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In the shelter of each other: notions of home and belonging amongst Somali refugees in Nairobi

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Introduction

This paper explores the impact of protracted displacement on perceptions of home and belonging among Somali refugees living in Kenya. It challenges the view held by some scholars that in a highly mobile and globalised world traditional notions of home have become meaningless. Instead, it demonstrates that cultural identity and attachment to home has not only been preserved among Somali refugees in the Eastleigh area of Nairobi, but has been reinforced.

Over the past 20 years, the geopolitical landscape of Somalia has undergone multiple shifts, reflecting the complex and dynamic nature of conflict in the country. Warlordism, general anarchy, Islamic militancy, banditry, piracy, a series of foreign interventions, drought and famine have all played a major roles in creating a tragic context of ongoing insecurity and displacement. The nature of conflict, in turn, has impacted the way in which Somali refugees have perceived and understood notions of ‘home’.

Historically, Somalis have adhered to a geographically de-territorialized and nomadic identity by employing mobile ways of living to enhance their survival in a harsh and challenging environment. Whether as pastoralists seeking greener pastures for their livestock or traders developing and maintaining cross-border links and routes, mobility has always played a central role in the identity of Somalis.

Not surprisingly, Somalis continued to use such mobile strategies to enhance their survival with the collapse of the Somali state in 1991. Yet in a context in which, globally, the strongly territorialised notion of the nation-state has become the primary means by which individuals and groups access their human rights, the existence of a de-territorialized identity has become increasingly problematic.

After 20 years of conflict in Somalia, and with no solution in sight, hundreds of thousands of Somali refugees continue to struggle to survive, either in Kenya’s refugee camps, or in the challenging urban climate of Nairobi. There were approximately 520,000 Somali refugees and asylum seekers in Kenya by the end of November 2011,¹ of which 444,030 were in the Dadaab camps, 45,000 in Kakuma camp, and 30,790 in Nairobi.

Yet durable solutions continue to remain elusive, in part because the government and international community continue to favour repatriation over local integration and resettlement and, in part, because policies continue to be informed and influenced primarily by sedentary theories and understandings of the way in which people organise themselves and perceive their situation. As a result, Somali refugees have effectively had their lives put on hold, with minimal effort being made to find alternative interim or long-term solutions.

While this situation of protracted exile is not unique to the Somali refugee population, this paper argues that a pragmatic approach to the reality of their situation in Kenya must replace the traditional approach of waiting for the situation in Somalia to improve so that they can all return. As the paper demonstrates, despite the fact that Somali refugees in Nairobi continue to idealise home and strongly ascribe to a Somali identity and therefore hope for an eventual return to Somalia, they have always exercised a healthy degree of pragmatism and have therefore been thinking ‘globally’ rather than ‘locally’ in their search for a more productive

¹UNHCR Kenya Statistical summary on refugees and asylum seekers as of 30 November 2011

life in exile. However, there is a need for national and regional refugee policies to acknowledge this reality in order to better safeguard their ability to access their rights.

The paper begins with an overview of Kenya's role as a refugee hosting country and its refugee policies and laws. It will consider how these policies have changed over time, from the relatively tolerant policies of the 1960s and 1970s to the more restrictive policies of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Drawing on research conducted among Somali refugees in Eastleigh in September and October 2011, the paper will then discuss the life of Somalis in Nairobi and their sense of belonging to the city and country, particularly how their cultural identity may have changed over the past two decades due to their exile. It will explore different theories about cultural identity and debates about the relationship between person and place.

The following sections will explore notions of home and return, leading into a broader discussion of durable solutions in which there will be an emphasis on the need for the international refugee regime to seek alternative solutions to the situation of Somali refugees in Kenya.

Methodology

Twenty-five semi-structured interviews were conducted with Somali refugees in Eastleigh, Nairobi during the months of September and October 2011. Two group interviews were conducted (one with four interviewees, the other with three), while the rest of the interviews were individual-based. The interviews were based on a questionnaire that was used to guide the discussion rather than restrict it. The names of the interviewees have been changed in the study.

Although a gender balance was intended, of those interviewed, eighteen were men and seven were women. Interpreters were used in all but four interviews. They also served as guides and 'gatekeepers' to Eastleigh, which is a difficult neighbourhood to navigate as an 'outsider'. Both interpreters were well known within the community, which gave them access to both women and men, but ultimately more men due to specific cultural barriers.

Interviewees ranged in age from 17 to 69. The only criterion for those interviewed was that they had been in exile for more than 10 years. This specific criterion had been deemed necessary in order to more effectively explore and analyse changes and shifts in identity and a sense of belonging among refugees over time.

Finally, a number of interviews were conducted with senior UNHCR staff in Nairobi, the Country Representative of the International Rescue Committee (IRC) Kenya office as well as individuals working for a number of Community-Based Organisations in Eastleigh.

Kenya: historical and legal context

Until the late 1980s and early 1990s, refugees in Kenya enjoyed 'full status' rights, which included "the right to reside in urban centres and move freely throughout the country, the right to obtain a work permit and access educational opportunities, and the right to apply for legal local integration" (Campbell, 2006: 399). This open door and hospitable attitude was

mainly due to the relatively small number of refugees in Kenya at the time: approximately 12,000 at the end of the 1980s.² (Jennifer Hyndman and Bo Nylund, 1998).

The early 1990s saw a dramatic shift in Kenya's refugee and asylum policies to a more restrictive approach that centred on the containment and isolation of refugees residing in its territory, in part due to a shift in global ideologies that came about with the end of the Cold War. As Western countries lost an ideological incentive to resettle large numbers of refugees to their countries, much of the burden of hosting refugees rested on countries of first asylum.

Additionally, the end of the Cold War coincided with a rise in conflicts in the East African region that caused the number of people seeking asylum in countries such as Kenya to soar in the early 1990s. Somalis made up the bulk of the new arrivals in Kenya and by 1992 there were approximately 400,000 Somali refugees in the country (Hyndman and Nylund, 1998).

With this sudden explosion in refugee numbers, the Kenyan government found itself overwhelmed, unprepared and unable to manage such a large population of refugees. It therefore handed over prime responsibility for managing the refugee crisis to UNHCR. With this handover, the Kenyan authorities retreated from refugee affairs (Campbell 2006; Horst 2006).

Somali refugees arriving in Kenya at this time were recognised on a *prima facie*³ basis, which gave them temporary asylum in the country. Unable to close its borders and deeming it impossible to locally settle nearly half a million refugees, the Kenyan government sought a way to contain the situation until the conflict was over and the refugees could be repatriated.

As Loescher and Milner point out: "As a result of diminishing international support for long-staying refugee populations, local settlement began to be perceived by most African host governments as politically and economically infeasible" (2005:156). It was in this new geopolitical climate that the 'encampment policy' was conceived and implemented in Kenya, a policy that centres on the isolation and containment of refugees in 'designated areas' of the country.

Many practitioners and academics in the field of forced migration have voiced concern over the policy as it not only limits the freedom of movement and right to decide where to live, but also limits the social and economic integration of those who seek asylum within Kenya's borders. Under the policy, freedom of movement from camps is extremely limited and refugees must be issued with a time limited travel pass by the District Commissioner to leave the camps. Reasons for travel are only granted for medical reasons, for attending a course or for training, and proof is needed accordingly.

