NEW ISSUES IN REFUGEE RESEARCH

Vital links in social security:
Somali refugees in the
Dadaab camps, Kenya

Cindy Horst

University of Amsterdam
Amsterdam Research Institute
for Global Issues and Development Studies
Opaalstraat 190-3
6534 XP Nijmegen
The Netherlands

E-mail: C.Horst@inter.NL.net

April 2001

Introduction

At the end of 1991, three refugee camps were set up close to Dadaab, a small town in the Garissa district of Northeast Kenya, to host the large influx of Somalis fleeing the collapse of their state. Today, approximately 120,000 refugees are living in Ifo, Dagahaley and Hagadera. Most of them originated from the regions of 'Jubadda Hoose' and 'Shabeellaha Hoose', the lowlands of the two main rivers in South Somalia. In 1995, I carried out research in Ifo for my Masters degree, which served as pre-study to the PhD that I am now working towards. Between July 1999 and June 2000, research was carried out in the three refugee camps as well as in Nairobi (Eastleigh) and Garissa, the Kenyan towns where most Somali refugees can be found. My main aim was to find an alternative representation of refugees, who are often depicted either as vulnerable victims or cunning crooks.

The Somali have always relied upon a strong social network that instilled great family responsibilities on each member. The dispersal of the larger family and flexibility in the movement of smaller units were important livelihood strategies prior to the war. This allowed the Somali to deal with the high-risk, semi-desert environment they were living in. My main interest was to see whether these networks still functioned, and if so, whether and how they played a role in the livelihoods of the refugees in the camps. The information I collected on the extensive, all-Somali, informal means of communication and banking (*xawilaad*) confirmed the continuing importance of their social networks. An interesting aspect was their transnational character, with many Somalis longing, and some actually managing, to move to other places across the globe.

In the first part of the paper, I will outline some of my research findings in relation to the movement of information, people and resources within the social networks of Somali refugees. On the basis of the research material collected in Garissa and Nairobi, I will concentrate on the relationship between urban refugees and those in the camps.

In the second part, methodological and theoretical issues will be examined. I will stipulate the changes that have been made since the original research proposal, and why they have been made. I also provide an overview of the methods used, problems faced and lessons learned. Then, I will address the ethical dilemmas that I faced during fieldwork and also those I will face in the process of writing my dissertation. I will conclude by going back to the methodological principles outlined in the research proposal and relate them to the type of material I have collected.

Movement of people: urban refugees

Despite the fact that UNHCR and the Kenyan government do not usually allow refugees to settle outside the Dadaab and Kakuma camps, many have opted for the independence of self-settled life in town. This group of urban refugees has always been difficult to trace, both for policy-makers as well as researchers, due to their 'invisibility'. Indeed, when I went to Garissa and Eastleigh I noticed people prefer not to disclose their identity as refugees, although we recognized one another from

having met in the camps. They most likely feared to be identified as refugees because they are in town illegally.

Another reason for their 'invisibility' is that it is not easy to distinguish Kenyan Somalis from 'Somali Somalis' since objective differences between them are not great. Furthermore, there is no clear, fixed identity for people who move back and forth between borders, dividing their families between different countries. Despite these difficulties, I managed to get an initial impression of the situation of urban refugees and how they relate to those in the camps.

Somalis in Garissa

Although I refer to urban refugees as if they were an homogeneous group, even between the Somali living in Garissa and those in Nairobi there are actually many differences. Most people who go to Garissa do so because their parents or grandparents are from there and/or they have relatives in town. As one of my informants stated, a Somali will not miss his relatives as long as he is in Ethiopia, Djibouti or Kenya. If a problem emerges in one location, people can immediately shift to another where they have relatives living. The family dispersing to different places is a strategy the Somalis have long used in order to reduce the effects of man-made or natural disasters. As a consequence, at times it seems rather artificial to give some of them the label of 'refugee' or 'local'; and the example of the following individual is a case in point:

> When I ask him whether he faces any disadvantage business-wise, being a refugee, Moxamed[1] explains why he is not seen as a refugee. His grandfather was from Garissa and moved to Somalia. He left a number of his children here, and most of Moxamed's uncles and cousins still live in Garissa. His father however was born in Somalia. But the family kept in touch: the eldest son went to Garissa in 1986, his father was here in the seventies. Even Moxamed's ID was granted in the normal way; as with any other Kenyan citizen. Though his father was born in Somalia, his name was in the files. Also, all the family members are here in Garissa. So the officials couldn't doubt that Moxamed is a Kenyan.

