo and my parents and siblings in Somalia every month'.

Not only do transnational responsibilities determine the migration choices that Somalis in Minneapolis (can) make, but they also influence their lives in other ways. A friend to Abdulkadir Warsame sends 500 dollars to the Kenyan refugee camps and 200 to relatives in Somalia every month. He told him that as long as he has that responsibility, he cannot marry. Personally, Abdulkadir does not completely agree with that decision: 'Some people give their life to their family; they always work and

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<sup>4</sup> Somalis also move from the Netherlands and Denmark to the UK in very large numbers, because of the large Somali community in the UK and because of their inability to send remittances from the Netherlands and Denmark (see also Bang Nielsen 2004; Reek and Hussein 2003).

send everything to their relatives back home. But you do not need to give all your life, you should also think of your own options'. Nevertheless, many would agree that marriage does complicate dealing with family responsibilities. Dhofa Abdi told me that a very important condition for marriage would be that her husband would agree for her to continue working so that she can keep sending money to her relatives: 'A number of my relatives are simply dependent on me, so even if I get married I will remain responsible for those back home. Many of my friends stopped working after getting married and they just sit at home.

The problem is that the husband has to provide an income for them and maybe children, as well as for his family. He has to work many extra hours in order to pay for everything. If her family calls and needs assistance, she will want them to receive money as well and this might lead to conflicts. Also, she will ask him what he sends to her family in comparison to what he sends to his family<sup>5</sup>. Her family will put their stresses on her life, and the husband will never be able to provide for all these people. People get divorced over these issues, and that is why I would really want to continue working'.

While family obligations thus can cause great pressures in the personal lives of Somalis in Minneapolis, many feel that this is not sufficiently understood or appreciated by their relatives. Whereas almost all Somalis send monthly or at least occasional remittances, many complain about the way in which relatives often simply expect or even demand to be assisted. Yusuf Abdinoor arrived in Minneapolis only one year ago. He is very disappointed with his inability to find an appropriate job, preferably as a teacher. Still, he sends 500 dollars every month to his wife and children in Egypt. Their expenses are high because the children are going to a private school there. Then, he has thirteen siblings, with one sister in Saudi-Arabia, one in Djibouti and a brother in Yemen. All others live in Somalia, and depend on the remittances sent by his brother, who is a doctor in Yemen, and himself.

Every other month, he sends the families of his three bigger brothers as well as his stepmother with five younger brothers 150 to 200 dollars, bringing the total amount to about 1,000 dollars a month. Yet, as Yusuf says, 'I cannot assist all of them all the time, and they do not understand. They will comment "he is gone, he is in America now", which means that I no longer care for them. They do not understand my position'. Moxamed Hussein similarly sighs: 'I wish I was alone. I have worked all my life to assist others, and they are never satisfied. Everybody thinks that life is good here, and that I am rich. A friend of mine just called and asked for 200 dollars. I said that I did not have that money right now but will try my best to send it. But they find it hard to believe I do not just have that money'.

A further frustration in some instances is caused by the fact that remittances do not appear to be used wisely and may cause dependency<sup>6</sup>. Remittances are mainly sent to families and used for daily survival. At times, the money can be used to start up a small business or send people to school, but others use it to buy *qat* or stop working altogether because of remittances sent. Dhofa Abdi told me how she recently went to Mudug to visit her relatives, and stopped sending 800 dollars a month after that. Now,

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<sup>5</sup> That this is a very common scene is proved by similar dialogues in the Somali theatre play 'Qaabyo'.

<sup>6</sup> See for a analysis of the 'dependency syndrome' related to international humanitarian aid and remittance sending Horst (2003: 251-3).

she only sends 200 dollars to her father, who is taking care of her epileptic brother, and 200 dollars to a cousin of her father who is a sheikh: 'I told him he can use 50 dollars for himself, but should make sure that the 150 remaining is spent on the children of my brother. I used to send that money to the ex-wife of my brother, but realized the lady is a spender. Some of the children did not even have a bed to sleep in, so I bought them beds while I was there and no longer send the money through their mother. Also, I no longer send money to some of my brothers. The two who are staying with their families in the country side, near my father, are okay, but the three who stay in Galgacayo chew *qat* and leave their wives behind. I used to be very sensitive when they call and work on my conscience, saying their condition is so bad. But at least since I went, feelings of guilt have really reduced: I have seen their life, and it is better than mine in many ways. They do not work hard like me, having many responsibilities. The problem is that they have become dependent on the money I sent. What if I am no longer around, or am no longer able? I asked them what they did with all the money I had sent them throughout the years. Where did it go? They could not answer me'.

