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## **Reconsidering the Role of Conflict in the Lives of Refugees: The Case of Somalis in Europe**

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**Reconsidering the Role of Conflict in the Lives of Refugees:**

**The Case of Somalis in Europe**

**Susan Zimmermann<sup>1</sup> and Roger Zetter<sup>2</sup>**

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**Abstract:** Based upon qualitative research with Somali refugees in two European host countries – the UK and the Netherlands - this paper explores the micro-level experiences and ongoing effects of the Somali conflict on their lives in exile. Challenging predominant macro-level framings of refugees in these settings, it supports a micro-level analysis of their experiences and lives. It analyses their ongoing connections with the conflict in Somalia, and reveals how this can affect aspects of their integration and emotional health while in exile, alongside social problems such as poverty, drug use and divorce.

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## **Introduction**

An increase in asylum applications and refugee populations from conflict zones since the late 1980s has led to considerable public, political and policy concern within the European Union. Somalia has been one of the top refugee-producing countries in the world for more than twenty years given the protracted nature of its conflict. Around 245,000 Somali asylum applications have been lodged in Europe since 1990, after civil war began affecting large parts of country. Estimates of the remaining population vary, but one World Bank estimate put this at 8.9m in 2008.<sup>3</sup> There were approximately 1.5m internally displaced persons in 2009, in addition to a total estimated refugee population of nearly 700,000 (UNHCR, 2010a, b). Most refugees live in nearby Kenya, Yemen or Ethiopia, often lacking socioeconomic or other rights for their lives, whilst many who have remained in Somalia have likewise faced hardship and risk.

From nation state perspectives, once refugees have reached Europe and been granted status they can start a new life away from conflict and commence the process of integration (albeit that is a long term process). Conflict is viewed as a cause and justification of exile, and not as an ongoing issue faced during the process of resettlement. Refugees are perceived to have left behind the ongoing conflicts within the sending area behind. Thus the focus in exile shifts to their integration, with concerns that where this is problematic this may produce difficulties in host areas - community tensions, criminality and security concerns. Attempting to thus promote the integration of displaced populations, and to tackle issues of their exclusion or marginalization, can be key policy goals, yet ones that can be very difficult to achieve. At the same time, blame is often assigned to those refugees who fail or struggle to integrate, as is the case with many Somalis.

This paper suggests that to better manage the resettlement of displaced populations and avoid the possibility of conflicts arising with the host community, a fuller understanding of the role of conflict within a sending area in the lives of refugees is needed. For the purpose of this discussion, the term 'refugee' is used not only in the strict Convention sense, but to refer more widely to people who have escaped conflict

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<sup>3</sup> [http://devdata.worldbank.org/AAG/som\\_aag.pdf](http://devdata.worldbank.org/AAG/som_aag.pdf)

and now live in Europe with a range of statuses - this includes subsidiary 'leave to remain' statuses, as well as Somalis who have since achieved citizenship, or who have joined recognised refugee family members through processes of reunion. Meanwhile, conflict is used to refer to the sustained violence and lack of governance in Somalia, including Somaliland, with both its direct and indirect effects, such as impoverishment and survival challenges.

Based upon a study of 52 Somali refugee participants living in two European host countries, this study asks how Somalia's protracted conflict has continued to affect those living in Europe. What is the ongoing role of conflict within their lives, and how might it create an additional set of obstacles or influences that mediate their lives and settlement strategies? How does it affect their identity and relationships? Through an analysis of how conflict is 'transported' with those who are displaced, this paper seeks to challenge the conventional framing of conflict within refugees' lives. Instead it provides an in-depth understanding of micro-level impacts, experiences and needs. In doing so, it provides empirical evidence of the way personal experiences present hitherto neglected policy challenges for the process of resettlement and the need for such policies to recognise the challenges which displaced populations confront in order to promote more effective resettlement and integration into host communities.

### **Research background**

Research on Somali refugees in the West focuses on two main themes: ongoing transnational connections with the sending area, or limited integration, disadvantage and exclusion faced by many in exile (Kleist, 2008a, 1128-1129). This study closely engages with these arguably conflicting debates.

Integration is a widely contested term: but it is generally perceived to concern economic, social, political, personal, cultural or wider forms of participation in a host community, and access to rights or services (Ager and Strang, 2008; Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1998; Moffatt and Glasgow, 2009; Walker and Walker, 1997; Wets 2006). It relates to "equality of rights, equity and dignity" (UN Expert Group, 2008: 12) and can have consequences for individuals, the society and the host country, including the potential to avoid community tensions and more profound but illusive security concerns. Like other immigrants, refugees are thought to engage in gradual

processes of increased involvement and commitment to a community and locality as links with a country of origin diminish. At the same time, increasing resistance to immigration in developed countries has the effect of discouraging integration.

The predominant focus of research, as well as policy, in this area has mostly concentrated upon local factors or dynamics within host countries, with lesser concern for the broader transnational connections that refugees can maintain. Hence, barriers or solutions to integration are thought to exist within host areas and are broadly portrayed as institutional or individual in form (Veit-Wilson, 1998). They include amongst other variables: identity issues; rights-based contexts; permanent or temporary immigration statuses; language barriers; racism; non-recognised qualifications; impoverishment; and the nature of relationships between host areas and immigrants, (Bloch, 2008; Castles, 1995; Danso, 2001; Fangen, 2006; Harris, 2004; Mestheneos and Ioannidi, 2002; Soysal, 1994; Pennix, 1999, 2000; Valentine et al, 2009).

Research on Somali refugee integration emphasises the difficulties many have faced while living in the West (Kleist, 2008a:1132). Across more than twenty years of their formation, Somalis have been one of the most disadvantaged, excluded or marginalized of all refugee groups. Of course, individual outcomes differ, but they have had the highest rates of unemployment of all foreign-born groups in the UK (Khan, 2008), with similar problems seen throughout Western host countries (Bloch and Atfield, 2002; Cole and Robinson, 2003; Danso (2001); Fangen, 2006, 74-75; Harris (2004); ICAR, 2007; Mohamoud & Nieuwhof, 2000). Somalis are often portrayed negatively because of this situation and suggestions that they may be “difficult to integrate” (Kleist, 2008a: 1131) or not wanting to do so are attributed to this factor (Fangen, 2006: 70). The mental health of this group is another key area of concern, at times also linked to these issues (Djuve and Hagen, 1995; Djuve and Kavli, 2000; Fangen, 2006: 74-75; Harris, 2004:54-59; Bhui et al, 2005; McGraw Schuchman and McDonald, 2004; Palmer, 2006; Warfa et al, 2006).

Much of the research concerning Somali refugee integration and issues of mental health in host areas has been problem-oriented (Harris, 2004:13-14), yet finding appropriate solutions to such challenges remains elusive. Nevertheless, something that is often missing from these debates is how ongoing conflict in the sending area

might influence these outcomes. How might this have complicated or informed integration and affected wellbeing and perhaps the mental health of refugees?

While the focus on host country integration variables such as these is both important and useful, it is also important to recognise the part played by underlying assumptions of “correct” or “problematic” refugee behaviour. As noted by Lindley (2006:25), “the debate on migration and asylum in Europe remains hyperpoliticized and largely domestically focused or aid focused”. The main focus is upon the domestic environment, and upon refugees’ individual needs for durable solutions in exile. It is upon uprooting and re-rooting between countries, with little or no attempt made to understand or account for the effects of transnational factors upon the lives and situations of refugees. Unlike host-country factors, transnational links, particularly for refugees, are rarely perceived as potential barriers to integration or participation, but are framed outside of these discussions. Transnationalism can be seen as a distraction from the refugees’ task of concentrating upon new lives and surroundings – which might become permanent over time. Such assumptions may restrict awareness of the influences on refugees’ lives and in turn this may affect opportunities to support displaced populations in the resettlement process.

Transnationalist research suggests a more complex set of dynamics. It emphasises the ongoing involvement and connection that refugees (and other immigrants) can maintain with their country of origin as well as the wider diasporic community. It challenges the notion of a linear process of uprooting and integration from country of origin to country of asylum. They may instead live as long-term or permanent members of transnational communities. Refugees can have “multiple and simultaneous ways of belonging and multiple ways of incorporation concerning the ‘home’ and ‘host’ countries” (Cheran, 2006:4), whilst their “multiple homes and multiple locations” challenge ideas of their adaptation and integration into new national host contexts (Cheran, 2006:5); Van Hear (2006:10).