It is as if the refugees who came to Garissa had 'returned' there. They returned to settle with their relatives, and now can barely be distinguished from them. Initially, they were assisted by these relatives to re-establish their lives. Moxamed for example, was given 40 cows by his uncles from Garissa. He is now operating his own business and has married a Kenyan Somali. Most of the Somali refugees in Garissa have integrated well and have settled permanently there. Their children are going to school in Garissa, where they learn English and Swahili. Furthermore, the refugees own the majority of the businesses and live among the community.

---

[1] Names are changed so as to respect the privacy of informants.

Somalis in Nairobi

The permanency of life in Garissa stands in sharp contrast with the situation in Eastleigh, Nairobi. In the city, there are many men on their own who have left their families behind in the camps and are trying to earn an income. A few of the refugees are there for the purpose of gaining an education, and yet others have moved there in order to have a better chance of resettlement. In all these instances, the stay in Nairobi is seen as a temporary one. One indicator of this is the fact that many of the Somali in Nairobi live in lodges instead of more permanent housing.

When someone wishes to go into town but has not yet a source of income, friends and acquaintances are likely to assist. Sometimes, those who have already gone to Nairobi provide money through which a friend in the camps can try the same. When starting a small business, goods may initially be provided on credit, to be paid back later. Even those living in the same lodge may assist in paying for somebody's lodging until a job has been found.

But what are people's motives for moving away from the camps in the first place? There are a number of (perceived) advantages and disadvantages of urban life compared to that in the camps. One of the main advantages is that there are more jobs in Nairobi and wages are higher there. Money earned is sent to Dadaab each month, and has certainly contributed towards an improvement in the general conditions in the camps.

In addition, resettlement opportunities are thought to be much better in town. People may decide to move to Nairobi to enable them to follow-up more easily on their case for asylum, or when relatives abroad have promised to send a sponsorship. Communication to relatives abroad is a lot easier from Nairobi. Another frequently-cited advantage of living in Nairobi is the moderate climate. The conditions in Dadaab are harsh and unhealthy because of the heat and dust. In general, living conditions and the security situation in town are preferred to those in the camps.

There are also disadvantages to living in Nairobi. Although it is possible to earn an income more easily, this is at the expense of being away from one's family. Besides, the cost of living in Nairobi is so much more expensive compared to that in the camps. Also, despite resettlement opportunities being much better in Nairobi, this is not necessarily seen by all as positive. People see their friends and acquaintances leave Nairobi for the USA, Canada and elsewhere. This is likely to stimulate *buufis* (the extreme hope to go for resettlement), even in people who were not suffering from it before. But the main disadvantage that almost everybody mentions is that the Kenyan police hassle refugees living in town. Whereas in Garissa the strictness of the police seems to make it impossible to reside there without a Kenyan ID, in Nairobi people do. These people live in constant fear of being caught, and even those with a Kenyan ID try to avoid any confrontation with police or CID (Kenyan intelligence). This seems to be the main source of insecurity for refugees who live in Nairobi.

Movement of information: the *taar*

The first main advantage of living in a town is that communication services are much better there. Telephones, *taars* (radio transmitters), faxes, e-mail services, etc., are all widely available and at lower prices. There is much more demand for these services since more people can afford to spend money on communication services than in the camps. It is difficult to determine exactly how many *taars* are operating in Nairobi, but an estimate of one of the operators was that there must be over one hundred in Eastleigh. This is much more than the number of *taars* in the camps. Hagadera has some twelve, Ifo about eight and Dagahaley around five. The number of *taars* in a camp is related to the level of demand and not necessarily to the size of the camp.