### *Migration patterns from and to Minneapolis*

In Minneapolis, the lives of Somalis are intertwined across borders, with Somalis there having many options of keeping in touch with relatives and friends, engaging in various social, economic and information-sharing ties. At the same time, the level of actual physical mobility as well as discussions or dreams about migration amongst Somalis is very high. The *buufis* I observed in Dadaab is part of a much wider pattern, both in geographical and historical terms, where migration plays a vital role in Somali lives and livelihoods (see also Horst 2003: 231-3).

In this respect, travel documents are very valuable possessions for Somalis. Since Somalia is no longer a functioning nation-state and Somali documents are not accepted for travelling, Somalis are restrained in their movements practically. The main goal to be reached while living in the USA or Europe for a number of years, is to obtain travel documents, preferably those that do not need extra visas for most countries. Once such a document has been obtained, free travel becomes possible and shifts in residence can also be envisioned. At the same time, obtaining a passport provides the holder with more rights to assist others to migrate, for example through family reunion programs.

Very complex patterns of back and forth migration from and to Minneapolis in all directions, for short-term and long-term stay, can be discerned. Movements include family visits during weddings and holidays, as well as gatherings for religious occasions like Idh. During these instances, Somalis move to and from Minneapolis for shorter periods to be together with relatives and friends.

This may also lead to longer-term settlement, as in the case of Abdulkadir Warsame, who visited his brother in Rochester, Minnesota on his Dutch passport: 'Life seemed very ok here, with my brother operating his own grocery shop. In the Netherlands, Somalis live more spread-out and setting up a business is very hard. Besides, many are unemployed and receive welfare. I realized it is easy to find a job in the US, even if you do not speak English. So I went back to the Netherlands only to wait for an opportunity to move to the USA. In 2000, I was given a chance to go'. But like other

‘Dutch Somalis’, Abdulkadir does maintain a link with the Netherlands, occasionally visiting his relatives and friends there. And in fact, it is not uncommon for many Somalis to travel such great distances rather frequently. Khadija Osman provides a very clear, though not unusual, example of that. In 2004, she plans to go to Kenya for two weeks, as her mother will come to Nairobi from Somalia for an eye operation. Then, over the summer holiday, she will take her 8-year old daughter on a two-months tour through countries in Europe where she has relatives. She will visit her sisters in Stockholm and Copenhagen, as well as an uncle in London, where she has been a number of times before.

While the majority of Somalis have lived in another state before coming to Minnesota, some even have lived in three or four other states before ending up there. Even within Minneapolis, it is not uncommon for Somalis to move frequently. As Omar Shire semi-jokingly explained to me: ‘We do not have beds in our house, because we move so much. I now live in Minneapolis for two years, and have moved three times already’.

Over the last couple of years, there has also been quite a lot movement between places in Canada and the Minnesota area. Originally, Toronto was a city with a very high population of Somalis, but many of them moved to Minneapolis when a large community established itself there and it seemed job opportunities and services were better. When the US economy went down, a number of them returned to Canada. Others are engaged in transnational households, where parts of the family live in Minneapolis and parts in Toronto<sup>7</sup>. The husband for example works in Minneapolis, while his wife and children stay in Canada because of the better social security system available.

Rashid Kasim, who operates a travel business while his friend works at a xawilaad office, informed me that most of the flights he books for his clients are between Minneapolis and Toronto as well as Columbus, Ohio. Furthermore, a lot of money is being transferred to Toronto each month. There is still a very strong connection between Toronto and those who moved to Minneapolis from there. He tells me: ‘People like to have two or more bases, as they do not have a feeling of complete security. They want to have a chance to leave’.

All these examples and many more, confirm that Somalis can be described as transnational nomads, like earlier research suggested (Horst 2003). As Aden Yusuf, who now lives in the Washington D.C. with his family, remarked in support of this thesis, ‘Somalis treat the US – Canadian border the same as they would treat the Ethiopian – Somali border: “If it rains better today, we move there”. They are always on the move and changing their residency and they often do not like to be constrained by rules and regulations’.