People at home and abroad may operate in a single social field, or at least in linked social fields... and “transnational households” - that may have operated as single households in conflict areas - may contain members in countries of origin, in nearby countries of first asylum, and in other countries of asylum or resettlement.

Transnationalism can challenge host state expectations of the roles and behaviours of refugees in exile and the process of integration. It is much more than simply implying divided loyalties (Valentine et al, 2009). It tells us that settlement and integration – however understood - can occur with reference to different locations: decisions and outcomes can be made with reference to transnational, rather than just national, contexts (Sherrell and Hyndman, 2006). Taking this into account may be used to inform a fuller understanding of different impacts, the outcomes that occur, and thus the appropriate policy responses. Like integration, transnationalism can take political, economic, social or cultural forms, and takes place through personal or institutional channels (Al-Ali et al, 2001a:581). The capacity to adopt ‘transnationalism’ may vary according to willingness, skills or resources potentially available to refugees (Al Ali et al 2001a:581) and may be affected by levels of income and settlement challenges in host countries (Lindley, 2006; Sherrell and Hyndman, 2006).

As integration research and policy suggests, transnationalism complicates the lives, opportunities and aspirations of refugees in their host countries and communities. It can involve the making of sacrifices, leading some, for instance, to be “faced with a choice between saving money to return, supporting their families in Bosnia, or starting to build up a new life in the host country” (Al-Ali et al, 2001b:628). As Van Hear (2009:185) also observes, refugees can face other competing demands with their own livelihoods, and may “have to choose between supporting those back home and developing their own skills or educating their children”. Yet transnationalist research does not see these as issues of blame for those concerned, who might perhaps be accused of concentrating less than they “should” upon outcomes in host areas. Not only may transnationalist obligations such as these be unavoidable (Al-Ali et al, 2001a:591; Horst, 2006a:7-8), rather it is about understanding the contexts in which people live their lives and challenging a preconceived set of factors and expected outcomes by taking a broader set of behaviours and factors into account.

Perhaps the main focus of transnationalist research for Somalis has been to examine the role played in remitting funds to Somalia, either to support individuals or development processes – as palliative or transformative measures (Van Hear, 2009). Although by no means continuous, for more than two decades, conflict, violent instability and insecurity (including its direct or indirect effects) has affected quality of life throughout Somalia, including the more stable north. It has created many



challenges to survival. Environmental risk has often compounded these issues for households. One means of coping has been to call or rely upon others for support, such that a strong remittance culture has become economically very significant for the livelihoods of many Somali households (Gundel, 2002; Hansen, 2004; Horst, 2006a, b; Horst and Gaas, 2008; Jacobsen, 2002; Kleist, 2008a, b; Van Hear, 2003, 2006).

With a moral ‘imperative’ or ‘obligation’ on the displaced population to provide support (Lindley, 2006, 2009a), sacrifices may be necessary. For example, in Horst’s (2006a:10) study, it was found that remitting large amounts of money to Somalia did not necessarily indicate the wealth of the sender. In fact, many appeared to be “working young men and women whose main aim it is to provide an income for their family members left behind”, rather than being able to concentrate upon their situations and aspirations in exile. Again, Lindley (2009b) found that making financial remittances could have important implications for refugees’ lives: reinforcing poverty; making them more willing to accept low pay and conditions and not aspire to higher level employment; and removing opportunities to save or invest. Other issues such as anxiety and stress arose through the worry imposed by the need to support others in Somalia. Elsewhere, Lindley (2006) discusses how refugees have different capabilities to remit money depending on their economic circumstances in exile. Some can provide remittances more easily, whereas some are more vulnerable and need to make sacrifices to meet obligations at the expense, at times, of their nutritional wellbeing and health. Her study finds that there are “clear tensions between economic prospects in the host country and [the] support of relatives in Somalia” (p24).

Transnational networks of commitments are not a one way process and refugees’ relatives living elsewhere can be actively involved in significant ways (Al-Sharmani, 2006a). As well as sharing financial ties, care for children and the elderly or disabled can be significant. Whilst these ties support the survival and wellbeing of family members, they may also create tensions and challenges in terms of the competing interests. Elsewhere, Al-Sharmani (2006b) describes further complexity of how Somali transnational families juggle family affairs across several host societies as part of the diasporic society.

An additional research focus has been upon refugees’ political transnationalism, and how this may influence their relationship to the host country and society (Kleist,

2008c). Yet the main focus of such research is upon the sending area, and the role that refugees can play in either peace-building/development or sustaining conflict, rather than upon their own lives in exile (Brinkerhoff, 2005; Orjuela, 2008; Pugh et al, 2008; Salehyan, 2007; Van Hear 1998, 2006; Wayland, 2004). At the same time, it is worth noting that these and other outcomes may differ depending on the areas of origin within Somalia and whether areas have been less or more directly affected by violent conflict over the years.

The existence of transnationalism, therefore, supports the need to explore a range of potentially conditioning variables beyond the national context of resettlement in the country of origin. While the research therefore suggests a number of potentially negative impacts of transnationalism, it is important to note that it can also positively contribute to feelings of status, purpose, stability, dignity or esteem among those concerned (Hansen, 2008; Horst, 2006a, b; Kleist, 2008c; Portes et al., 1999: 229; 2002). These outcomes are, furthermore, dependent upon individual contexts (Levitt, 2003), and there may be no clear correlation between them and integration outcomes in the country of resettlement. Whatever outcomes arise, it is important to note that many refugees can maintain these connections as parts of their lives. The fact that many Somali refugees play important and sustained roles in Somalia whilst living as some of the most marginalised and excluded refugee groups in Europe, might itself support the view that there is an impossible tension between these two dispositions. Yet, another way of looking at this problem is to argue that these ongoing connections with the sending area and its conflict present a poorly understood challenge to the way host countries perceive and implement resettlement and integration policies.

Finally in the context of transnational research, we should acknowledge the way refugees perceive exile and resettlement to be permanent or not and how this conditions their present and future connections with host and sending areas and impacts attitudes to integration. Micro-level explanations question the expectation that refugees seek permanent settlement in exile and show how these expectations can be affected by ongoing conflict in sending areas (Muggeridge and Doná, 2006; Bang Nielsen, 2004). Imagining exile as being either a temporary or permanent phenomenon can influence the refugees' attitudes to resettlement and integration (Al-Ali et al, 2001a,b; Al-Rasheed, 1994; Bloch, 2004; Ghorashi, 2003:5; Horst and Gas, 2008; Muggeridge and Dona, 2006; Sherrell and Hyndman, 2006; Zetter, 1999;

Zimmermann, 2010). Those who maintain a 'myth of return', for example, can be "less likely to invest in employment and training opportunities because it implies a degree of permanency" (Al-Rasheed, 1994, cited in Bloch, 2004:2.13). So too, "the perceived limbo-like situation of being neither 'here' nor 'there' can [also] be a paralysing force and prevent refugees from actively seeking employment" (Al-Ali et al, 2001b:628).

Whereas integration research has tended to focus upon host area dynamics at the expense of transnational elements, the main focus of transnational research has tended to be upon the role which refugees play in relation to their country of origin. Some research has begun to combine these two poles (for example, Morawska, 2003). Yet, less attention is still paid to the way conflict is a potentially conditioning variable in refugees' lives in exile. We need to look more at the contexts in which refugees live their lives, and how conflict may continue to condition lives in exile for people who, on the surface, appear to have escaped it.

## **Methods**

Based upon interviews with Somali population groups in two European host countries – the UK and the Netherlands – this study examines the ongoing impact of Somalia's conflict on the lives of its refugees. The fieldwork took place between November 2009 and March 2010. The main phase was in London, and involved completing 34 individual semi-structured interviews with Somali refugees. A second, shorter phase was used to complement the first and was based in the Netherlands (mostly Amsterdam, The Hague and Delft). Here, 11 individual interviews and a group interview of seven refugees were completed. All of the interviews were held face-to-face, with the aid of interpreters where needed (in 12 cases, plus a further 5 where interpreters helped with small parts of communication). Where agreed, interviews were digitally recorded, or detailed notes were taken at the same time.