In Nairobi, radio sets were introduced in 1994, when refugees brought them from Somalia. In the camps, radios were introduced in 1998. Currently, they are also operating in the more marginal areas in Somalia and Ethiopia, where they are often the only means of communication for miles around. Most *taars* in Kenya are operating illegally since it is very difficult, if at all possible, to get an official registration. According to the owners of the *taars,* the government fears the *taars* are used by bandits to pass on information and may pose a threat to national security. In addition, all *taars* in the region have a limited number of air frequencies they are able to use and the ones owned by Somalis often interfere with those used by the police and NGOs. For both sides, matters of confidentiality are at stake.

Most communication from Nairobi is made with people in Somalia (Mogadishu, Baidoba and Kismayo), and recently, a link has also been established with Ethiopia. There is extensive communication with the camps. Refugees mainly talk with relatives to exchange news about their personal situation as well as to send and receive assistance. At times, the number of users increases drastically due to ongoing events. In Garissa, radio use increases when the rains are about to start, in view of the fact that the roads will soon become impassable. The refugees from the camps order goods and send money, or they come to purchase items but send the money through the *taar* for security reasons. Another instance in which the *taars* are used more is during a drought or in times of hunger. During such times, people who are affected tend to contact their relatives in town to ask them for assistance.

The following table is based on impact flow diagrams that were made during group sessions with community development workers (CDWs), elders and other community members. It shows the advantages and disadvantages of the *taar* to the various parties affected.

	Advantages	Disadvantages
The Somali community/ refugees throughout Africa and parts of the Middle East (Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Somalia, Uganda, Tanzania, South Africa, Zambia, Yemen, UAE)	• Passing information about family members • Tracing missing people • Sending assistance • Easy international communication • Security: not necessary to travel with money • News/Broadcasting function • Business competition & advertisement • Fast transmission of goods and money • Communication is relatively cheap • Development of the community in general • Increasing movement of people	• Reduced security due to bandits • Risk of loosing money due to police operations • No confidentiality
Taar operators/ Owners	• Profit • *Taar* are portable and can be used anywhere (no electricity needed: solar/battery power)	• Risk of confiscation • Illegal practice
Government	• For policemen on ground, it is an extra source of income	• Government fears national secrets will be compromized • Government/police believes security reduces because bandits communicate through the *taar* • For post offices (Posta) and banks the *taar* have caused great losses due to reduced money orders and telephone calls
Somalia	• Technological development • In most areas, it is the only means of communication and it is so easy that it can be used by anyone	• Used for military purposes

Movement of information: the situation of Somalis abroad

The second main advantage of living in Nairobi is that from there, opportunities for resettlement seem to be much better. At the same time, the number of people

suffering from *buufis* (the extreme hope to go for resettlement) is also higher, because others manage to go abroad and are envied for that. Expectations of resettlement may be higher than one might expect, considering the reality of refugee life abroad. This could be because, despite excellent systems of communication, knowledge about the situation abroad remains limited. It is interesting to examine the ideas that the Somali refugees in town and in the camps have on life abroad. What information do they get, how, and how accurate is that information? An example is the image people have of what happens to gender relations when Somalis are resettled.

When asked about the good and bad aspects of life abroad that people had heard about, one of the negative aspects often mentioned was the change in gender relations. Put quite bluntly, 'women turn bad' abroad because they are 'poisoned' with ideas about women's rights and gender equality. There is a perception that many Somali women deviate from their culture and religion once they are abroad, and it is not uncommon that a man has to come back to the region to marry again. This kind of information is circulated through many different sources, such as personal communication, the BBC Somali service and cassettes of theatre plays and songs. For example, below are excerpts of a play and a song, both performed by Somalis living in Canada.

In the play, which is performed partly in Somali and partly in English, a woman (Jinow) and her husband (Mohamud) have managed to be resettled in Canada. Bob John, a Somali man working for social services, explains a few things about the differences between Africa and Canada. He talks in English only, and since Jinow has been attending school to learn English, he addresses her. Jinow translates for Mohamud afterwards.