Under such restrictions, many hundreds of thousands of refugees have been forced to live in semi-desert and isolated regions of the country, now known as Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps, and have struggled to reclaim and enjoy their lives in exile. As Elizabeth Campbell asserts: "If the pre-1991 refugee regime in Kenya can be characterized as generous and hospitable, with emphasis on local integration, the post-1991 regime has been less hospitable, characterized by growing levels of xenophobia, denial of basic refugee rights and few opportunities for local integration." (Campbell, 2005:5). Restrictions on freedom of

² Estimates of the number of refugees in Kenya as a whole and in different regions of the country vary depending on the source.

³ Hyndman and Nylund define the *prima facie* refugee regime as '...determination of eligibility based on first impressions or in the absence of evidence to the contrary' (1998:29)

movement, therefore, undermine the rights of refugees, as enshrined in the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1969 OAU Convention.

Nevertheless, implementing the encampment policy has been less rigorous in practice mainly because many aspects of the policy were never clearly defined in writing and instead have been implemented on an ad hoc basis. As a UNHCR Senior Protection Officer commented in a meeting at the UNHCR Kenya Branch Office in Nairobi: “There are provisions in the policy that allow the Minister to designate areas, but these ‘designated areas’ were never officially identified. This has resulted in a *de facto* encampment policy, where Dadaab and Kakuma have become the two main areas of refugee concentration.”⁴

It must be noted that Kenya, much like other African hosting countries, is not in an easy position when it comes to hosting refugees. First, it has the responsibility of hosting nearly 601,500 refugees⁵ within its territory, a number that not many countries have had the burden of dealing with. Second, Kenya already struggles to provide the necessary infrastructure for its own population let alone coping with the added responsibility of looking after more than half a million refugees. Lastly, its geographic location has meant that it has been dealing with a range of security issues. For years, its porous border with Somalia has caused much concern in the government with illegal arms smuggling and, more recently, the cross border movements of militants based out of Somalia.

With the recent spate of kidnappings on Kenyan soil that have been blamed on Al Shabaab militants, the issue of security and how Kenya chooses to manage its security agenda has again become a topic of much discussion in not only the political arena but also in public spheres. Kenya views the topic of inland security as directly linked to its Somali refugee population and has announced that Al Shabaab militants have been operating out of cells based among Somali refugee communities in the capital city and the camps.

In this new geo-political climate, authorities have found a new reason to reinforce its encampment policy and keep refugee population far from any urban centre. It may be too early to say, but further limiting the mobility of refugees may become reprioritised by the Kenyan authorities in this heightened state of security.

Regardless, many have opted out of the official encampment policy, and there is a large and growing population of Somali refugees in urban centres such as Eastleigh in Nairobi. Their numbers are testament to the fairly ad hoc nature of the encampment policy and the ambiguity that exists in its implementation. In meetings with UNHCR Senior Protection Officers in Nairobi,⁶ it was discussed how, in practice, there is not an *official* bar on refugees being in urban areas and that the Department for Refugee Affairs even refers cases to UNHCR.

As Campbell argues, “Despite the narrowly defined encampment policy and its lack of exceptions, several thousand asylum seekers, individually recognised and *prima facie* refugees – without access to legal protection or material assistance – live permanently in Nairobi” (Campbell, 2006: 399). Refugees residing outside of the camps, like those in Eastleigh, exist within a protection gap and hold a ‘a legally ambiguous status’ (Campbell

⁴ Meeting with UNHCR Staff worker held on 8 September 2011 at UNHCR Kenya Branch Office, Nairobi, Kenya.

⁵ UNHCR Kenya Statistical summary on refugees and asylum seekers as of 30 November 2011

⁶ Meeting with UNHCR staff worker held on 8 September 2011 at UNHCR Kenya Branch Office, Nairobi, Kenya.

2005) whereby they are entitled to little protection or assistance in Nairobi and regularly have to travel back to the camps for population counts and registration with UNHCR. UNHCR Protection Officers in Nairobi explained that there are many discrepancies in the policies that govern the rights of refugees, especially when it comes to which rights are being guaranteed in Nairobi.

Unsurprisingly, a national urban policy that would address the protection needs of this growing population does not exist: although the Kenyan authorities may have turned a blind eye to the presence of urban refugees for all these years, they have never entirely or officially condoned this presence by drafting and implementing a policy that addresses it.

A shifting approach to dealing with urban refugees

Until recently, UNHCR's involvement with urban refugees was also highly limited. As Campbell, Crisp and Kiragu state, with regards to UNHCR's involvement with urban refugees during the 1990s and half of the 2000s:

UNHCR generally acceded to the Kenyan government's encampment policy. While the organisation was able to negotiate some exceptions to that rule, UNHCR generally advised refugees approaching the Branch Office in Nairobi that they should report to and reside in Dadaab or Kakuma. Few refugees were provided with the documentation that they required to remain in Nairobi legally and assistance was limited to a small number of the most vulnerable cases, almost invariably on a short-term basis...As a result of this tacit agreement with the encampment policy, UNHCR knew relatively little about the situation of refugees in Nairobi and was not well placed to devise protection and solutions strategies for them (2011:8).

Over the last half-decade, both UNHCR and the Kenyan government have taken steps in improving the management of the refugee situation in the country. Firstly, the Refugees Act 2006 came into operation in early 2007. Following this, the Department for Refugee Affairs (DRA) was established. These are significant developments, as prior to the 2006 Refugees Act, Kenya did not have national refugee legislation nor did it have a government department that was dedicated to refugee affairs.

The DRA has slowly been working to address a number of issues concerning refugees in Kenya, and, more recently, UNHCR has been working with the department to build its capacity in order to better respond to issues concerning Kenya's refugee populations. (Campbell, Crisp and Kiragu, 2011:6). Meanwhile UNHCR began to change its approach to urban refugees with the launch of the Nairobi Initiative in 2005, an initiative aimed at examining the situation of refugees living in Nairobi by understanding and responding to their needs.

Through the Nairobi Initiative, UNHCR has taken a far more proactive approach in its engagement with urban-based refugees and has reached out to community-based organisation working in the refugee communities. It has made considerable strides in its work with urban refugees and in its partnership with NGOs and other stakeholders in Nairobi.

Furthermore, the Nairobi Initiative compliments UNHCR's relatively new urban policy, which was introduced in 2009. As a senior UNHCR protection officer in Nairobi explained:

“UNHCR’s urban refugee policy allowed UNHCR Kenya to be more assertive in its efforts to reach out to urban-based refugees in Nairobi. In many ways, it served as a way to confirm what was already being done in practice.”⁷ However, the Kenyan government has not officially changed its policy: the encampment policy is still the official approach to managing refugees in Kenya.

Identity

This section will explore the complex issue of identities and the ways in which they are understood and preserved among individuals and communities. It will examine the impact that displacement has had on the cultural identity of Somali refugees in Nairobi and will explore a number of theories that centre on the relationship between person and place.

For decades, the relationship between people, place and identity has been the subject of much debate among social and cultural anthropologists. The debate centres on the notion of the territorialisation of identity and is polarised between those who argue that people and place have a deep and lasting natural bond (sedentary and essentialist theories on identity), and those who advocate the existence of a post-modern condition of identity whereby people no longer have a strong attachment to place anymore and that ‘home’ ceases to exist in this increasingly globalised world (de-territorialised theories of identity).

A large proportion of the Somali population are nomadic-pastoralists with a long history of mobility and involvement in ancient trading links and routes that have historically extended across the region that covers Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia, and the Arab world. Mobility has therefore played a major role in forming the identity of ‘the Somali’.