Participants were found with the support of several UK and Netherlands-based Somali community organisations, the staff of which acted as gatekeepers. The sample included 25 males and 20 females: all seven of the group interviewees were female. The participants were aged between 19 and 60, with an average age of 39. They came from a range of origins in Somalia (some more or less directly affected by conflict), and duration in exile, from three to 30 years. Forty of the interviewees had lived in

the UK or the Netherlands for more than 20 years, whereas others had lived there for up to ten years. Several were physically disabled and this had left them unable to work. All had refugee backgrounds, or had joined other refugees through family reunion in a few cases, and while none were still asylum seekers some had since become citizens of their host countries.

### **How conflict still affects Somalia's refugees: overview of findings**

The following discussion highlights the main ways in which participants were affected by the protracted conflict in Somalia. It demonstrates the dichotomy between their ongoing connection or involvement with Somalia while settling or living in their countries of exile. There are different degrees of engagement: some reflect closely upon this 'duality', others prefer to emphasise host-country factors more when describing the differential impacts upon their lives or experiences.

It is of course difficult to make a clear separation of how the impacts of country of origin and country of resettlement shape lives in exile, particularly since the interviewees were often unable to differentiate between them. The objective, however was not to explain how these distinctions mediated integration outcomes. Instead, it aims to uncover, from interviewee perspectives, the ongoing role of conflict in their lives in exile. How had they been affected or informed by its presence in Somalia, and what pressures or opportunities had it created in exile and their disposition to the country of settlement?

The discussion covers several topics, including how Somalia's conflict constitutes a variety of stresses on often vulnerable and struggling refugee participants, the financial implications of the conflict and how these factors shape the challenges of settlement, and underpin many of the social problems the refugees confront. Besides showing negative effects, the discussion shows how these tensions can also motivate some to succeed in exile.

### **Interviews with refugee community organisation staff**

Several of the participants, worked at refugee community organisations (RCOs), and chose to speak about their work more than their personal experiences, and so offered an overview from their perspectives of how events in Somalia have continued to affect their communities. Two of these accounts are particularly useful, and share similar views. Asked whether people struggled to send support to Somalia and how

this affected them, the first participant spoke about poverty as well as broader issues of concern for the community:

The Somali people here or in other areas abroad are living mostly as lower class – depending mostly on social welfare. They are among the poorest of society and some other people are asking you to give money away. There are psychological effects, and economic effects – always you're getting poorer. Poor because they have to give things away even when they have so little. For example, they can't give everything their children need here if they're giving money away. The welfare of kids can also go down. The effect is very big – and you can see the performance of Somalis wherever they are is poor. The government here is very concerned of the situation of Somalis in the Netherlands: that their school performance is poor, crime is high, economic level of low. Somalis are not doing well anywhere – and the root I think is in Somalia: if your country is not doing well, it affects you elsewhere.

From her perspective therefore, the very poor socioeconomic circumstances of many living in the Netherlands (although we know that this is a much broader problem in host states) are connected with how protracted conflict in Somalia has impoverished and challenged many in exile. It influences the experience of social problems and poor educational performance. Furthermore the pressure to provide support to others in Somalia can leave some unable to better themselves through education and work:

It's not impossible here to better yourself – but you have a family in Somalia where there's no government and they're calling you each day to send money. You don't have enough for your own family, but if you don't send you'll feel guilt, given the Somali culture of helping each other. This is the start of the problem. Sometimes they've got no money for food before the month is finished. You're very poor in a country that's very rich and you can't do anything to help yourself to get better. So I think it's very clear here that the problem that they have and what's going on in their country are connected... The stability is missing when you have some problem for family in your own country. So poor education and criminality for children [arise] because their families here aren't stable. So I think the root to poor performance is where we're from and what's happening in Somalia.

While there are, of course, many other factors which contribute to poor educational performance and social malaise, part of the problem is attributed to the ongoing conflict in Somalia. We already know that occupational downgrading, deskilling and reduced status can affect refugees, but the interviewee's point is about why Somalis

have continued to struggle more than most other origin groups. Since both host and sending country issues can be involved (“a lot of factors can be here as to why Somalis aren’t performing well - including relationship to their home country and also the factors here in the Netherlands”) looking at only one side of this equation will diminish the prospects of finding more effective policy responses.

The second accounts supports a similar perspective:

[The situation in Somalia has a] huge effect on us here. It affects people in different ways. People like me who have still many family members there – talking personally – it affects me enormously. I have a lot of family there – there’s no health or education system there. My mum’s there – the family’s situations are there. All these people have no income resource, no security, and what they do is calling people here and asking for support for their daily life – not to buy a house or car and that depresses people here – people are getting fed up because they’re saying that for almost 20 years we’ve been trying to support them and it’s not getting better there. “So how long should we have to continue like this?” that’s how people feel about the situation in Somalia. It’s been almost 20 years and still it’s not getting better. That’s how I’m feeling/dealing in my daily life. That’s a situation they are dealing with.

This interviewee supports the point made above about poor performance, suggesting that the pressures that refugees can face in exile to earn money quickly for their families in Somalia can lead many to enter low paid factory work and consigns them to long term economic marginality as they are thus unable to study for higher-skilled employment. This argument, made by several other interviewees, is supported by other research (Lindley, 2009b; and Horst, 2006a). This situation may be exacerbated by the fact that many who now come from a country with little effective development for more than twenty years, may have had little or no formal education on which to begin elsewhere. It is suggested by this interviewee that given their backgrounds, many may not even “dream” of progressing now, since they grew up in a situation with “huge trauma” and might only know one thing “that they’re now in a situation where they can work; and they have families back home who’re hungry and who need their support”.

Of course, individual attributes are significant as well. In the group interview of seven women in the Netherlands, including some who worked at an RCO, it was suggested that there are three types of people: “some who can’t cope with the

problems who get mad”, some “who grab to jobs” and others “who want a higher education for their children and who want to have a better life” for themselves. Several of the participants in this research show that strength of personality and determination can be important, but so too are the different contextual pressures that people can face in their lives. Those who have families in Somalia who need their help less, or whose families have died or left the area, may thus have more freedom to pursue settlement opportunities in exile.

### **Worry and stress**

Refugees are already a high-risk group in respect of mental illness, and face the added stress of adjustment to their new environments and lives in exile. Needing to adjust and perhaps build a new life in a host area has been compared to a process of being reborn (Lacroix, 2004). Many factors can complicate this, as integration literature shows us in respect of individual or institutional factors in the host area (see above). Research has indicated that one of the sources of stress or worry for refugees is events in the sending area, particularly where others close to them remain directly affected (e.g. Carey Wood et al, 1995). We also know that depression, avoidance tactics, or other positive coping strategies, can all be informed by stress and worry.

Here, among the main issues that all of the interviewees shared in common, was the experience of worry and stress connected with the ongoing troubles and related hardships in Somalia,. These could arise through telephone contacts, media reporting, and through the pressure that they faced to provide support to family members and others who remained in Somalia. Thus, while attempting to adjust to and live in their new countries, these additional pressures could act to shape their experiences of exile as these extracts from their narratives demonstrate.

I’m always keeping in touch with my family. It’s the first thing that everyone does: to watch the news and check on the family.

I worry. I watch TV and see how people are being killed – it makes me sad.

You stress when you hear about violence and about how people don’t have enough to eat.

It affects me because still my people – especially my family – are still there... Every Somali worries about Somalia – because my country still has no government.

Almost everyone has lost a family member. [We see] deaths/displacement daily in the media.

War is always a tension and a stress – our families are afraid and I cannot do anything... I feel powerless. I just think about what can I do? They're unhappy, I'm unhappy – and it's a constant stress/tension.

Several interviewees described what they perceived to be a direct relationship between the stress and worry that they experienced and their own settlement challenges. For example a 50 year old former headmaster in Somalia had lived in the UK for 13 years, having spent 7 of these years as an asylum seeker. This had affected his development and he was still trying to learn the language adequately for the work that he hopes to do. He felt he was still struggling to learn English more because of the worry he faced. Asked whether the worry he feels for his family in Somalia ever affects his life, he said that this is a problem that he faces. Sometimes, he said, he feels “unable to do things”, and asked for an example he answered:

...if Somalia was peaceful.. it would make a big difference, of course, not worrying about them or worrying about how to send money... I expect that if this had happened, I would be a history writer (his dream) by now.