> *Bob* starts: 'Well, in this country, women....you know women's rights. Please let me explain to you, this is very important to you since you are a new family'. And he explains how her husband can't touch her without her will, he cannot shout at her nor the children and he has to make her happy all the time. From now on, she is the head of the family and Bob gives her a cheque on her name. If she faces problems she can call the police.

> When Jinow tells Mohamud about what she has just heard, they get into a fight. *Mohamud*: 'On this world you will see everything, you grey-haired woman who can't keep her food, can't take care of children and abuses me. You, disease is roaring from you. I will treat you, so stop this behaviour'. *Jinow*: 'Stop this behaviour? Heeyee. Every dog has a day and today is my day. What does he know today is my day. How many teeth and ribs has he broken from me? I remember having children of his at night, he threw me on something. Today is another day; I told you I will go to school. Ladan will drive me to school. You cook for the children and take them to bed when they sleep, and you clean the house well. And be careful: You have to follow my orders, otherwise you will be in jail. Bye, bye'.

The music group is a Somali-Canadian one that produces a mix of Somali and western music with lyrics in Somali. Their cassettes are very popular in the camps, particularly among the young and better-off refugees. In the following excerpt of one of their songs, we hear a Somali man who lives in Canada complain about his fate. At the same time he is warning others, such as the refugees listening in Dadaab.

> The wife I send, and given her
> Whatever I had
> The mother of my children
> When she came to Canada
> She came out with different things
> 'It is true', as I said
>
> I brought you from a place
> Kunya Barow, near to it
> Before you reach Kismayo
> And I took you to Canada
> You started to be arrogant
> You eye-liner yourself
> Your shoes are like a mortar span
> Kept at the back
> Your trouser repeatedly patched
> And your shirt collar
> Which is standing like a hedgehog
> Do I preserve to go away from you?
>
> Our Islamichood, our children
> Our traditional way
> Was it covered behind the fence?
> If I could say I will go to the court,
> Men have no future.
> They call their prayers in a dish
> Women have more power than them
>
> Hey, the sons of men
> Hey, look after your children
> Hey, refuse to go abroad
> Hey, put your wives in your houses
> Hey, in making a will
> 'It is true', as I said
> I regretted and cried
> My children became orphaned
> Whoever believes in Islam
> Never go to foreign countries
> 'It is true', as I said

These two excerpts provide a clear illustration of the way in which information and perceptions are moving between different groups of Somalis around the world. The information is not necessarily a positive picture of life in the west. Problems are spelled out as they are seen by the writer/performer, and people are even warned not to make the mistake of resettling. Yet, *buufis* does not seem to be affected much by any of these warnings. Thus it is not necessarily the poor dissemination of information that causes *buufis* to be so widespread.

Movement of resources: the responsibility of assistance

A third advantage of life in town is that the living conditions and climate are judged to be better than in the camps. When relatives abroad start sending monthly allowances to facilitate survival in Garissa or Nairobi, it is likely that a family will move out of the camps. In general, assistance through the *xawilaad* tends to enhance the movement of people. Not only can refugees in the camps go and live in town, those still in Somalia may decide to come to Kenya as refugees, and receive assistance from the international community.

This could be one of the ways in which aid reduces traditional social security mechanisms, as has been suggested before. In a recent report on livelihood security in Garissa, Collins (1999) states: 'A shift in the responsibility for coping with drought from the household and community to national government and international organizations has occurred, further eroding traditional coping mechanisms'[2]. As early as 1984, similar warnings were already being discussed by Harrell-Bond in her book *Imposing Aid* [3]. There is a Somali saying which states that something handed out to you will not solve your problems in the long run - thus addressing these issues of responsibility and dependency. I found a poignant example of this, in that of a wealthy businessman, who was assisting relatives but did not see it as his responsibility.

> Omar is complaining about the fact that he is providing things for his family members, whereas the UNHCR is not doing anything: they should be providing all that. To me, his reasoning is inconsistent. On the one hand he doesn't want to be considered a refugee all his life, on the other he insists the international community has the obligation of assisting refugees. And some of his demands/complaints are unreasonable: He has bought a house in Mombassa where four of his relatives are schooling, and there are orphans for whom he provides shelter there. He finds it ridiculous that he has to pay for the education of these relatives because UNHCR is not assisting them. To me, I don't see why they should when he is quite well off and is not even a refugee anymore [being the citizen of a European country]: why should that responsibility not be his, when it has always been?