Traditionally, nomadic pastoralist movements have mainly depended on clan and kinship lines that extend across the Horn of Africa as well as on taking their camels and other livestock to “cooler ground”, as termed by Tim Allen (1996). The harsh and semi-desert landscape of much of Somalia and the wider region has encouraged, if not forced, the continuous movement of families and clans in order to find greener pastures for themselves and their animals. It is worth noting that mobility is not restricted to nomadic pastoralists: sedentary cultivators have also employed it as a survival strategy, particularly in difficult times (Horst 2006).

It can be argued that the identity of the Somali nomadic pastoralist has never truly been linked to a fixed locality but rather to a vast region. The link between place and identity as is prioritised in sedentary thinking, therefore, cannot be applied to the Somali nomadic pastoralist, as his or her identity derives from membership of a particular clan (that extends across vast areas) rather than to a specific place that is geographically fixed. Mobility and the constant scouting for new places to temporarily set up home (Horst 2006) has in itself become the essence of their identity. The following sub-sections will explore these ideas with specific reference to the Somali refugees interviewed in Eastleigh.

⁷ Meeting with UNHCR staff worker held on 8 September 2011 at UNHCR Kenya Branch Office, Nairobi, Kenya.

An essentialist approach to understanding identity

Sedentary theories are essentially based on the idea that a profound and natural bond between people and place exists. The idea that people are intimately linked to a physical place that is known as home is a common and comforting way of understanding one's place in the world and how an individual and society form a cultural identity. In this understanding, the notion of home and belonging is not only linked to being part of a community and the relationships that exist among those in the community, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to the physical place and soil upon which this community thrives.

In this understanding, home is territorialised, belonging is territorialised, history is territorialised, and thus culture and identity are territorialised. The existence of nation-states portrays the way in which belonging has been politically territorialised since people ascribe to national identities.

As Coles states, "Man is not an ethereal spirit living outside space or time but a terrestrial creature with roots in a land and its history that has formed common beliefs and values...and conferred on it an identity. The link between people and a land is a profound one." (Quoted in Warner, 1994:163). This relationship is based on an understanding that people are 'rooted' to a particular place that is steeped in their community's history. History can be traced back through ancestral lines that have been preserved in this place and land.

The corollary to this theory is that displacement causes people to be uprooted from their place in the world, just like a tree is uprooted from the soil to which its roots have been intricately attached. This understanding helps to assign a pathological nature to displacement.

In this respect, since identity, culture and belonging are territorialised, the displaced person is not simply 'uprooted' from place but essentially torn loose from culture and from his or her identity. As Malkki notes in her critique of sedentary theories, the refugee is thus seen as "a naked and unaccommodated man;" naked and not clothed in culture (Malkki 1997). Sedentary theories therefore argue that a rupture between person and place occurs through displacement, a rupture that jeopardises the very understanding of who one is and where one belongs.

The collective preservation of identity

As one walks in and around Eastleigh, it is impossible not to notice that Somalis in the neighbourhood have managed to preserve their Somali identity both individually and collectively. For example, Somali seemed to be the dominant language on the street and in shops; the style of dress, particular among women, was distinctively Somali; and the cafes, hotels, and restaurants served Somali food.

The research found that the presence of so many Somalis in a relatively small geographic space has ultimately resulted in a collective preservation of Somali identity. By living and socialising predominantly in this Somali community, Somalis have not been forced to adapt to a different social conduct or way of life as would normally occur when an individual or group move to a foreign country. Furthermore, as will later be discussed in the paper, the notion of the Somali as 'the other' has aided in the preservation and reinforcement of a Somali identity among Somalis.

The study had anticipated being faced with challenging and ambiguous accounts of how one's identity had changed whilst in exile. However, everyone interviewed asserted that their identity had not changed since having fled Somalia.

In the interviews, statements such as the following made by a male interviewee were frequently heard: "I am a Somali. I am still Somali and I am still a Muslim. Even if I got to another country, I will always be Somali."⁸ It soon became clear that their sense of identity was linked to the existence of a social network within a Somali community and not by the fact that they were or were not in Somalia.

One interviewee whose two children had been born outside Somalia explained that he still strongly identified himself as a Somali: "I am bringing up my children as Somalis and making sure that they know and understand where they come from". When asked if the fact that they had never seen Somalia would cause a problem in the construction of their Somali identity and sense of belonging, he explained: "No, it doesn't matter where my children were born or where they live. I will make sure that they know that they are Somali and that they feel Somali. I will ensure that they know their culture, their language and understand that both of their parents are Somali."⁹

More surprisingly, younger interviewees who had either been born in Kenya or arrived when they were very young explained that they were just as Somali as the older refugees who had lived a significant portion of their lives in Somali before being displaced. When talking about 'identity', the researcher would often ask if they felt Kenyan in anyway. They had, after all, lived for the majority, if not all, of their lives in Kenya, not Somalia. A 20-year-old woman, for example, stated in a discussion: "No, I am not Kenyan. I am just here for the time being."¹⁰

Similarly a 22-year-old man who had arrived in Kenya as a toddler described his notions of identity and belonging: "You will never forget your identity, you will always remain who you are."¹¹ It became apparent from these discussions that many Somali refugees in Eastleigh were challenging the common-sense understandings of the relationship between person and place just as had been seen in Malkki's research among the Hutu refugees in Mishamo camp in Tanzania.

The fact that the second-generation Somali refugees in Kenya identify themselves as Somali and not Kenyan is testament to this argument. With regards to those interviewed, their Somali identity was formed and reinforced due to their place within a strong Somali community and not by their presence in a specific place or land. Being born into a Somali family and raised in a Somali community was enough for them to identify themselves as Somalis.

Kinsi, a 17-year-old girl who was born and raised in Kenya explained that her cultural identity had always been and would remain Somali. She had been born into a Somali home, in a Somali speaking region of Kenya, and upon moving to Nairobi, had settled into a Somali neighbourhood, Eastleigh. Her English and Kiswahili were poor and she felt more comfortable conversing in Somali. Her identity had clearly been formed as a Somali girl despite never having been to Somalia. She even asserted that acquiring a new nationality in the future could never affect her link to Somalia and that her identity as a Somali would

⁸ Interview held on 21 September 2011 in Eastleigh, Nairobi, Kenya.

⁹ Interview held on 19 September 2011 in Eastleigh, Nairobi, Kenya.

¹⁰ Interview held on 22 September 2011 in Eastleigh, Nairobi, Kenya.

¹¹ Interview held on 19 September 2011 in Eastleigh, Nairobi, Kenya.

always remain because she had been raised as one and her family's history is linked to Somalia.¹²

In fact, many of the refugees interviewed expressed similar views on how they would always remain Somali, despite their location. In an interview with a young adult male, he explained that wherever life may take him, whether to South Africa, the USA, or Europe, and whatever nationality he may acquire in the future, he and his 'nature' will always remain Somali.¹³ Similarly, a young man in his twenties who was interviewed expressed: "Your identity never changes. Your identity should always remain with you. Wherever one goes, one's identity remains the same."¹⁴

When discussing their thoughts on the preservation of their identity, the interviewees also often attempted to speak on behalf of the entire global Somali diaspora. They often declared that the sentiments they were expressing were general and to be found across all ages and locations of the Somali diaspora. As one interviewee asserted: "The Somali community, wherever they are, will never forget their culture or identity."¹⁵

In a later discussion with three community elders, the researcher referred to the interviews held with younger refugees with regard to how they ascribe to a Somali identity despite having lived in Kenya for most, if not all, of their lives. The elders explained that Somalis are very proud of their identity and try hard to raise their children as Somalis, no matter where they live. One of the elders stated: "Even families who have raised their children abroad want to send their children back to Africa to learn more about Somali culture. Deep down, everyone wants his or her children to have the Somali culture. They don't want to lose that".¹⁶

The case of Somali refugees in Eastleigh shows that people rather than place are bearers of a cultural identity. Somalis are perhaps the masters of being able to re-territorialise their identity as their history as a people has always been linked to mobility. If place was the single most important factor in the construction and preservation of a cultural identity, there would be no Somali identity today. In fact, Somalis in Eastleigh have demonstrated a commitment to preserving their identity and have held tightly onto their culture. Wherever they may go, they carry their identity with them as a family, as a community, as 'a nation in exile' (Malkki 1995).