Others said that worry and stress were constant background experiences that they could not avoid, but that these did not affect how they lived their lives. The evidence suggests that personality can be an important factor in this kind of response, together with the degree of pressure apparently faced. Two explained that in their experiences:

I have got used to the sadness now – I have no choice. You have to live your life anyway.

People call me up - not my immediate family - but other relatives. They call up and ask for things a lot. But it's not a problem. They need - because there's not an opportunity there in Somalia - so sometimes I send them money because they need the help... It improves my life - it makes me happy - like if someone's got a tyre puncture and you help.

The second of these interviewees did not face personal pressure from his immediate family to provide support, given that his brother who lived in Somalia could afford to support the family without him. He said that this had freed of this burden he had been



able to focus on his education. As such, he was very grateful to his brother and said that he owes him “a lot” for the support he gives to the family. He has only sent money that he has afforded to spare, and has been able to focus upon his higher education and career in exile.

Another interviewee said she always worried about how to support others back in Somalia, but explained that she also had had a large extended family based in London who shared her burden:

You worry always about how to pay a bill or support someone back home. Always in a loop – always thinking. [Does the worry ever get overwhelming?] Yes.. sometimes because you’re trying to live life here, and support people there – so sometimes you can’t meet your needs. You’re worrying here about the difficulty of living here, and need to support others. What’s good for me is that I have a lot of family living in London. So I’ll get support if I need it from them.

She explained that, in contrast, others can face higher pressures, making it more difficult for them to cope:

for some all the pressure is on that person - and at least in my family the load is less heavy – lighter – than it would be if I were on my own.

In this and other cases therefore, what we can see is that worry and stress were connected not only with the situations of others in Somalia, but with the interviewees’ own expected roles or obligations in respect of family circumstances back home. In this context, one described having prioritised his pursuit of an education in exile, yet said that he had experienced “psychological pressure” through been unable to provide more support to his family during this time:

There’s a moral need to support your family. One thing I had in my mind was that I have to study, whatever else, and then whatever I got I have to share it. I knew all the time that they needed me – I’ve been brought up in a very, very real life to help my family... People are desperate – they rely on you. Led to serious, hard discussions sometimes. Mum will call asking for help and you can’t argue with that. It wasn’t an issue of being able to forget them and say okay they don’t need help; it was a matter of bettering himself here.

Through his work at an RCO, he observed that others, unlike him, may “feel depressed and just look for ways to pass time” rather than pursue their goals in exile. This reflection indicates a range of possible coping strategies or responses to worry

and stress, some of which might act to hinder educational or employment outcomes in exile.

From another interviewee's perspective, individual personalities can help to explain such differences in response. The (now adult) child of two refugees, raised in the Netherlands explained that her parents had quite different responses to this issue, and that while her mother worried a lot about her relatives in Somalia, including the small details of their lives, her father was not "such a worried person", and in fact he was the "total opposite" of her mother who spent a lot of time and energy worrying.

For one interviewee, worry had been a serious issue for several of his years in exile, and an ongoing issue in recent years, but had not prevented him from pursuing his education and career. He had spent five years remitting everything that he could financially to his family, he said, whilst simultaneously pursuing his university degree. He did so because he said he was worried so much about them. To achieve this, he never took holidays, he worked every day of the week, never went out or made any friends, but spent all of his time "studying and working on weekends". It was not until he visited his family in what was after all a comparatively safe part of (formal) Somalia – Somaliland - that he had come to feel relief and worried less about them:

...it was eye-opening – I thought people are not dying and I felt guilty, but they're slightly better than me. And they get money for nothing – living better than me... I understand that they have also difficulties... I'm still sending money to family, but before if someone called me I couldn't do anything – I couldn't sleep, but now.. It was a relief for myself – always I was worrying, thinking about them, and it was a relief not to have to support them... Now I don't worry like before – before if they called me I'd think they were dying. But now I know that they can still survive without me.

He described how it had been "very difficult" for him to concentrate on his education, but that he had achieved this focus:

You'd get a call before an exam.. and you'd worry... and instead of focusing on your studies you'd have to think about helping them. Sometimes you feel powerless... not being able to help them.

Eleven years later, he said that he still worries about them, but not as much as he did before. Such findings resonate with those of Muggeridge and Dona (2006) on how a

first visit back home can help people to move on in exile (and which distant perceptions of conflict can often prevent), as well as evidence from Horst (2006a) that people back home can exaggerate their needs or not do enough to support themselves, as the interviewee himself had come to realise.

Another interviewee said that she had been living with stress for years, always worrying about what might be happening to her family in Somalia. This included being unable to sleep, after some relatives were killed, which impacted upon other aspects of her life. Ultimately, this situation combined with other stress that she experienced in her host country - the difficulty she was finding in her attempts to build a career - helped to inform her decision to simply become a stay-at-home mother:

I'm more focused on what happened at home because you have the stress and you have also the discrimination outside [in looking for work] and then eventually you think "yeah let that go" and then I focus at home - that's for me enough for this time.

Here we can see the interplay of stress factors derived from both the country of origin and the host country. While on the surface it might appear that for reasons of child-rearing or other integration challenges in the host area, she remained economically inactive, in fact it was the two sources of worry combined that contributed to this response. Her ambition to work was being thwarted in exile as she struggled to achieve a career whilst at the same time facing the pressure of what was happening to family members in Somalia.

Other interviewees attribute stress to the settlement and integration pressures in the host country which have the effect of cutting off psychological as well as material links with the country of origin. As one interviewee argued, it is important for refugees to be able to "forget" the problems they had in Somalia, saying that in her case she was "lucky" to be able to do this because most of her family had since left. She thus had achieved greater distance from the ongoing effects of conflict:

You must forget all of the complications about why you came here – you must try to forget. I'm lucky because in my family no-one's died, thanks for God. Nothing's happened, just only we lose everything. They're spread throughout the world – my family is all over the world.

Others, in different positions can find it harder to forget or distance themselves from ongoing or past events. From her perspective, refugees need to find a positive environment in their host areas that can help them to move on “as quickly as possible” from their refugee backgrounds, whilst also keeping in view their role as transnational actors. She suggests that not finding this balance can change people’s personalities over time, making them less likely to adjust, outcomes which she explained she had seen in her work as an integration mentor with the Dutch Refugee Council:

The refugees if they are coming here need to start asap. But the system makes you wait to get status – and the waiting time creates psychological problems. Because the refugee needs to get money because they have more problems than normal people... [Eventually], you’re not the same person – they get psychologically sick waiting at home for status. And at the same time the family’s calling you for help – but how can you help if you don’t have anything here yet?... [The] government doesn’t understand the problem because they give [asylum seekers] everything they need to stay alive... but they have more problems than normal... What they’re waiting for is more than normal – they have their problems here, and they have their families there who need you. They get sick and end up as not the same people.

Her argument is that such a host country policy environment serves to keep asylum seekers alive, but does not take into account the broader role as transnational actors supporting their families, whilst building new lives quickly away from conflict which might help them forget the most stressful aspects of their situation.

Thus, the failure to appreciate this duality of refugee displaced populations and the tension between life in exile and knowledge of what is happening in the country of origin, is a key part of the stress which Somalis face in their host countries, from her perspective.

### **Working to help Somalia**

Several interviewees – mostly RCO workers - explained how “helping Somalia” as one of the key focuses while living in exile had assisted in shaping their lives. Helping Somalia in this broader developmental sense was seen as a moral calling or responsibility. Most of the interviewees expressing this sentiment had achieved university education in exile, and sought to use their education and professional skills to help Somalia, or at least Somalis, in the ongoing challenges that were faced. In this sense we may see another dimension of transnationalism where the pursuit of

education and employment in exile, are oriented towards helping both the country of origin and the diasporic population in exile.