When I use the term transnational nomads, I refer to a nomadic way of life rather than nomadism in the strict sense of a livelihood. What I call the Somali ‘nomadic heritage’ includes a mentality of looking for greener pastures, a strong social network that entails the obligation to assist each other in surviving, and risk-reduction through strategically dispersing investments in family members and activities. In my opinion,

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<sup>7</sup> Research has indicated that at least 18 percent of married Somalis in the Twin Cities are geographically separated from their spouse (Mattessich 2000).

this also means that Minneapolis will not necessarily be the final destination of the many Somalis who live there. Rashid comments: ‘Somalis always have an idea of temporality; they always have the option of looking for greener pastures in mind’.

And indeed, a number of Somalis had moved from Minneapolis already or were thinking about moving from there soon or eventually. A survey amongst Somalis in Minneapolis and Saint Paul indicated that 71 percent were hopeful of returning to their native country someday (Mattessich 2000). This was high compared to other migrant groups, but partly explained by the relatively short duration of their stay. On the other hand, there were people who had already returned and especially in safer areas like for example Somaliland, groups of Somalis are returning from all over the world and carefully preparing the return of others (Fink-Nielsen et al. ).

Abdulahakim Aziz was seriously considering returning to the region with his young family, despite his reasonable social services job with a Somali NGO: ‘Life here is difficult and very expensive. I have a full-time job and do a part-time course in International Studies, while my wife has a part-time job and studies full-time. It is difficult to manage all that in the USA, so I applied for a job at the UNHCR in Kenya. I was hired, but we decided to wait until my wife finishes her BA. I still have some offers from UNDP and a number of NGOs working in Somalia, so by the time we have completed our education, we will move back’. But return did not only occur to the home country. Sacadiyo Muse arrived from Cairo very recently and showed me the video of her farewell party, giving me details on who was there. Besides those who had been in Cairo for ten to fifteen years and recent arrivals from Somalia and other Arab countries, there were mothers with children who had returned from Western countries like Finland and Denmark. Life expenses are an important factor contributing to this decision to return, but also the religious environment and education of the children. Rashid Kasim’s aunt is considering moving back to Cairo, wanting to buy a house there and take the children: ‘Their main concerns are that Cairo has a better educational system and a better religious system. They want to be able to give their children an Islamic upbringing’.

### *Dealing with buufis*

Those who now live in Minneapolis are frequently confronted with the fact that many others would want to follow their example. These dreams to move to a Western country from Africa or the Middle East are not called *buufis* by all. In fact, when I started asking questions about *buufis*, I realized that many Somalis in the USA used the word in a different meaning. Only those who had come from Kenya or Cairo more recently were familiar with the way in which I used it. As Yusuf Abdinoor told me: ‘In Mogadishu the word was used amongst young people, as a kind of slang, meaning “suspect”. I then heard it being used in Egypt and realized the person did not mean suspect, so I asked what it meant. I was informed that *buufis* was related to resettlement’. Yet in the US, *buufis* is far more often used to indicate mental health problems of all kinds.

When I asked questions related to *buufis*, I was often told it is quite common in the US, because of the traumas that people endured during the civil war and while living in refugee camps. Life in the USA can also be traumatic, as some people feel really dislocated there. This could cause mental health problems, which were addressed as

*buufis*. It is fascinating to see the various uses of the term in different places, although there does seem to be a link between the use of the word in Dadaab and Minneapolis. Those who really dream of going for resettlement badly, suffering from serious *buufis* in the Dadaab sense, are often seen to have mental problems that can only be solved by enabling them to go for resettlement.

Rashid Kasim's brother for example was a serious *buufis* case. His mother was really worried about her 20-year old son, as at times he would not talk to anybody, behaving strangely. Rashid realized he really had to help him to move from Mogadishu, as the 'symptoms' were getting increasingly worse: 'My brother just finished High school and has extreme *buufis* because all around him, all people of his age, like neighbours and classmates, have gone or are going. There are simply no opportunities for them in Somalia, and he says that he cannot be in Mogadishu in 2004. His mind is focused on Western countries. When I told him that our habar yar went to Edinburgh, my brother informed me of the number of the train she must have used from London. I was shocked and asked where he got that information, and he told me that that is the talk in Mogadishu cafes. Well, I guess it used to be the same for me as well; we used to talk about streets and places in the UK or Canada, about people who went, or as we formulated it 'wuu galay' (he has entered), as if it was paradise they were entering. Then, everybody would want to know how the person had made it, and they all would want to try the same. But of course, after ten or twenty people manage to get through a certain route, that would be discovered and closed'.