Belonging

The following section will examine the discussions that took place with refugees on the topic of belonging and will touch upon their relationships with Kenya. In particular, it will focus on the question of why Somali identity has remained fixed despite years of displacement and exile, and consider why Somali refugees who have never seen Somalia are determined to identify themselves as Somali and not Kenyan. An analysis of Somali refugees' accounts on where they believe they belong gives some insight into the reasons why Somali identity has been able to flourish in Nairobi over the last two decades in exile.

¹² Interview held on 22 September 2011 in Eastleigh, Nairobi, Kenya.

¹³ Interview held on 19 September 2011 in Eastleigh, Nairobi, Kenya.

¹⁴ Interview held on 22 September 2011 in Eastleigh, Nairobi, Kenya.

¹⁵ Interview held on 22 September 2011 in Eastleigh, Nairobi, Kenya

¹⁶ Interview with three elders held on 6 October 2011 in Eastleigh, Nairobi, Kenya.

Kibreab (1999) argues that the territorialisation of identity is reinforced by the fact that rights are determined by one's national identity. This can also be extended to the sense of belonging among a refugee population in a country of asylum. Among Somali refugees in Kenya, there is a strong belief that their identity as Somalis has been preserved due to the harsh conditions and strict policies under which they live. A territorialised claim on identity, therefore, exists in Kenya, whereby the rights of people are determined by who they are (their national identity) and the nature of their presence in the country.

A note on Eastleigh

As a bustling and overcrowded suburb of Nairobi, Eastleigh is home to numerous small and large-scale businesses and commercial enterprises mainly owned by economic migrants and refugees. Over the last decade, it has become the hub of refugee life and business in the capital. It comprises mainly Somalis, with a number of Ethiopians, Congolese, Burundians, Rwandans, Ugandans, and Eritreans also residing and working there (Campbell: 2005). Prior to the mass refugee influx of the 1990s, Eastleigh was home to a large number of Somali migrants. This served as a major 'pull' factor for Somali refugees when fleeing the conflict in Somalia (Campbell 2005).

Somali refugees engage in a range of jobs, mainly in the informal economy as casual workers in shops, restaurants, hotels, and so on (Moret et al: 2006). However, for many Somali refugees in Eastleigh, gaining employment is a huge challenge, as it still remains illegal for refugees, Somali or other, to legally enter the formal job market in Kenya.

This means that the jobs that they may have access to in Eastleigh are not always long-term, well paid, or beneficial to any sort of career progression. There are also a significant number of highly successful Somalis who own shopping malls, hotels, and large businesses. This group mainly comprise of earlier Somali migrants who arrived in Kenya long before the war and the refugee influx.

Feelings towards Kenya

On the surface, it is not unreasonable to assume that a Somali refugee living in Kenya for the last decade or more feels an attachment to Kenya and lays claim to some sort of belonging to the country. After all, the Somali refugee community has lived, died, and given birth to new life all on Kenyan soil. Dig a little deeper, however, and one begins to see the ripples that cause many Somali refugees to look not at Kenya but to the Somali community that they live in and Somalia as their place of belonging.

All those interviewed expressed that they felt that they belonged to Somalia and that they had little or no sense of belonging to Kenya. Interviewees emphasised the belief that their sense of belonging to Somalia could never be replaced by a sense of belonging to another country regardless of the length of time they had spent or would spend outside of Somalia. Their world in Kenya revolved around Eastleigh and other Somalis in the community. Little integration with Kenyans was observed, even among the younger generation who had grown up in Kenya: for instance one 28-year-old male interviewee said that he only lived and socialised with Somalis.

There was a strong belief among the Somali refugees interviewed that the local population in Nairobi and Kenya, in general, perceived them as ‘the other’, “the Somali”, and “the refugee”. Many discussed a sense of marginalisation and discrimination against them. This perception had aided in the construction of a socially distinct and separate group or community.

As the term indicates, being identified as ‘the other’ is synonymous with not belonging to a particular group, community, or society. If this is what is perceived and felt among the Somali community in Eastleigh, then it is no wonder that their sense of belonging has strongly remained with Somalia and not Kenya. Many testimonies, including those of younger interviewees, pointed towards these perceptions.

As Kinsi explained in her interview: “I cannot call Kenya my country. Even though I was born and brought up here, I am still treated like a foreigner, as a refugee, and the police constantly ask me for my ID and papers. This is a sign that Kenya is not my country.”¹⁷ It is a simple statement that gives enormous weight to an argument that can be applied universally: if one is treated as ‘the other’ and constantly reminded that one is different, one’s sense of belonging to the host country will be tested: a refugee or a migrant needs to feel welcome in order to develop an attachment to their host society.

However, it is also imperative to acknowledge that it is a two-way relationship and one party’s behaviour has an effect on the other’s behaviour and understanding of the situation. In Eastleigh, the host community’s perception of the Somali as ‘the other’ has no doubt affected the way Somalis feel towards their host society, leading them to strengthen and reinforce their cultural identity. This has the effect of the further ‘othering’ of the Somali on the part of the host community because their original belief that Somalis are different and foreign has now been strengthened by the actions of the Somali, which actually had only been strengthened due to the host community’s initial perception.

As stated above, many testimonies described the perception of not belonging to Kenyan society. For example, when asked if after 20 years of living in Kenya he felt like he belonged, a 31 year old expressed the following: “No, I am not a Kenyan, so how can I feel that it is home.... I am not a part of this country because I am not a citizen and I am not a resident. We [Somali refugees] only remain as refugees and no one cares for us here...Even if we wanted to be Kenyan, we couldn’t be because we are seen as different.”¹⁸

Life in Kenya for the average Somali refugee has presented many challenges. Somalis in Eastleigh live in difficult conditions and the inability for most, including the youth, to access employment and education is an unfortunate reality. Although Eastleigh thrives with businesses ranging from shopping centres to big hotels, the majority of Somali refugees struggle to negotiate a meaningful place for themselves in this urban jungle.

Their sense of marginalisation seems to have grown in the aftermath of the recent kidnappings in Kenya by Al Shabaab militants in September and October 2011, as well as the grenade attacks in Nairobi in late October 2011 (also reportedly linked to Al Shabaab). In the wake of such attacks, Nairobi heightened its security in public places and residents were told to be vigilant. In effect, much of the attention turned to Eastleigh.

¹⁷ Interview held on 22 September 2011 in Eastleigh, Nairobi, Kenya.

¹⁸ Interview held on 21 September 2011 in Eastleigh, Nairobi, Kenya.

Many Somalis believed that Kenya's renewed focus on Somalia, Al Shabaab, and its possible presence in Kenya was another reason for Somalis to be labelled and discriminated against. In this time of heightened security, arbitrary arrests and police harassment increased on the streets of Eastleigh as the authorities announced that they were attempting to 'flush out' Al Shabaab operatives who were allegedly present in Eastleigh.