Although external aid may have negative consequences on traditional social security mechanisms, at the same time that aid has become integrated in survival strategies. When the husband goes to town in order to earn an income, this is much easier when he can leave behind his family in the care of UNHCR. When a family decides to move to Garissa so as to receive a monthly allowance from abroad, it is more secure to do so while keeping the ration card. A relative remaining behind in the camps can collect the rations and send, for example, the oil and wheat flour to Garissa, while keeping the maize.

These are just some of the many examples of the importance of external assistance in coping with refugee life. One person commented that rations are needed because UNHCR is reliable, whereas assistance from relatives will depend upon their capability and willingness to send money. However, the counter argument was made by another who said that at least one can always rely on relatives to assist, whereas with the UN one never knows what to expect. It was claimed that they constantly reduce rations, providing only what they want to give, and at some point may decide

---

[2] Greg Collins (1999), *Garissa District Livelihood Security Assessment,* prepared for CARE Drought, Garissa.
[3] Barbara Harrell-Bond (1984), *Imposing Aid: emergency assistance to refugees.* Oxford; OUP.

to stop assisting altogether. Whereas the responsibility that relatives have to assist each other, is never-ending.

Movement of resources: the 'dependency syndrome'

The provision of assistance, and its reliability, are even more essential when we consider the dependency that people are said to develop on external aid. Much has been written about the 'dependency syndrome', which is said to occur when refugees accept handouts without taking any initiatives to attain self-sufficiency. The syndrome is characterized by symptoms of excessive and unreasonable demands, frequent complaints, passivity and lethargy.

A variety of theories have been developed to explain the emergence of the syndrome, but it has always been in relation to the dependency on assistance provided by the international community and governments. But, as one refugee remarked, dependency can also occur as a result of relatives sending monthly allowances. The symptoms he described are similar to those in the literature. Someone who receives a regular amount through the *xawilaad*, becomes dependent upon that money. As the patterns of expenditure change, one takes credit from the shops easily and is not working to finance one's own subsistence. This ultimately leads to lower self-confidence and dignity. Abdi's case clearly illustrates this point:

> Abdi had not received any assistance from his daughter in the USA for the last four months, so he called another relative, also a neighbour of his daughter, to ask what had happened to her; whether she was alive or dead. Then the man told him that his daughter's husband had had an accident and was in hospital, and also that she had moved. He gave him their new telephone number. So Abdi called her and she apologized to her father for not having talked to him for the past few months. And she sent him 300 dollars and 50 more for his sister, and promised to send him money every month and also to their relatives. Abdi was annoyed with her because he does not have a job, which she is aware of, and also because he is responsible for all of the shops credits and bills for the family. There was 13,000 credit at the shop for milk and clothes. Abdi has now settled these debts and he has repaired his house.

Abdi clearly assumes that it is the responsibility of his daughter to assist him and his family. The fact that they eat sufficiently and are dressed decently is possible only because the shop-owners give him credit on the basis of his monthly allowance. So when the money is not sent it is problematic, since expenditures have already been made. In the meantime, he has no other source of income and is not trying particularly hard to find something.

Apparently, he assumes the daughter is easily able to send the money, and he gets very annoyed with her if she does not. But the daughter may also be in a difficult financial situation since her husband has had an accident and is in hospital. Do they

have a regular source of income, and are they able to pay the hospital bills? Why did they move? And besides, why did she not contact her father? It is possible that sending money on a monthly basis is a great burden for her.

Revisions to the research proposal

When going into the field with a set of pre-developed research questions, the researcher never knows whether those questions are really appropriate to the situation he or she will find. Having spent some months in the field, it was a relief to find that my interest in the social security mechanisms of Somali refugees was justified. There were many services to facilitate interactions and transactions between Somalis all over the world, which indicates that the Somali refugees in Dadaab invest heavily in their social networks.