Educated to MA level as a refugee in the UK, one interviewee has since aimed to “serve the country”, referring to Somalia, not the UK. He feels that “half of” his life is now in the UK, where he is pursuing a career in support of the Somali community as the head of an RCO. At the same time, he remains emotionally attached to Somalia and imagines that “when it comes to really settling down” he, and he suggests others like him, “will choose half-half”, to be connected with both Somalia and the UK. He is “motivated” to “take back the positive things” that he has access to in exile, and in particular his education. Indeed, his undergraduate and masters courses were chosen partly because he believed they would be useful in his aim to help Somalia in the future. He also expected that his studies would secure him a good job in exile. As such, while he does not necessarily plan on going back to live in Somalia, he sees his role in exile as being about being part of a solution to Somalia’s problems by helping the community in exile. While policy and political agendas might suspect that these two ‘halves’ of his involvement and commitment to both countries are contradictory, his motivation to help Somalia had acted to inform his success so far in exile.

Another interviewee, who has lived in the UK for 16 years since she was 11, has likewise recently completed her university studies. For her future career she aims to help Somalia, particularly in support of women’s and children’s rights. Asked what she wants to achieve in her career, she answered that she wants “her country” (by which she too meant Somalia) to be peaceful and that she wants to be part of that process. London is her “second home” and “nothing holds her back” here, she explained in terms of her education or career, but her goal is to support Somalia through her work.

Similarly, an interviewee who is the 59-year-old head of an RCO believes that it is important for Somalis to focus upon integrating in exile “because otherwise they can’t help others in Somalia”. They face a lot of challenges to their settlement here, but have an important role to play in relation to Somalia, which their educational and career development will support.

Other interviewees who have structured their careers in exile around being part of a “solution for Somalia” are the co-founders of an RCO in the Netherlands. After

finishing university, they both got jobs in the private sector before deciding that they had a moral obligation to help Somalia. They chose to quit their jobs and establish an RCO in support of development and capacity-building in Somalia. The same organisation supports Somalis refugees in exile by providing support for integration strategies. Their motivation was that they did not wish to continue to work for only individual, financial gain, but also because of a sense of moral obligation. As one explained:

When I finished my studies I did different jobs related to these, but something... I knew the story – I'd been through it – how hard my life here was when I came here, and I asked myself how I could make things easier for the people. I'm not living for myself alone. I'm a part of the society – and if my group that I'm part of doesn't succeed.. – I feel like I'm part of it. Sometimes you have to sacrifice part of what I have to do – do I work in a well-paid job 9 to 5 just earning money or work for less to work for the community?

He explained that a cultural background which did not necessarily reify individualistic achievement such as pursuing a career in his country of exile was an important factor in this decision. A third RCO worker at this same organisation supported the view that his work now has both a financial and moral value to him. It is paid, but is also a “moral thing” since professionally he is able to help others as well as himself.

Another interviewee shared a similar experience of her own. She had been working as an accountant in the Netherlands for five years before taking up the position of running an established RCO since she welcomed the opportunity that it gave her to “help and contribute to development in Somalia” through her work. Until then, she had been focused on her “personal development”, but said she “was always thinking of doing something” for Somalia. At the same time, she chose to keep her professional job on the side in accountancy, working for both personal and moral gain. Like her, one interviewee co-founded his own organisation in view of the fact that “the demand in Somalia is huge”. He too kept his professional job on the side since it was financially impossible to survive giving up salaried employment and work entirely “for Somalia”. Several other interviewees share similar views and experiences to these, feeling a sense of responsibility to others and believing they have a role to play in helping, and this in turn had helped to shape their lives and outcomes in exile.

Finally, one interviewee is an Elder in his Somali community in the UK and lives on incapacity benefit. He spends his time aiming to support peace processes within Somalia from exile. He is a founding member of a group of former Somali military professionals who have joined together to contribute to a solution to Somalia's problems in this way. Thus while economically inactive and unable to work in exile, his life was shaped and given meaning by this undertaking.

### **Helping other Somalis in exile**

In a related way, others spoke about the help they gave to other Somali refugees in exile, given the high level of need that exists among their communities for support for people affected by conflict in their past and present circumstances. Provision of assistance, which was not sufficiently available from other public sector sources, aimed to fill the substantial gaps and the failure to recognise the degree of vulnerability that exists amongst refugee populations with respect to public sector support.

One interviewee who had been in the UK for almost thirty years had arrived as a student from Somaliland before needing to claim asylum a few years later after the situation there changed. He explained in detail how others arriving from conflict after him had come to need his support as well as that of others like him who were better established at the start, and how providing this had affected his life.

We became all of a sudden the mainstay of the community here.. because people are coming, turning to us.. for guidance, for advice.. where they can go. So we realised that there was a need for some sort of community facility to be set up.. that they can fall back on in times of crisis. And that's how we started – some of us, not all of us – I mean, it was very easy for us to go and look for jobs wherever and then do your work, but still the people would be coming to your home in the middle of the night;.. they call you from the detention centres; everywhere. So you had to do something anyway, so what we decided is – some of us decided to come back to the community and try to set up community facilities... And I personally what I'm doing, my job since then is helping the community set up.

Even after he established an RCO to formalise such activities, he continued to receive personal calls to help Somali refugees who had arrived in the UK. Given his less vulnerable personal background, he might have had a better chance of adjusting his

socio-economic status early on had it not been for these pressures. Asked what impact they had on his life, it was clear that these experiences shaped this:

It affected me because.. instead of.. setting up and establishing myself properly, you have to take time to help these people... So.. it reduces your capacity to improve yourself in terms of [a] career. Secondly.. with every plan you have to take, it might not be that at that time.. because people might come to your door and say “help us”. You have to abandon all your plans and go with them... So looking for a proper job.. looking for a proper job.. comes secondary again... You spend a great deal of time [helping].. so if you’re even spending one week on them, on your resources - little resources that you have – then all of your plans are out of the window again... Morally it helped me.., but it hindered all other aspects of my life in this country.

Although he says that now the situation has come to be “completely different”, as there are so many more Somalis who new arrivals and others can call upon, the scale of the problems that the Somali community has faced has also grown. He explained that: “the problem is bigger when it comes to the community.. because there are so many problems now – to do with children, schooling, the children getting in prison..”. So for more than twenty years, during which time others too have come to share such pressures, he has been called upon for advice and support. A high level of need clearly exists for members – new and old – of the Somali community, in this and other host countries, and this can be seen to impact upon individual refugees themselves and affect how they live their lives. Many others spoke of these pressures, or calls for support, and it is clear from the fieldwork evidence from members of Somali communities that there is a high degree of inter-reliance. At the same time, support is often being given by people facing their own forms of disadvantage, and can affect the degrees to which they are able to focus upon other outcomes.

From this interviewee’s perspective, the “major problem” that exists here is that Somali communities in exile – specifically in this case, the UK - require greater recognition and support for their needs from state authorities, and yet this remains largely absent:

...it is a major problem.. it needs some sort of understanding, recognition from the authorities now, rather than individuals trying to do what they can. It’s now the authorities - there are quite a number – to do what they can now.



So too, the interviewee explained that a paradoxical pressure derives from the fact that those like himself who achieve family reunion for other relatives then have to take on additional responsibility. He argues that there is a lack of government support, or at least recognition of the challenges this creates. Family reunion hands refugees additional responsibilities whilst also expecting them individually to work towards socio-economic or other forms of integration. In his experience, from having lived through family reunion and its effects, this policy environment has inadvertently contributed to social problems, as well as adding to the individual burden that he has faced:

the Home Office claims you will get [family reunion] but [really it's] immigration clearance, they will give you immigration clearance, nothing else. They're your responsibility... Once I get my sister, her children, my brother's children, I have to do everything. Take them – look for schools, look for homes, look for everything, everything, so it became a lot more of a burden than I can ever imagine... They put them on you and it is just sink or swim, so.. yeah.. “what is the point?” So those who are back home, at least they don't have the luxury of having the distance.., but they are no better, these are no better than.. [?] because most of the children have got just-have got lost. None of the children I've brought here – except a few – have made it anywhere.

Over time, through these different involvements in support of other vulnerable members of his community, he said he has come to realise that he has “always lived for others” in exile. In addition, he has sent money back to sponsor development work in Somaliland. Having needed to find a new career after his hope of returning to Somaliland to apply his specialist skills there could not be realized due to conflict, he felt that he had become “a jack of all trades”. Nevertheless, through the different pressures for support that have been placed upon him, he explained that he has come to understand a great deal about the socio-economic life in the UK works and how to help people in need. On the basis of these activities his career has progressed in exile. He now works at a housing organisation, still helping members of his and other communities.

