

History, overview, trends and issues in major Somali refugee displacements in the near region

SUMMARY

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This paper charts the displacement of Somalis living in the Horn, beginning from the 1977-78 border war between Ethiopia and Somalia, through to later cycles of flight caused by conflict, state collapse and natural disasters such as drought. Although cycles of assisted and unassisted returns have taken place and have helped promote rehabilitation, in general they have lacked sustainability and many of those who have returned remain destitute and/or displaced within the country. Many refugees have opted to forego formal refugee status and assistance by integrating amongst local populations in rural areas around refugee camps or in cities. A small proportion has been able to resettle to third countries through sponsorship programmes.

All host countries – albeit to different extents - impose limitations on refugees' movements outside the camps and forbid employment or land ownership. Educational and training facilities are available in most camps, but enrolment is not universal. To supplement the assistance they receive, refugees rely on social networks within camps and, where they exist, with local hosts. Those who have lived in the camps for longer tend to have stronger ties with their fellow refugees and many have access to transnational social networks through which they are supported by relatives living in the “far-off” diaspora (North America, Europe and the Middle East) who send them their remittances.

In the absence of a ready durable solution, many refugees return to Somalia for short visits in order to support their families and begin to explore possibilities for return. Their engagement with multiple locations at the same time, and short-term visits to their country of origin, are risk management practices that may usefully be built upon to enable temporary return and to build confidence in the viability of longer-term return.

However it is likely that different solutions will be needed for different groups of people. For instance, longer stayers in the refugee camps often have less secure claims to land and other property upon return to Somalia. They have been urbanized to an extent, such that relocation to urban centres may be more feasible. Even so, there, they will obviously be in competition for income and services with the many internally displaced persons living in urban centres. Newer arrivals to the camps may be able to return to more rural-based livelihoods, although their ability to access land must be confirmed prior to their repatriation. For some refugees, return may be more problematic than for others, and other solutions such as local settlement or resettlement, or some other arrangement, may need to be found.