In the days following such operations in Eastleigh, many Eastleigh residents were very fearful of being targeted by the police. There was a real sense of fear and confusion in the neighbourhood and it only served to remind some that they were indeed foreigners in Kenya.

As a result of the lack of educational and employment opportunities for Somali refugees in Eastleigh and Kenya in general, many lives have effectively been put on hold since arriving in the country. The majority of interviewees stated that they did not enjoy their lives in Kenya because there was a total lack of opportunities here and they expressed frustration by saying that they had wasted many of their years (often the most productive years of their lives) as a result. It should be noted, however, that despite the difficulties faced by many refugees in Eastleigh, most believed that they were better off in Nairobi than in the camps.

Gouled was one of the first refugees interviewed for the study¹⁹. He had arrived in Kenya in 1991 at the age of 25. Now at 45 he said that he often reflects on the years that should have been the most productive years of his life, which he believes were wasted in refugee camps. He is a resident of Kakuma refugee camp and was in Nairobi for a visit. He explained that when he arrived in Kenya in 1991, he never imagined that he would still be in the country 20 years later.

He spoke of how he was young when he arrived and had thought that the problems in Somalia would be temporary. He was nostalgic when describing his life: "I still feel like a refugee in Kenya. Even after all these years, I am nothing but a refugee. I cannot act like a real Kenyan resident or citizen because I am a refugee living in a refugee camp. I am locked up in a refugee camp. When I have problems here, I think about what I would have been doing in Somalia. I am unemployed and I feel like a 'nobody'. I often think that I might have done something with my life back in Somalia."

These words were echoed in many of the interviews conducted in Eastleigh. Many described, just as Gouled had, that they couldn't feel Kenyan or an attachment to Kenya because they were 'only refugees'. They did not feel that they had a right to lay claim to Kenya despite having lived in the country for years and even decades. Instead, they expressed feelings of alienation, marginalisation and discrimination. When discussing their lives and their sense of place in Nairobi, many explained that they were "living a life in limbo" and were a constant target of police harassment. A sense of belonging to a society and a country can only be fostered in an environment where a person is made to feel that they have a right to belong.

As a result, those refugees interviewed asserted that they only felt a sense of belonging to the Somali community. As one Somali elder explained in an interview: "Somalis are social by nature and they look for each other to form communities when they move to new places. They do this so that they can come together and discuss Somali-specific issues and the things that are going on in Somalia."²⁰

¹⁹ Interview held on 19 September 2011 in Eastleigh, Nairobi, Kenya.

²⁰ Interview held with Somali elders on 6 October 2011 in Eastleigh, Nairobi, Kenya.

Notions of home and place

For sure, the world has become increasingly globalised over the last few decades and mobility and displacement have become an integral part of our existence. Scholars such as Daniel Warner (1992, 1994, 1999) and William Connolly (1991) have rendered the notion of 'home' obsolete and argue that a generalised feeling of homelessness now exists in the world. As a consequence, 'we are all refugees' (Warner 1992). They argue that a universal disjuncture between person and place has occurred in this post-modern age; universal because it applies to both those who are physically homeless and those who are not. "The homeless, therefore, are not necessarily those without a territorial place although the two can be easily confused." (Warner, 1992:369).

Warner argues that 'rifts' and 'splits' have appeared in the relationship between person and place and thus challenges the essentialist and sedentary understanding of man's bond to place. These rifts have and always will exist. In the case of refugees, it is argued that these rifts existed prior to flight and will exist after a return takes place. Connolly calls this denial and repeated attempt to prioritise the need for a home a deeply ingrained "nostalgia for a politics of place" (1991:464).

However, this research challenges this view. It found that for many Somali refugees in Eastleigh, and all those interviewed for the purpose of this study, 'home' has and always will remain Somalia. There was a strong sense of nostalgia for Somalia throughout the interviews, and specifically for the Somalia that had existed prior to the war. The interviews showed that just as Somali identity had remained strong, Somalia still represented home for many. The continued connection to Somalia was evident in the ways in which Somali refugees had constructed their lives in exile. For instance, their continual engagement with Somalia from afar through a number of ways was observed.

Somalis, as often documented, have developed a transnational network that spans across the globe. This has been accompanied by a range of communication systems that allow the Diaspora, whether in Minnesota, London, or Eastleigh to keep updated with the events that are currently taking place in Somalia. As was explained by a young man in an interview, he, like many other Somali refugees in Eastleigh, visits a number of Somali news and social networking sites on a daily basis. "I love my country. My dream is that I will one day go back there. I visit these sites regularly and also watch TV channels that show news on Somalia. This helps me keep updated with what is going on back in Somalia."²¹

As the interviews with Somalis in Eastleigh progressed, the extent to which Somalia as a place in their minds was kept alive through their active engagement in this transnational network became more apparent. A strong sense of nationalism among Somali refugees in Eastleigh was felt during discussions on Somalia and their relationship with the country.

After twenty years of civil war, anarchy and destruction, it was clear that a collective dream and longing had been constructed in exile. Faced with the realities of a devastating war with no end in sight, Somali refugees have kept alive a strong link to their country, a link that sustains them and gives them hope for a better future. This strong sense of attachment to their homeland served as recognition among the community that Somalia had not and would never be forgotten. It seemed that by preserving their Somali identity in exile, by stating that they did not feel that they belonged in Kenya, and that by asserting that Somalia was and

²¹ Interview held on 21 September 2011 in Eastleigh, Nairobi, Kenya.

would forever be home, they were playing a vital role in the construction of a collective longing for peace to one day prevail. Having lost their homes, livelihoods as well as having been forced to live a difficult and unproductive (for many) life in exile, this was the only thing that they could still insist upon.

As Hussein, 28 years old, explained: “Somalia will always be home for me. We always talk about Somalia and we always have images of Somalia in our minds. We watch TV to see what is happening in Somalia. We talk a lot about politics and about what is happening in the country. We also talk about how we can achieve peace, how we can get a good Government and leaders, and realise a good transition.”²² He had come to Kenya at the young age of seven and his memories of Somalia were extremely limited. He explained that the active engagement in discussions on Somalia could be observed throughout the community.

Nostalgia and “fadikudire”

The nostalgia for Somalia and better times was perhaps best observed in *fadikudire*. Hussein was the first interviewee to mention *fadikudire* and did so by saying: “Somalia is always on people’s minds. People gather in places and drink tea and coffee and what is immediately on their lips is Somalia”.²³ The term *fadikudire* is used to describe an act often observed in Somali communities across the world: people coming together to pass time and enter into impassioned discussions on Somalia, where analyses of the socio-economic and political situation are shared.

People talk about what should be done in the country and their opinion on why things in Somalia are as they are. Topics of discussion range from politicians and their shortcomings, the transitional government and its weaknesses, to Al Shabaab and its threat. Walking around Eastleigh, it is common to spot Somalis, both young and old, sitting around tables in cafes, drinking tea and engaging in long conversations.

Gupta and Ferguson discuss the act of remembering ‘home’ among displaced communities: “Remembered places, have, of course, often served as symbolic anchors of community for dispersed people. This has long been true of immigrants, who use memory of place to construct their new lived world imaginatively. “Homeland” in this way remains one of the most powerful unifying symbols for mobile and displaced people” (1997:39).