Another interesting finding was that the communication and assistance which took place within those networks, gave them the opportunity to move and thus a choice of identity. It enabled people to become refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), resettled and returnees. The enormous investments the Somali were ready to make in resettlement proved to be especially remarkable in the camps, and thus questions on *buufis* were added to the original proposal.

On the other hand, during fieldwork some questions turned out to be lower priority or of less interest. Initially, I wanted to examine the effect of life in Dadaab, as determined by UNHCR and Kenyan government policies, on the social security arrangements of Somali. To address this principal research question, I first examined the social security arrangements still operating in Dadaab.

When trying to explain my specific interest to people in the field, the original question was reformulated into something more plain: 'the movement of information and resources' between people, or communication and assistance between them. In previous field reports, I also used the terms 'interactions and transactions' to mean the same thing. Whatever the terms used, the social security arrangements themselves were the top priority. Next I examined the institutional aspects in the form of UNHCR, NGO and government policies and practices. I am still not completely satisfied with the depth and objectivity of the institutional analysis as compared with that of the refugees, and I hope to improve on it at a later stage.

I wanted to ask people about social security mechanisms they had had access to prior to flight, in order to determine what had happened to these mechanisms after flight. Ultimately, however, I decided that it was unnecessary. There is already literature covering how the Somalis have dealt with insecurity in the past, by building upon a strong social network. My main interest was whether this social network still existed. I decided that it would not be necessary to ask the refugees about the situation before the war. Experience in working with refugees, as well as other research, has taught me not to pry too much. If it is important for someone to recount something, I try to show that person why it is important. Trust can only be gained by respecting people's privacy. It is not beneficial to ask someone to recall a period they wish to forget. Only when someone starts talking about the past voluntarily, am I able to listen and

learn. I could have asked about the period before the war, but this did not seem to be particularly useful for my research. People talk about their past in Somalia in almost mythical terms; the time when everything was perfect. Although one can learn a lot from people's images of a past or a place, as Liisa Malkki's study convincingly shows, such images are not particularly relevant to my own research questions.[4]

Methods used

A variety of methods were adopted in the field, but particularly useful was participant observation: observation of, and participation in, everyday life in the Dadaab camps. In each place where I collected information, I started off with a kind of 'grand tour': a walk through the camp or town in order to familiarize myself with its features. Then, observation took place in the blocks, agency offices and offices of the *taar* and *xawilaad*. In terms of participation, specific events in which I participated were the registration of new arrivals (in Hagadera), two evaluation missions by a team from WFP-UNHCR (in Dagahaley) and the card revalidation exercise (in Ifo). In addition, I taught English composition to Standard 8 pupils and organized various training sessions and workshops for refugees.

With respect to interviewing, a total number of 144 interviews were conducted, of which the majority (over 60 percent) were conducted by research assistants. These assistants were refugees who had participated in the training on *Data collection and report writing*, and afterwards volunteered to assist with the collection of information, as a practical learning exercise. In each camp, I worked with a group of about 10 people, and this work taught me a lot, both methodologically as well as about the content. The quality of the reports varies widely, ranging from excellent to material that is unusable. As well as through official interviews, I have also learned a lot through informal discussions with NGO staff members, incentive workers and refugees in the blocks. Finally, a questionnaire was developed in order to obtain basic data from those interviewed.

In terms of participatory methods, two main techniques were utilized. First, I distributed the interviews to the person interviewed and field reports to others who might be interested within the NGO and the refugee community. This was an attempt to stimulate feedback, and indeed interesting oral and written comments have been received. Second, I conducted training on data collection and report writing for community members in all the camps. Following this, I worked with a group of around 10 of the participants to collect information in the blocks. The group determined much of the outcome and came up with some good initiatives.