In view of high level of need that persists among Somali communities, another interviewee explained that it was his goal, since graduating with an MA, was to respond to this situation. He explained that: “people like me – educated people - have to take our turn to help change things in Somalia”, whilst his main focus would be

hoped be upon Somalis in exile. He would like to apply his education in such a way as to work towards bringing UK Somalis together to discuss underachievement, housing, unemployment and to challenge a mentality of return that he believes can also be a problem. He also aims to empower Somalis to be “good citizens”, and to understand their duties and rights in exile. He hopes to combine this focus with studying for a PhD. In other words, in his educational and future career ambitions, he takes motivation and inspiration from his community. He wants to help other Somalis to integrate more successfully like he has, whilst like others he remains concerned with the country of origin too.

Another interviewee is economically inactive in the UK, but still very active in supporting other Somalis here. A Sultan back in Somalia - a traditional authority figure for his clan/sub-clan – since coming to the UK six years ago he has found that many lack their own Sultans to support and advise them. He has been unable to perform paid work since falling and hurting himself shortly after being granted refugee status, but has nevertheless performed a valuable role for his community. By helping with their problems (particularly with family disputes), he has also indirectly helped the host society. He is now in the process of setting up his own RCO to continue his work formally, and hopes to also make a living from this. He explained that doing this work was part of his “job” back in Somalia, and so he is happy to continue this in exile. He explained that he continued to hope that Somalia could be safe again for his return, since he believed that he could go back and “achieve more” there whilst currently being able to “pay back the British” whilst in exile by conducting his traditional role in exile. He feels indebted to the UK, and this reciprocity in his work for the Somali community, particularly as he has been unable to work to earn a living, serves as:

the only thing I can pay back here is to advise my community; to enable people not to make problems here; to work and get educations; to avoid damage to local culture/laws and to know their rights here.

Asked how many Somalis he had helped over the years, he explained:

I’ve travelled this country helping people. I can’t remember [how many] but daily I solve a problem for Somalis here – for 6 plus years every day.

Likewise, an RCO head in the Netherlands shared his own sentiment of wishing to “give something back” within a role for the Somali community that he described as “a

worthwhile job that a social worker would do”. At the same time resolving family and personal problems gave something back to the Netherlands, he explained, by creating added value on top of helping his “fellow countrymen”.

All of these examples of performing community work are valuable, needed and have important implications for disadvantaged Somali refugees, and yet in economic terms such interviewees appear inactive – at least in these respects - since they are not paid for their activities. Like other activities in support of people in Somalia, they represent a sense of moral obligation, it was explained. For example, one interviewee described the guilt that he felt in knowing that other friends of his still lived in Somalia, with the same need to leave as he had, and yet only he had managed to escape. This guilt motivated him to work for Somalis around him in the UK, and he did this informally, which, of course, took up both energy and time that could have been spent on other, formally recognised and explicit activities which would better demonstrate his individual ‘settlement’ and ‘integration’. Many others were in similar positions, with the needs of family and friends around them for help, and with the moral responsibility to provide this when it was not available in other ways.

But these largely unrecognised, yet vital, contributions to the wellbeing of the Somali refugee community activities serve the wider interests of the host society as well, by mediating and mitigating some of the profound personal problems and reducing the hardship which refugees face in settling in their host country. But at the same time, for the individuals concerned, these activities and responsibilities may detract from their own individual performance of ‘settlement and integration’ expected by government policy makers. We can see here how the complex interplay between individual socio-cultural responsibilities and sacrifices on the one hand, and the wider experience of hardship among a community on the other, may be one factor in helping to explain the often rather poor socio-economic performance of the Somali community in exile.

### **Implications of providing financial assistance**

The section discusses in more detail some of the issues already touched upon above regarding the implications for the lives and experiences in those exile of providing financial support for others who remain in Somalia. As noted, this perspective is one that is most developed in the transnational literature, and yet remains largely overlooked in integration research and policy from a national level perspective.

These considerations provide another explanation of the limited socio-economic performance which is the Somali community are thought to achieve in exile.

Starting from Lindley's (2006, 2009a) description of a moral "imperative" or "obligation" that exists behind such activities, the discussion here explores more widely of the economic pressures and challenges that these obligations represent. For these interviewees, pressures or requests for financial support came not only from close or extended family members, but also old friends or neighbours, clan members, and at times anyone who had been passed their telephone numbers. Clearly, the moral imperative is greater in respect of relatives, but exists far more widely. Providing such support – or fielding the requests even if unable to do so – is one of the ways in which conflict has been 'transmitted' to affect these refugees elsewhere.

As in studies cited above, many of those participants involved in this study discussed the personal sacrifices they had made to meet the financial commitments or requests that they faced from others still struggling to cope more directly with the effects of conflict within Somalia.

Supporting the argument that such transnationalism can appear to be forced, one interviewee, a mother in her late 30s who had been in the UK for 15 years, spoke about feeling compelled to send money to her uncle who had previously helped her to survive before she left Somalia. At the time, he had been living elsewhere. Although this was the only pressure that she faced, as her close relatives were killed in the war and her children had joined her in the UK, it was a big problem for her to send:

I send them money, even though I haven't got any to send them. I beg money off my (adult) children who work to send to them. It's a problem, but you send. You have no money, and your family says they're hungry, but you send to them. Sometimes I can't buy nutritional/balanced food, or buy new clothes, because when I think about it I remember that the family needs food and so I stop and send money to them. Sometimes I don't pay the bills and I have to beg off my children to pay the bills. My children keep something for themselves of their wages, and I'll send £30/£60 but not more.

This case demonstrates how obligations can affect not only directly the adult refugees concerned, but also their children. It is a source of tension within the family, furthermore, since her children "don't listen or understand" why she does it, but instead get angry with her.

Building on the contention that supporting others in need in Somalia can lead to tensions within the family unit, another interviewee said that he faces criticism from his own children. They have accused him of not focusing upon supporting them, but instead of focusing upon others in Somalia. Like others, he has sacrificed “luxuries” (including books, clothes and entertainment) for his children but even more for himself. His income, he said, is “very low, and the demands are higher”. To meet the needs of others in Somalia, he spends money he “should” spend on his children “to people whose needs are more critical – who’re dying”. He receives about ten calls for such support every month, and all the remittances which he sends come out of his Income Support. At least two other interviewees have accrued debt trying to help.

It was common to go without “luxuries”, as interviewees often put it, even where participants explained that they personally “did not struggle” to send support. For those that had more difficulty, however, this could affect their abilities to pay their household bills. One respondent explained, for example, that financially supporting others in Somalia was such a problem for her that sometimes she would be left feeling weak because of the worry of it and could not go into work:

You live constantly to lie and lie - to say you don't have it. My children find it hard to understand - sometimes they say that I can't afford things... like luxuries such as to pay for the cinema, nice shoes, etc, games. Sometimes I struggle to pay my bills - sometimes [my children] say that they don't have food, and you think about bills. It's really difficult living with this. Sometimes you feel weak - that I can't go to work today because I didn't sleep that last night. Because I stayed awake thinking about the people who've contacted me saying that they don't have any food. I worry because I have to help them and yet I can't - and so sometimes I feel too weak to work.

Thus, with the pressures that she faced from people affected by conflict in Somalia, her employment in exile was also affected. She explained that while she worked as a low-paid health worker, and felt she was in the position to begin her own health care business, she chose not to pursue this career on the basis that she feared that if she did so the financial demands upon her from Somalia would increase:

You can't start a business here - because they (the people asking for money) would find out and think you have money. I want to start a business but I can't. I have the

skills - I've been living here a long time- but then the pressures upon me to give money will increase.

She experienced this level of pressures upon her in the UK even despite the fact that she had never even lived in Somalia, but, as an ethnic Somali, had only ever visited on holiday.