In the Eastleigh context, through the act of *fadikudire*, Somalia as the ‘homeland’ was kept alive and remembered. Somali refugees continued to lay claim to their homeland by engaging in the past and the present from a distance. Also, as a community in exile, they were able to form a collective dream of the future. In many respects, remembering home has helped to unite Somalis in exile and give them a sense of active participation in the fate of their country.

I may not remember, I may never have been there, but it is still home

Interestingly, the opinions of second-generation Somali refugees on the notion of home were similar to those with older refugees who had left Somalia as adults. For these younger

²² Interview held on 21 September 2011.

²³ Interview held on 22 September 2011 in Eastleigh, Nairobi, Kenya.

refugees, Somalia represented home despite the fact that they had spent most or all of their life in Kenya. It was interesting to explore the ways in which they had created this living place (Somalia/home) in their minds without the advantage of having memories to form the foundation of these constructions.

Dalmar, a dynamic 22-year-old male, was interviewed in Eastleigh but had spent his entire childhood and adolescence in Ifo camp, Dadaab. He moved to Nairobi at the age of 19 to attend college. He said that despite the negative images of Somalia often shown on television, in his mind he had constructed a positive image of the country. For him, Somalia represents the only true home. In fact, all the young people interviewed insisted that Somalia was, and always would be, their 'homeland'.

However, it was imperative to analyse their imaginings of this place and 'home'. They explained that their understanding of Somalia had been formed by stories told to them by parents and older relatives as well as seeing images on television, the Internet and listening to the radio. This had helped to form a familiarity with their country of origin and a relationship with Somalia – albeit one that was deeply rooted in idealism. This relationship was ultimately linked to the metaphysical search for a home often observed among refugee and Diaspora communities worldwide.

The social and cultural construction of place and home

In sedentary theories on the relationship between person and place, place is conceptualised in the most simple of ways: as a flat and unchanging location. As Brun critiques, "...space is conceptualised as stasis, as a flat, immobilised surface, and place is defined as a singular, fixed and unchanged location. This may be understood as an essentialist conception of place, suggesting that all people have a natural place in the world and therefore refugees have been regarded as being torn loose from their place and thus from their culture and identity." (Brun, 2001:15) The research conducted with the Somali community in Eastleigh challenges this essentialist understanding of place as a fixed entity. Let us explore why.

According to Gupta and Ferguson (1997), place is a social and cultural construction and they discuss "a partial erosion of spatially bounded social worlds and the growing role of the imagination of places from a distance" (1997:39). 'Place making' is especially relevant to understand in situations of displacement and exile, where people continue to lay claim to a homeland, but physically inhabit another land. "Place is here a cultural construction, not a fixed entity; a location, not only about ideas, but about embodied practices that shape identities and enable resistance" (Brun, 2001:19).

These concepts are evident among Somali refugees in Eastleigh who continue to lay claim to Somalia while physically inhabiting Kenya. Knowing full well that it may be years until they can safely return and rebuild their lives in Somalia, they actively engage in a process of 'place making' by constructing a place in their minds that represents home.

Brun summarises the arguments of Olwig and Hastrup (1997) in their discussions on the ways in which place is constructed and its role in the conceptualisation of culture: "Olwig shows how people have a strong tendency to migrate, but at the same time maintain a strong notion of attachment to place, and describes this as contradictions of being physically present in specific localities, but at the same time being part of trans-local communities 'rooted' in distant places" (Brun, 2001:19).

Home, in this sense, may be linked to a particular physical place, but it thrives in the minds and dreams of the displaced. In this sense, the essentialised conception of place and home as a fixed and spatially bounded place is flawed. The Somali refugees interviewed showed how these spatially bounded worlds can be eroded by the continuous engagement of collective re-imagination and place making.

De-territorialised versus re-territorialised identities

The above exploration into the many ways in which home, place and space are conceptualised helps to understand the specific situation of Somali refugees in Eastleigh and the ways in which they engage in their homeland from afar. It has shown that it is wrong to completely reject the relevance of home as scholars such as Warner and Connolly have done. At the same time, it has helped to caution against an essentialist understanding of people's relationship to place. Both extremes fail to show how place and space are social constructions and are able to be inhabited and experienced from afar.

The displaced are not culturally lost nor will they naturally suffer from a crisis of identity because of their displacement. In this understanding, cultural identity is not dependent on presence within a specific, as seen in the case of Somali refugees in Eastleigh. At the same time, it does not mean that territory or place does not have a role to play. Territory becomes relevant once more when we recognise that culture and identity are often re-territorialised. It is important to not only focus on the de-territorialisation of an identity but to take it a step further and consider the ways in which people can re-territorialise their identity in exile.

In his critique of Kibreab's conceptualisation of territory, Finn Stepputat (1999) argues that there is an oversimplified opposition made between territorialised and deterritorialised identities. "...Identity is not necessarily de-territorialised but rather re-territorialised. As has been amply shown during the 1990s, the displacement and migration of people is often accompanied by the development of a strong notion of attachment to certain place or territories" (1999: 418).

To refute the importance of place and celebrate the total de-territorialisation of identities is just as simplistic as to essentialise the relationship between person and place. What is crucial to recognise is that 'place' and Somalia continue to play a vital role in the lives of Somalis in Kenya as a spatially unbound entity: not fixed, not unchanging, and not totally irrelevant. It continues to be constructed, re-imagined, and preserved both collectively as a community in exile as well as individually.

The research shows that Somali refugees preserve their identity and attachment to home while in exile. The decisive factor in reterritorialising identities is an image of community, not necessarily the present territory in which the community lives. The research on Somali refugees in Eastleigh shows how the link between person and place can be de-naturalised. "This understanding means that refugees are not out of place, their place is defined by the particularity of their social interactions that intersect at the specific location where they are present" (Brun 2001:20).

Among the Somalis in Nairobi, a strong association of place with memory, loss, and nostalgia continues to exist. As Gupta and Ferguson conclude in 'Beyond Culture': "Deterritorialisation has destabilised the fixity of 'ourselves' and 'others'. But it has not created subjects who are free-floating nomads. This opposes those who are eager to celebrate

the freedom of the postmodern condition. Instead of just stopping at the idea of deterritorialisation, we must theorise how space is becoming reterritorialised in the contemporary world” (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997:50).

Dreams of return

Despite the inability for Somalis to return at present due to ongoing insecurity and conflict in Somalia, the interviews explored their views on a possible future return. Return was often discussed as a future desire and linked to obligation, whereby in the context of the large-scale destruction that Somalia had experienced, many stated that it was up to all Somalis to return one day to help rebuild the country.

Return, however, was also linked to opportunities. It goes without saying that the more opportunities made available to refugees while in exile, the more likely they will envisage a successful return to their country of origin when peace is restored. Aside from the large-scale reconstruction of a country coming out of decades of war, the personal situation of individuals and families is a crucial aspect of the return and reintegration process and must be prioritised. People and families must feel equipped with the necessary skills when returning.

These findings point to a major flaw in current refugee policy in Kenya: the prioritisation of voluntary repatriation is futile if the management of refugee situations prior to repatriation does not adequately create an enabling environment for refugees to realise a sustainable repatriation in the future. Many Somali refugees do not feel prepared in themselves for a future return. This was the most important concern voiced by the Somali refugees interviewed on the topic of return. For many, ensuring the improvement of their quality of their life in exile represented a means to an end of years of displacement, struggle, and sacrifice.