In Dagahaley, they decided to continue providing the training to other members of the community, with the support of only basic necessities from social services. The refugees themselves were fully in charge of the whole process. In Ifo, the group wanted to continue even after I had left the camp and they continued to collect not only interview reports, but also reports of observations, radio programmes and matrix group exercises. They were also interested in being taught further, and so for a

---

[4] Liisa Malkki (1995*), Purity and exile: violence, memory, and national cosmology among Hutu refugees in Tanzania*.   Chicago & London; The University of Chicago Press.

number of Sundays I prepared workshops on alternative methods of collecting information, data analysis, international refugee law and institutions, and the dependency syndrome.

I concluded my fieldwork period by spending one week in each camp to present my results to various groups within the community. These included those I had trained earlier, the elders, CDWs and teachers. Although I had faced quite a number of organizational hazards, I did get valuable data. During these meetings I used participatory techniques such as matrix exercises and group discussions to obtain feedback on some of my findings, which led to lively and often highly useful discussions.

A further method used was text analysis of a collection of letters, compositions, applications and transcribed cassettes containing relevant information. For example, while teaching English composition to a class in Ifo, I gave them assignments relevant to my research. I asked them to write about topics related to *xawilaad* and *buufis* and asked them to compose an imaginary letter for a relative outside of the camps. In addition to marking these compositions for the pupils, I analyzed them for the purposes of my own work. The refugees also gave me actual letters to and from relatives, as well as applications for resettlement which contained relevant information. One of my research assistants developed and recorded a radio programme with interviews related to the research. Finally, I obtained two tapes made by Somalis from Canada which deal with various aspects of refugee life and provide a lot of information on *buufis* and assisting relatives.

Difficulties faced and lessons learned

In conducting fieldwork, one may encounter difficulties collecting the material for the research. Yet at the same time, valuable lessons can be learned from the experience. A number of issues raised here apply to interactions in the camps in general and may thus be relevant to policy-makers, agency staff, and other researchers.

A white visitor in Dadaab

One of the problems I faced was related to the image people had of me, which determined the kind of information they gave me. Having spent nearly a decade in the Dadaab camps, the refugees are now accustomed to various types of white visitors. A small number of those white visitors have been students on long-term research projects like this one, but the majority have been more prominent people. White visitors to Dadaab tend to be donors, evaluators, selectors or journalists; and even if they are not, they are assumed to be. They are thought to come with money, resettlement or a link to the outside world. It is in everybody's interest to present the problems that the refugees are facing in their daily lives.

This is in sharp contrast with my own interest in countering the refugee label by showing how people are dealing with insecurity themselves. Whereas I was trying to determine how Somali refugees helped themselves and each other, they tried to tell me about the problems they were facing and how they needed external assistance to

solve those problems. The stereotyped image of me influenced the responses I would get, and it also established a pattern of how I should think and act. I tried to counteract this simply by thinking and acting as I usually do, and not conforming to what was expected of me. For example, in my many visits to the blocks, I always travelled on foot, sometimes alone but usually escorted by my translator. By small things like that, and simply by being there for such a sustained period of time, the stereotyping was gradually reduced.

'Truth'

In relation to this issue, there is also the problem of 'truth' assessment. Since the refugees had an interest in creating a picture of vulnerability, I suspected that their answers were not always accurate. Much can be said about the politics of truth, especially in relation to refugees, and I intend to investigate deeper elsewhere. Here, however, I only wish to mention a few specific points.

First, when I asked about whether somebody received assistance or had other means of income besides ration cards, this was very often denied. However, in a number of cases I found that answer to be untruthful. This is clearly related to the refugee's wish to appear to be vulnerable. Second, at times it was difficult to determine the 'truth' simply because people were very suspicious. Since the *xawilaad* and especially the *taar* businesses are operating under a low profile, owners were reluctant to talk to me and then reluctant to provide me with much information. This was particularly a problem in Garissa, where at the time the police were carrying out a campaign against illegal radio sets in the town.

As well as *xawilaad* and *taar* owners being suspicious, refugees in Garissa and Nairobi were also reluctant as many were in town illegally. Refugees in the camps were suspicious about my goals, and for the research assistants it was worse: they were even suspected of being *shiftas* (bandits) who intended to rob money received through the *xawilaad*. Though we have learned to cope with these issues, it has made it impossible to gather reliable statistical information.