For another interviewee, going without "luxuries" means not using the telephone or Sky TV, as well as buying all the clothes for herself and her son from charity shops. Her family lives in the relatively safer Puntland, which is indirectly (i.e. mostly economically) affected by conflict in Somalia. She said that she has been helping for over twenty years since having arrived in the UK. In this time, she has achieved both an education and full time work, but has been left with few material comforts and ongoing pressures upon her finances as a result of the war.

Perhaps the most dramatic and poignant example of the impact of these financial obligations/sacrifices comes from a refugee who, since arriving in the UK in 1998, having left all of her family behind at that time, has been under constant pressure to provide support. She has done so at the expense, she feels, of both her diet and health, as well as of her prospect of employment in exile:

Because of the war, people can't work/do anything in Somalia and so they ask if I can send money to buy food. Sometimes I'll stop eating good nutritional food or meat... That's how I'll survive: by eating badly and sending money for them to survive as well. Many Somalis do this - they don't buy clothes, or eat properly so that they can. The war continues, and so not eating properly continues. I get really tired and weak. If I were in Somalia, I'd be strong - stronger than now - but now because of this I am weak. and my joints are in poor condition because I'm not getting enough nutrients. It's a lot of worry... Sometimes I forget things - even to pray - and the worry... always asking how do I get something for these people. If you don't get for them then they will starve. I fainted, fell and broke my leg recently.

Her statement that "the war continues, and so not eating properly continues", is especially pertinent within the context of this study. What little she has been able to spare has come from her own Income Support payments received throughout her years spent as a refugee in the UK. In addition, given the pressure of family reunion, she has found it difficult to share what little food she has, after providing support to others, with her children who have since arrived. Without the pressures deriving from

the continuing conflict in Somalia, she explained that she believes her health could have been better, and that as a result she would have been able to pursue employment in the UK. In her view, she had never managed to become employed because of “all these pressures, and the health problems caused by them”, experienced in connection with the war in Somalia. Whether or not she could have done more for herself, helping others evidently took priority over her own needs and created a challenge during the last 12 years which is evident in her physical condition. Another interviewee likewise explains that to meet the demands upon her from others in Somalia, she eats “very little – to survive”. A focus upon survival – of themselves and others in Somalia - is seen in several cases, and clearly comes with a high cost for the refugees and their socio-economic and bodily wellbeing.

Speaking about these difficult circumstances, and how the conflict in Somalia could affect the decisions individuals make in how they live their lives in exile, one RCO worker observed highlighted the problem of prioritising their interests or needs [in exile] over the requests for financial support from those back in Somalia. Little thought can often get given to achieving a “decent education”, and “then decent employment”, he said, before meeting requests for support from back home, “because the need and the pressure is out there”. “It’s not a matter of they can wait until you’re self-settled and say ‘okay I have time for you now’”, he explained, but was there from the start and throughout the process of settlement. It is a persistent pressure that many of the refugees cited, although over time they appear to have developed strategies and coping mechanisms to handle it as they began to adapt to their host environments.

The same RCO interviewee raised a point shared by several others in comparing the “Somali” or “African” way of doing things with what he perceived as Western individualism. He explained:

Our upbringing is slightly different from the Western upbringing. We’re very much attached to the families or relatives and that’s the place and the tradition we’ve grown up.

What some can do, however, is to send the minimum they possibly can while aiming to focus upon other goals such as education, he explained. Yet, the idea that the refugees should or might distance themselves from the needs of others in Somalia is thought to be culturally impossible. According to another interviewee, therefore, it is a “duty”, a matter of “conscience” and it is “why Somalis survive”: “from South

Africa to North Africa, to Egypt, if people live that way, they help each other”. No interviewee disagreed with the suggestion that providing support was necessary, although there could be disagreements with their children who lacked the personal ties their parents had. It was a challenge recognised and experienced by all but one interviewee who denied ever having been asked by anyone for support. .

One interviewee explained that financial support that he provided to family members was something that he would have been expected (and expected of himself) to give had he still lived in Somalia and had something to give. It was said to be his “cultural duty” to help family members in need of his support wherever he or they were living. Clearly cultural duties extended beyond this, for both him and most others. As a different interviewee this explained:

*We come from a society where everyone depends on each other. Everyone shares in each other’s successes. We’re not individualistic.*

The crucial point though is how this obligation is met in exile. This cultural duty of shared success (or failure?), combined with a perception of those in Somalia that refugees in Europe are successful, means that the economic devastation caused by conflict in Somalia has also to be shared even though the financial pressures of surviving in high cost economies in exile are enormous. The sacrifices that many have made to meet their cultural obligations to those at home can call into question the blame often assigned for those who achieve poor levels of socio-economic independence, enhancement or ‘successful’ settlement in exile.

The difficulty then of attempting to prioritise educational and career development in exile, as explained in the context of these pressures, means that some can live in host areas “for ten or twenty years” only by sacrificing career or educational aspirations and remaining in unskilled factory work, as one RCO worker interviewee explained. The refugees continue to be in these situations because “their families are dying back home”. Going straight into work rather than into further education is said to be “very common”, and the interviewee cited many Somalis who are in this position. Conflict is said to be a problem in the sense that it has:

...[changed] the way they plan/think – the conflict changed this and created many things like this (referring also to an example of some women he knows who won’t marry because their relatives are dying elsewhere). But the point is that something



should be done about Somalia. My view is that if conflict ended there then things would change here... But EU countries aren't focussing on this and so it continues.

An interviewee exemplified this situation. Having arrived in Europe with no education, having grown up without education in conflict-affected Somalia, he did not have the time to study in exile since his family back in Somalia needed his support:

The problem you're getting from Africa, the need to support people – you don't remember to look at education. If you go part time in education even you can't afford to cover your family's expenses.

He criticised his host country – the Netherlands - for not offering the support that he needed to train for higher skilled work, but at the same time he could not study since he did not have the time to give because of the need to support his family. Whilst his ambition is to receive more education and ultimately to go to university, his “problem is the need to support my family and that's why I'm looking for a job”. “Now I'm surviving”, he said, “but if things changed [in Somalia] then there'd be a big difference and I'd go on to a proper life”. What little money he is able to send from his low-skilled, low-paid factory work the family spends on food, hence the need for him to continue in this stasis whilst the conflict continues elsewhere.

One interviewee described being trapped in unemployment by his efforts to financially support to vulnerable relatives in Somalia. Keeping just £40 of his monthly Income Support, and sending the rest to relatives in Somalia, he eats and lives with friends, not contributing anything to their costs, in order to just survive. He has been in this position since 1996 – for fourteen years – since his late teenage years, when he could have otherwise been completing the education and building a career he initially interrupted due to illness. He would like to study and “learn something”, he explained, but “I can't remember anything I'm told. Because I have so many problems”. Asked what would change in his life if he no longer had to meet his financial commitments to his closely relatives affected by conflict in Somalia, he explained that he'd have “a house, good TV, I'd get married. For now, I can't marry as I don't have any money”. At 32 years old, he is continuing to miss out on key parts of his personal and material development, whilst creating an additional burden upon other members of his community here needing to share their own resources.

Even for those relatively more successful, in terms of having managed to pursue a career in their host area, they are severely felt. One interviewee explained that his

“entire life has been affected” by the financial pressures he has faced to support others since conflict erupted in Somalia. He had initially come from Somaliland to study before the situation in his home area changed. His situation has been compounded by the ongoing requests that he has faced to support other refugees around him. He explained that instead of “settling and establishing [himself] properly”, he had to “think about every penny” he could get. Plans to continue his studies, for example to PhD level, or buy a house, “all of a sudden went out of the window” because he had to secure an income. Eventually, most of his family joined him through family reunion but conflict still affects his life, for around three decades now, through the continuing calls for support, both from within Somalia and the UK, that he has faced. Asked if he has ever managed to get a mortgage, he answered ironically:

No. I’m already in mortgage. Already. Helping... helping my family. So I’m already commitments – you can’t have two commitments etc, or three commitments.. I’ve got already, I have to support myself, support my family – my family here, I have *to support my children, and my family there. So how can I get a mortgage?*

Only one interviewee said that she had bought her own house, despite the obligations for monthly remittances to relatives back in Somalia. Asked what she believed the difference was between her and others in different positions, she suggested that her achievements came down to determination and hard work. Yet she was also relatively advantaged in the sense that her family in Somalia was economically relatively stable and needed her support far less.