Durable solutions

At an international level, understandings of the relationship between people, place, and identity has influenced policy discussions and debates on finding durable solutions for refugees in protracted displacement across the world. The next section will attempt to link the specific case of Somali refugees to the broader debate on finding durable solutions to protracted refugee situations.

The three traditional solutions sought in refugee crises are voluntary repatriation, resettlement, and local integration. Since the end of the Cold War, refugee-hosting countries, UNHCR, donors, and other actors in the international refugee regime have prioritised voluntary repatriation as a solution to the plight of refugees. In Kenya, this is very much the case: Kenya currently has a yearly resettlement quota of 10,000 places, representing just 1.6% of the refugee population.

Local settlement or integration of all or the majority of Kenya’s refugee population is likewise seen as an impossible task to achieve. In the words of a Senior Protection Officer in UNHCR’s Branch Office in Nairobi: “Local integration is something that is not discussed in Kenya, at least not officially.” Meanwhile the intractable conflict in Somalia continues to prevent repatriation from taking place – at least for the foreseeable future.

As a result, Somali refugees – like many refugees around the world in protracted situations – have effectively had their lives put on hold. Indeed, the image of a refugee as a person ‘lost in limbo’ and torn loose from his or her homeland is deeply engrained in much of the thinking that has shaped refugee policy for decades. Solutions to situations of displacement continue to focus on containing or reversing movement. As a UNHCR Senior Protection Officer in Nairobi said, a traditional approach to handling the refugee situation in Kenya is still maintained and this includes the search for durable solutions: “Everyone is waiting for the situation to improve. This is wishful thinking as if the ‘problem’ will somehow just go away.”

The assumption that displacement is temporary has influenced the management of refugee situations whereby containing and eventually reversing a movement of people is seen to be the most logical solution to the problem. This has led to the development of policies and programmes²⁴ that ultimately make it very difficult for the vast majority of Somali refugees in Kenya to lead a productive life in exile.

In part, this approach can be explained by the economic context in many African hosting countries, Kenya included. Faced with high rates of unemployment, chronic poverty, and over population, many hosting countries in Africa struggle to provide the most basic of services and infrastructure to their own population. With the added burden of hosting hundreds of thousands of refugees, many feel that their hands are tied with regards to what they can realistically provide.

Refuge is provided in exile and many Somali refugees interviewed expressed their gratitude to Kenya for having given them this refuge and right to life. However, this life was neither productive nor enjoyable for many. As Crisp states, in many protracted refugee situations “the right to life has been bought at the cost of almost every other right” (2003:13).

Breaking with tradition: exploring alternative solutions

The situation facing Somali refugees in Kenya (whether marginalised in the camps, or struggling to access a livelihood in Eastleigh) is illustrative of the failure of the traditional approaches to managing refugee crises, and is one that is reflected in protracted refugee situations around the world. As a result, in the past few years attention has turned to exploring alternative durable solutions to protracted refugee situations as it is being widely acknowledged that the three traditional durable ‘solutions’ have so far failed to actually solve many of the world’s protracted refugee situations.

As stated by UNHCR in 2006, “The recognition, on the one hand, that voluntary repatriation is not always possible and, on the other, that indefinite encampment is unacceptable has led to a profound review of the three durable solutions and how they relate to one another. The need to avoid human degradation while simultaneously safeguarding voluntariness has spurred the development of new methods and approaches” (UNHCR, 2006: 130).

UNHCR now recognises that the international refugee regime must look for other ways to address the needs of Somali refugees and find alternative solutions to their plight. A number of formal and informal discussions are taking place in Kenya regarding the need for

²⁴ These include the continued implementation of care-and-maintenance programmes in refugee camps, even after decades.

alternative options to be made available to Somali and other long-staying refugees in the country. It has been recognised that many Somali refugees have reached a certain level of integration and self-sufficiency in Nairobi, which can be seen in many of the Somali-owned and run businesses in Eastleigh. Although not an easy life, many have found ways to cope and survive in the city. Rather than criminalising this integration or continuing to implement a set of policies that create obstacles for the further integration of refugees, it is slowly being acknowledged that more initiatives need to be developed in order to reach out to this population and safeguard their protection.

As a UNHCR Senior Protection Officer commented in a meeting: “The situation as it stands in Kenya is not sustainable. With over 500,000 refugees in Dadaab, where is the cut-off point?”²⁵ In this context, the UNHCR staff worker explained that the Office has been trying to present the urban refugee population to the Government as a self-sufficient and important part of the Nairobi population with a range of skills that can be tapped into, in an attempt to change the popular perception that refugees are a burden and drain on society. If the Kenyan authorities can change their view of Somali refugees, perhaps they will recognise that enhancing their ability to integrate will not only benefit refugees but also benefit the local economy and Kenyan society as a whole.

In efforts to improve the plight of refugees in protracted refugee situations, some research has initiated a debate on exploring transnationalism (Van Hear, 2003) and the enhancement of migration and mobility as interim (and at times durable) solutions (Crisp and Long 2010, and Sturridge 2011). Other initiatives and concepts including the promotion of self-reliance and livelihoods, development assistance to refugees and development assistance through local integration have all been identified as precursors to voluntary repatriation and resettlement.

Furthermore, it is argued that the Kenyan government, along with other refugee-hosting countries, must begin to recognise that investing in initiatives and programmes that promote self-reliance will only benefit their efforts to promote voluntary repatriation in the future since refugees will feel better prepared to return skilled rather than unskilled.

Mobility and trans-nationalism as viable options

Mobility and the existence of transnational networks in the Somali refugee context have been increasingly viewed as viable strategies to the survival of refugee communities in protracted displacement. Somalis have developed such strategies to control and better their lives in exile, resulting in secondary and further movements from the camps to Nairobi and beyond.

By employing their nomadic heritage of mobility, Somali refugees do not necessarily move on and forget the past and their home. The discussions with refugees in Eastleigh portrayed a general sentiment that mobility did not mean the loss of their links and bond to their homeland - indeed, it was seen as a means of helping the realisation and success of an eventual return home.

Lucy Hovil commented on the use of mobility as a coping strategy in exile in her research on Sudanese refugees in Uganda: “...striking throughout the data was the extent to which families spread themselves out geographically – either within Uganda or Sudan, between the

²⁵ Meeting with UNHCR staff members held at UNHCR Kenya office in Nairobi, Kenya on 8 September 2011.

two countries, or in some cases, further afield. In doing so, they are building on the experience of exile: despite restrictions on freedom of movement for those living in the settlements, there is ample research to show that most refugees have been highly mobile, especially those who opted to self-settle” (2010:13). Enhancing refugee mobility, either by moving from Dadaab and Kakuma to Nairobi or further afield, can give them the chance to access certain livelihood or educational opportunities that were previously unattainable. Somali refugees in Kenya form a crucial part of a global transnational network that extends across the globe.

The ability for Somalis in Eastleigh to tap into these networks can be essential for their survival. And, while mobility is a central element of these transnational networks, engaging in them does not necessarily require physical movement, as seen in the example of remittances being sent from relatives living abroad to people and families in Eastleigh (Sturridge 2011). Indeed, as stated above, mobility has long been used by Somalis to enhance their survival and has now been adapted to this new political climate of displacement and conflict.

Furthermore, UNHCR and NGOs have increasingly advocated that promoting self-reliance and community development among refugee communities does not mean that refugees would not want to return home when it becomes possible, as many host countries fear. The interviews with refugees in Eastleigh showed that a return home is still their ultimate goal; however, many do not want to spend another twenty years in their current situation.