Just before I left, Rashid's brother attempted to go to London through Dubai with an uncle who would move there with his family. Rashid bought the ticket of 2,500 dollars for him, and there was no one to assist him: 'Everybody is in the same position; if you do not have your family here, you will have to work towards bringing them over. We tried before and I spent 5,000 dollars on him, but the attempt failed'. Unfortunately, I was informed that the second attempt also failed, but they would try again.

This possible loss of money was not the only risk that people were taking while attempting to reach Western countries. Sacadiyo Muse showed me a book that she kept with pictures and stories from and about friends and relatives who stayed with her in Cairo. They were all young people, some living in European countries, some staying in the US, Canada or Australia, some who went back to Somalia, but also three who had died while trying to cross from Libya to Italy by boat; independent from each other. I was informed that on Internet, one could find the names and clans of those who died there. Rashid's elder brother is in prison in Libya for a similar attempt; being amongst the lucky ones, as 100 others died when the boat sunk.

Somalis take great risks when trying to 'enter', and one may wonder whether their relatives in Minneapolis are always ready to assist them in such dangerous attempts. Besides, there are other reasons why some may not be ready to sponsor their relatives. Dhofa Abdi clearly explained this to me: 'My brothers all want me to sponsor them, but how can I sponsor them when they are so irresponsible? How can I sponsor my brother who left his wife with four children? If he behaves so irresponsible in Somalia, what can I expect of his behaviour here? When I sponsor them, I will be responsible for the distance between my brothers and their families. Besides, I will be responsible for their misbehaviour here. What if one of my brothers marries a new

wife here? How will my sister-in-law accept that I have assisted him to come to the US?’

A further dilemma that Somalis in Minneapolis face is caused by the fact that their relatives have dreams of coming to the US, but as Sacadiyo formulated it, ‘The America that is there in Africa is not here’. Almost everybody arriving in the US has much higher expectations of his or her life there than reality can offer. Suleiman Hashi, the director of one of the Somali NGOs in Minneapolis, tells me: ‘When they come to the USA, people expect plenty of money, work, no responsibility and easy access to everything. Then, the reality is that they have to look for a job, some live on welfare and life is very hard. Many people cannot deal with that reality’.

As mentioned earlier, overly positive images are based on media and communication with relatives and friends already in the USA. Khadija Osman remarks: ‘They watch TV there and think that life in America is like the Hollywood movies’. Then, pictures that relatives send distort reality, but also the fact that large amounts of money are being sent from the US and people seemingly obtain everything that those ‘left behind’ can only dream of. Abdulhakim Axmed had very clear ideas in this respect: ‘We tell horrible stories about life in America, but when they see we have a car, we have housing, we have education and we have an income, all things that they do not have and that thus seem like a dream, it is difficult to make them change their views. A friend of mine is going back to Galgacayo and asked me whether he can do anything for me there. I told him to show people “Bowling for Columbine”, just to make them understand that in the US, guns are freely available and cause as much problems as in the places they are running from’.

So on the one hand, some Somalis in Minneapolis try to explain to their relatives and friends what their lives are really like, but it seems they are not listened to. Yusuf Abdinoor sighs in this respect: ‘I never used to believe that my brother-in-law, who has a Canadian passport, could not help me. He used to explain his situation to me, but I did not believe it, just like my relatives do not believe me now. I really apologized to my brother-in-law when I found out he had been speaking the truth all along. If I had known conditions here, I never would have come’.

Many people found the only solution to the *buufis* problem would be for all Somalis to be shipped from Somalia to Westerns countries, see what life is really like there and then go back again. Yet on the other hand, Yusuf admits that he does not inform most of his relatives of the fact that he has nothing. He simply gives them what he can, and tries to explain his situation only if they complain that he does not send enough. He tells me: ‘Somalis are very proud people, and they will not tell the truth. If someone was a manager in Somalia and now works as a loader, he will not confess that. He will hide the reality and send money’. At the same time, when going to Africa many Somalis engage in a lifestyle that also portrays a different image, while their relatives will not realize that the life styles they display there for a short period are the result of a hard and difficult life for the rest of the year (compare Salih 2001: 58).

Rashid Kasim once gave me a ‘grand tour’ through Minneapolis, when we passed a rather shabby-looking man on the streets and Rashid laughed to himself. He later told me that he had seen the same man in Nairobi, looking very distinguished. Everybody knew he came from America and had assumed that this was a very wealthy man. Rashid’s dream to go to the US only grew stronger, and he managed to come but is

very surprised to see the actual condition of the man who had such great prestige in Kenya. For those who are seen to 'have made it', keeping up appearances may be just as vital as the dream of a better future is for those in difficult circumstances like in the Dadaab refugee camps.