The cases reinforce the earlier conclusion, that meeting such commitments or requests can also be a source of worry and stress, and of guilt or anxiety where no support, or insufficient support, can be given. However there are variations. The interview evidence suggests, perhaps not surprisingly, that the problem of sustaining these obligations diminishes over time. But it is not clear if this is the result of a long period of adjustment in their host society as the refugees adapt to ‘transnational’ identity, or a better financial situation, or other factors. Those who faced the greatest pressure were often the only (or one of few) member(s) of their families who carried this obligation outside Somalia, or were on very low incomes (including participants who were or are asylum seekers, parents with young children, or disabled). This finding supports Lindley’s (2006) discussion of how Somalis can experience different

capabilities to remit money to Somalia, depending on their economic circumstances in exile.

Such circumstances or pressures within refugees' lives are often overlooked in discussions of their integration challenges in host areas. In policy and political terms, refugees are mostly viewed as individuals, and not as part of a wider network that can transcend national boundaries. Integration is framed as being unidirectional (from Somali to British or Dutch) and the decision to send money to - or spend time on other activities concerning - the country of origin is perceived to be an individual decision and one that is indeed discouraged. In a discussion with two employees of the Dutch Refugee Council (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland), the researcher was told that:

it is very difficult to get this (the question of how people survive if sending so much of their incomes back to Somalia) seen as a problem at a political level because they say it's your own decision. There's a judgment in there – that you'd better not do it and had better use your income support/money to take care of yourself.

Reinforcing this contention, these informants furthermore cited a recent statement by the Dutch Minister for Integration that immigrants should not invest in their home areas, but in their host area, hence advocating that they should make a choice and commitment to this. There are heated debates around this topic both in the Netherlands and the UK, and in both cases the prevailing view is that individuals are responsible for ensuring integration, and blamed for making insufficient effort to adjust to life within the host area. There is little or no attempt to understand and see as legitimate their 'transnational' obligations, or to support refugees in such processes given that these irrevocably affect their lives in exile.

Expectations of refugees as being national not transnational actors can, furthermore, fall heavily upon those incapable of doing more than survive on benefits in the host society. One interviewee was in such a situation due to his disability caused by the violence he had suffered in Somalia. His state support for him as an individual, does not take into account his place in an 'international' family. He cannot afford to send financial assistance to those who need his support in Somalia. Frustrated by this situation, and feeling guilty about "failing" his family, he wondered if it might have been better for him to have stayed in Somalia and not flee for his life, since what kind of life was he now living away from there? As we have seen, guilt and anxiety are

common reactions for those unable to offer more, or any, support to those who need it, given their own difficulties in exile. Only a few interviewees were in any way reconciled to the fact.

### **Social problems**

A final area of concern raised by about a quarter of the interviewees are the social problems which affect their communities in exile. These include turning to crime, divorce, low educational attainment, and drug use. We have seen above how poor socio-economic circumstances can be connected with the conflict in Somalia, and the social problems they face may be a further reflection of this. Indeed, some of the interviewees explicitly sought to link the two together, and their accounts are discussed below.

In the overview section at the start of this analysis it was noted that RCO officials argued that low educational attainment of Somali children in exile, and the fact that some can turn to criminality, are linked to the problems of social instability. This, furthermore, was linked to their connections with Somalia, suggesting that the “root to poor performance is where we’re from and what’s happening in Somalia”: it is this, they contend, which contributes to social problems.

Another interviewee referred similarly to how “the older generation sees the younger generation failing”, through failing to progress socio-economically and turning to crime. Several of the interviewees suggested that this was particularly a problem amongst young males, and one suggested that this was in part because of Somali cultural expectations of boys and girls, whereby boys have greater freedoms and girls greater domestic responsibilities. In other words, there are both country of origin and host country factors involved and these complexities need to be recognised in developing policy responses.

The clan leader spoke both of problems for Somalis here, and in relation to conflict in Somalia. Through his work, he suggested that he knew of “Somali youth in British jails”, who had turned to crime after failing in education. He also spoke of divorce and single parenting, which is “rare to see in Somalia”. Several others made the same point. There can also be “a big problem of turning to khat” as a result of poor economic performance, and pressures from Somalia.

Another interviewee – an RCO member - suggests that young Somali boys may turn to drug use – again khat – because they can feel like “outcasts” in their host areas. In their often poor families, they can turn to crime because they feel unable to afford to live like “richer” people in the host society. Another interviewee raised the same point. In addition, those who face financial pressures from Somalia can also, it is argued, turn to drugs or become mentally ill because of the stress that this creates for them.

One interviewee had himself turned to heavy drug use and criminality, as he attempted to reconcile the pressures he faced both in exile and from his family back in Somalia. An asylum seeker at the time, he was frustrated by insensitivity to his situation as a refugee and with a family that needed and expected his financial support:

I didn't have no work permit for four years and the government said you have to live on food vouchers and for me it was like: “what? Where is my dream, where is my goals, where is my.. you know, I've got things to do, I've got people phoning me <laughs> .. they think I am in a dream-land and I have to move on, I have to earn quickly because I've got people who rely on me.

He began working illegally as a mini-cab driver, without a licence or insurance, because he “had a grave responsibility on my shoulder” to support others. In addition to his own personal goals to begin to build a life in his new environment, this meant he was willing to simply wait and do nothing while the Home Office considered his asylum case and refused him permission to work. He turned to heavy khat use as a way of staying awake during his night shifts, and things rapidly spiralled out of control. Eventually, after nearly being murdered by another khat addict, he was able to turn his life around. Khat use is often spoken of as a host country problem, assumed to be linked with feelings of hopelessness, depression, and frustration (for example, Fangen 2006), but this evidence supports a focus on the effect of the sending area too. Other interviewees discuss others less fortunate, who have developed drug and mental illness in response to the pressures and problems that they face, both through their challenges in exile and from Somalia.

## **Conclusion**

While successful integration is important for the stability of host areas, it must be supported through tailored policies based upon an understanding of refugees' needs.

In the case of Somalis, “dedicated and specific” policies and services may be needed to support them in achieving their full potential, it can be argued (Harris, 2004). In this respect, this paper has examined micro-level needs and experiences of refugees, questioning an assumption that often informs host country policies, that conflict in the sending area is a ‘past tense’ issue for refugees. While conflict can be linked to issues of trauma derived from the sending area, there is far less recognition of the way that conflict can be transmitted through and into refugee communities and how protracted instability in countries of origin can continue to affect refugee populations in complex and profound ways.

The paper suggests that more appropriate policies to address the needs of refugee populations should take into account the variety of pressures and opportunities produced by ongoing conflict in the country of origin that impact refugees’ lives in exile and which play a significant role in how they settle and adapt in host communities. Rather than seek to distrust or blame those who struggle or fail to settle or integrate in prescribed ways, there is a value in exploring, amongst many other salient factors, how the situation in the country of origin mediates the ways in which refugees choose, or need, to live their lives in exile. This paper has revealed a range of additional obstacles, challenges, considerations and - at times – opportunities, which are little considered for members of this often poorly integrated or economically poorly performing refugee population. Even for those refugees from areas less directly affected by conflict – such as Puntland and Somaliland - the lives of the refugees could be equally affected by the situation in areas of origin.

Speaking to an integration agenda, this paper has examined some of the variety of ways in which ongoing conflict in Somalia can affect its refugees living in the UK and the Netherlands specifically. It offers some ways of thinking about a largely overlooked area of potential influence, and challenges policy makers to recognise these issues in managing expectations of settlement and in designing more appropriate settlement and integration policies. Refugees do not simply move to Europe and begin new, linear associations with their host areas, but can retain complex connections to conflict elsewhere. This in turn impacts how they settle, how they relate to their host environment and may lead to tensions and conflicts, in combination with other host-country objectives and expectations of refugees that until now have remained the narrower focus of policy responses. Taking into account micro-level

experiences and understandings of the 'conflict experience in exile' may, it is argued, help to improve an understanding of why settlement and integration policies are not always successful. At the same time these findings may also help to avert placing blame on refugees seen as individuals who do not succeed rather than, more accurately, transnational actors who bring within them enduring cultural obligations combined with the enduring legacy of conflict.

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