In this respect, their priority at the moment is to maximize their ability to access jobs and educational opportunities here in Kenya or further afield if necessary. As Crisp and Long state, “...the real challenge in the coming years – for researchers, UNCR and refugees themselves – will be how to persuade reluctant states that acknowledging and protecting the mobility of refugees ay in fact help to ‘solve’ twenty-first century displacement crises more effectively than insisting on return ‘home’.” (Crisp and Long, 2010:57)

For Somali refugees in Kenya, the desire to move on has become ever more associated with economic migration. If every available option or possible solution at the local level has been exhausted, then they will not fear or discount the option of onward movement. In this respect, Somalis will think global more than local and try to assess what global options are available to them.

In recent years, there has been a growing phenomenon of mixed migratory movement in the direction of Southern Africa. As stated by a UNHCR Senior Protection Officer during a meeting in Nairobi: “There is also a lot of movement out of the country (especially in the border regions). There is also a huge migration movement to South Africa. Accurate numbers of this migration are hard to come by, but it is thought to be high.”²⁶

In this context, individuals with refugee status in Kenya move on in search of a better life but in doing so put themselves at considerable risk and often lose the protection to which they have been given in Kenya as refugees. Regional governments, UNHCR, and other actors in the international refugee regime must acknowledge this reality if the protection of refugees, such as Somalis, is to be safeguarded. Indeed, another UNHCR Protection Officer discussed the idea of a regional approach in dealing with the refugee situation in Kenya could be

²⁶ Meeting with UNHCR staff member held on 8 September 2011 at UNHCR Kenya office in Nairobi, Kenya.

beneficial²⁷. This would help to share the burden and ease the pressure on Kenya as well as offer a solution to the situation of many refugees who are unable to access the three traditional durable solutions.

The staff member was careful to emphasise that if this were to happen, it should not be in the form of transferring refugees from camps in Kenya to camps in another country, but rather to try to find alternative and more sustainable solutions in these new countries. As UNHCR states in a paper on protracted refugee situations, “Refugees in such situations could perhaps be admitted to the migrant worker and immigration programmes maintained by states that are unable to meet their own labour market needs. Many of these programmes, it should be noted, also offer opportunities for long-term residence and naturalisation, and thus offer the prospect of a durable solution as well as an interim one” (UNHCR, 2008:20).

Juggling options

Ultimately, solutions are likely to be creative and multi-faceted, a sentiment that was echoed in the interviews. Indeed, the study found that many of those interviewed in Eastleigh did not see durable solutions as mutually exclusive: a decision to return, resettle, or to stay in Kenya to work or attend college did not come at the expense of the other, but was often seen as a precursor to the other. Yet in reality, all three durable solutions are currently being denied to them.

Everyone interviewed talked of the hardships that they faced in Kenya and the fact that that they had lost many years of their lives because of the strict policies under which they lived. They expressed hopes to move beyond Kenya in an attempt to build a better life.

As the discussions turned to one’s will or lack of will to be resettled, it became apparent that resettlement featured high on their ‘wish lists’. In fact, 100% of the caseload interviewed said that they would like to be resettled. What would appear to be a contradiction with regards to what they had expressed about their dreams to return to Somalia, actually made a considerable amount of sense since it was clear that until a return could take place, an alternative solution needed to be explored and realised in the interim.

Somalis, therefore, have a global perspective in their search for a better life. Instead of waiting to return, they prefer to be active agents in control of their lives and to search for better options. Resettlement was only prioritised over return on a practical level due to the present realities they faced. As one interviewee had expressed: “*Right now*, I would like to go somewhere else. All my friends are in America. They have been working and have been given different opportunities. I want this for myself.”²⁸

It is interesting to note that many expressed that if they did get resettled, they would still consider a return home to Somalia when and if peace came. In their minds, the act of resettlement will help them now, but does not replace the dream of a return home in the future.

²⁷ This was not an official UNHCR perspective, but rather a comment made by this particular staff member in a meeting held on 8 September 2011 at UNHCR Kenya Branch Office in Nairobi, Kenya.

²⁸ Interview held on 21 September 2011 in Eastleigh, Nairobi, Kenya.

Conclusion

This research on the Somali refugee population in Eastleigh has shown that despite the length of time spent in exile, most continue to ascribe to a strong Somali identity and have developed few, if any, emotional ties to Kenya. Furthermore, Somalia as a representation of home has not diminished in the minds of Somalis after all these years in exile and their sense of home and place is strongly associated with memory, loss, and nostalgia.

The paper has discussed that Somalis have historically adhered to a de-territorialised identity with a history steeped in mobility as a key survival strategy. The link between place and identity as is prioritised in sedentary thinking cannot be strictly applied to the Somali nomadic pastoralist, as his or her identity derives from membership to a particular clan rather than to a fixed and specific geographical location. The paper has argued in favour of the notion that identity, belonging, and culture are not determined by the rooting of people to a physical place and location and that people, rather than place, are bearers of a cultural identity.

By contrast, the paper has explored how the territorialisation of identity, culture, and belonging is linked to a sedentary approach of understanding people's place in the world. The research in Eastleigh showed how theories that 'essentialise' the link between person and place do not acknowledge the fact that people and communities in situations of displacement can still ascribe to their cultural identities and lay claim to their homelands while physically inhabiting another land. The paper explored the ways that place, space and home can be conceptualised in a different way in order to understand these realities: identity, therefore, is mobile, fluid and constantly able to be constructed and re-constructed depending on the situation.

The research has also shown that it is important to caution against the celebration of the total deterritorialisation of identities, which includes the idea that home ceases to exist because of increased mobility and an increasingly globalised world. Even if people's identities and sense of belonging are not entirely dependent on being rooted to a physical location as advocated by sedentary theorists, the study argues that place is still relevant in the construction of an identity because it can be reterritorialised. In this respect, the study showed that Somalis in Eastleigh are like a 'nation in exile'.

The research echoes other studies conducted on protracted refugee situations in Africa and argues that Kenya's inhospitable refugee policies have limited the legal integration of its refugee population as well as their freedom of movement and right to reside outside the camps. The paper concludes that the three traditional durable solutions of voluntary repatriation, resettlement, and local integration have failed to offer a viable solution to the plight of Somali refugees and as a result many tens and hundreds of thousands of refugees have lived a life in limbo for the past two decades.

Despite the restrictive nature of policies that govern their life in Kenya, the paper demonstrates that Somali refugees continue to deploy traditional coping strategies of mobility to this new socio-political climate of displacement. Somali refugees have developed and maintained a vast network of transnational links, and the paper has argued that faced with the inhospitable nature of Kenya's asylum policies, Somalis will continue to think 'global' rather than 'local' to seek better opportunities beyond Kenya.

It was argued that this does not lessen their emotional attachment to their homeland since many Somalis ultimately dream of a return one day. Dreams notwithstanding, Somalis operate with a high degree of pragmatism and recognise that in order to achieve the goals they have set out for themselves, they may have to move on. The study therefore argues that this understanding must be complemented by a change of thinking on the part of the international refugee regime if solutions to their situation are to be found.

Ultimately, the international refugee regime's perception of displacement as a 'temporary phenomenon' is at the core of this failed approach and has served as the cornerstone for the development of policies that have ultimately made leading a productive life in exile very difficult for hundreds of thousands of Somali refugees in Kenya. In this respect, this case study of Somali refugees living in Nairobi builds on a growing body of literature that asserts the need to break from tradition and explore alternative and more ambitious approaches to dealing with protracted refugee situations.

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