## **Conclusion**

How do Somalis in Minneapolis and other places in the West deal both with the responsibilities they have towards their families and others 'remaining behind' in Africa, as well as with the migration dreams they are confronted with, based on images of a life that does not exist? I started this paper by distinguishing three types of connections that are of importance in this respect, derived from the flows of people, money and goods as well as ideas that characterize transnationalism; transgressing national boundaries and thereby connecting different physical, social, economic and political spaces (Mazzucato et al. 2004).

After having described the material assistance provided, the migration processes as well as the information exchanges taking place both from the perspective of Somalis in Kenyan refugee camps as well as from the perspective of those resettled in a US state; I will now try to connect the two. This is not only to provide more insight in this specific case, but far more to illustrate the importance of a transnational approach when studying diasporas. The livelihoods that people engage in, the choices they have and the decisions they make in one place, may very well be influenced by the way their lives are connected with those of relatives and friends elsewhere. At the same time, this case clearly illustrates the relevance of taking a holistic view that combines an analysis of migration, remittances and information exchanges; as these fields are very clearly influencing one another.

Somalis in Dadaab as well as in Minneapolis engage in transnational livelihoods both financially and in terms of decision-making. In Dadaab, research indicated that the Somali refugees would not have been able to survive the limited regional opportunities and insufficient handouts provided, without the assistance of remittances sent to the camps. Monthly or occasional amounts of dollars were vital in enabling daily survival as well as dealing with contingencies.

Somalis in Minneapolis were very aware of the vital role they played in the survival of relatives living in the region, and almost everybody was sending the little or much he or she could send. There was some more concern about the endurance of remittance sending over generations. As Abdulhakim Axmed indicated: 'Generations change and the children might not send money to the extent that their parents did. They have to be taught, like I do with my five-year old daughter. I take her to the hawala and tell her to give the money to the owner, and my daughter can even ask me "father, when are we going to send them money again?" But many parents do not teach their children, saying that they are working hard for their pensions so that their children do not need to send them money'.

Another threat to the continuity of transnational networks is the fact that the pressures are often very high. Somalis in Minneapolis feel the obligation to send money to relatives in Kenya or Somalia who might otherwise not be able to survive there, but this obligation is often a real burden to their own livelihoods. In many cases, this

burden is managed with an idea of temporality: eventually, sending remittances may no longer be necessary or at least the amount can be lessened considerably. In order to achieve that, Somalis in Minneapolis for example try to assist those who are dependent on them to migrate from the region. Alternatively, they try to encourage investments that enable people's self-sufficiency.

In some cases, Somalis in Minneapolis have actually already reduced the amount of dollars they were sending because they were dissatisfied with how their money was used. This may threaten the durability of remittance incomes to relatives. There are initiatives that try to combine the funds of a number of Somalis in diaspora to contribute to longer-term development initiatives that may encourage self-sufficiency, like building schools or setting up water projects. Such initiatives could be supported by international NGOs, though this could cause new problems, as Suleiman Hashi points out: 'At times it is better for individuals or the community to set up these things, as they should not always expect to be assisted. Besides, there seems to be more respect for private property than public property. If governments or NGOs get involved, there is a higher chance of being looted'. Still, in many places self-sufficiency can only be envisioned in the long-term and might not be possible without large-scale political-economic changes.

A final problem is that those 'left behind' do not understand the extent to which they burden those who 'have entered' places like Minneapolis. Images of life in resettlement countries are still highly unrealistic, leading to extreme expectations of the role of the Somali diaspora. As such, an important step towards a more balanced division of responsibilities, and thus possibly greater endurance, could be a communal attempt amongst the Somali diaspora to provide more realistic images of their lives 'overseas'.

On the one hand, this may remain extremely difficult as material realities do differ greatly and it may be hard to understand for those who were never there in what sense life could be difficult in places like Minneapolis. As Abdulhakim illustrated: 'It is like trying to explain to my mother what snow is. You cannot make people understand exactly how cold it is'. On the other hand, there is also still reluctance to give up the status and relative power that comes with living in the USA. Some find it unnecessary to burden their relatives with the problems they are facing in Minneapolis. Others are embarrassed to admit to the humble lives they lead. Many would not easily give up their position as wealthy, successful migrants, no matter the difficulties they find in keeping up this image.



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