From these experiences, I learned that in identifying the 'truth' in people's accounts, it is difficult to remain neutral and completely open towards what people tell you. There is a risk of disregarding what people say, because 'all refugees are just complaining' or 'they are all lying and cheating anyway, and they are only after assistance'. Such an attitude is quite common among government officials as well as NGO and UN workers dealing with refugees all over the world. But although it is common, it can also be dangerous. At one stage, I had to caution myself to continue listening properly to people's difficulties and to take them seriously. I noticed that I was developing a cynical attitude similar to what I had observed in others. Another change occurred when I had collected much information and I began assuming that I knew quite a lot. I found myself relating instead of asking, which is not the appropriate role for a researcher. Besides, in light of the sensitivity of some of the information, it may even be damaging to those concerned.

Participation

Other difficulties were encountered in the implementation of participatory methods. When conducting training or having group discussions in a very open, participatory way, it is bound to take longer because of the likelihood of being side-tracked. Also, refugees who had participated in the various training sessions in the camp tended to use 'empty concepts' in answering questions. I always tried to move beyond such concepts in order to fully understand what they were trying to express which was very time-consuming. Yet, at the same time, it taught me the importance of being very specific in one's use of language so as to make oneself understood. The use of a variety of empty concepts by policy-makers, government officials, researchers, and refugees results in poor communication. During my fieldwork, I learned how important, and how difficult, it is to use simple, concrete terms that everybody can understand in the same way.

Occasionally, I disagreed with suggestions made by participants. At such times, it was interesting to see how 'participatory' one can really be. But I have certainly learned the potential and value of participatory work. It is actually not difficult to create an atmosphere in which participation seems non-threatening. This is done simply by taking people seriously as individuals and ignoring any labels attributed to them. By being genuinely interested in what people have to say and treating everybody with equal respect, most are eager for a chance to be heard. I saw the value of participatory work, for example, through working together with a group of young men in Ifo. As well as the satisfaction of seeing each of them learn and develop, and become critical in a constructive way, I also learned a great deal from them. They developed their own techniques of conducting research: dealing with problems in a manner sometimes different, other times similar, to my own; and coming up with specific questions to ask and ways to approach people. They also brought in new data to the research which I would not have found myself and from which it was possible to build upon further. They also questioned some of my findings, provided explanations for others, and obliged me to discuss ethical dilemmas with which I was struggling.

Many participants praised and agreed with my work. But this is not actually very useful in trying to move forward, and I also did not entirely believe their praise. Only in a few instances did I get valuable critical comments. Reasons for this may be that the refugees simply did not want to disagree with my views, or perhaps they were just uninterested. With respect to the agencies, I realized that only a few individuals were genuinely interested, while the majority were too occupied with their own work. This was not very encouraging, but it taught me about the problematic relationship that exists between academia and NGOs generally. Besides, I learned that as a researcher trying to influence refugee policies, I have to present my work differently. Since well-informed policies are urgently needed, academics should actively try to make a difference and stimulate discussion between refugees, policy makers and researchers.

A further issue with which I found difficulty was that information cannot be collected truly systematically. One can plan to gather information, but must always keep in mind the Somali saying when speaking of the future outcome: *Insha Allah* ('if God wishes'). Appointments are often cancelled or postponed, and agreements never turn out as planned. As a researcher, one has to learn to deal with these kinds of uncertainties in order to be able to function. An important lesson I learned was that much of the data appears when it is least expected, and one has to be receptive to it all the time. Information becomes research data not by actively collecting it, but simply by writing it down.

As a researcher, one wants to be able to control the collection of information and have a very systematic approach towards that process. But in reality this tends not to happen. It may be argued that this is a problem specifically associated with anthropological research, but it is, I would argue, also the merit of an anthropological perspective. Initially, I was concerned about the apparent lack of a systematic approach and that my methods were perhaps unsound since I failed to collect statistical data. Eventually however, I realized how much valuable data I had collected. I came to recognize that this was not despite my approach, but because of my approach. By being accommodating and taking the time to listen and observe whatever was available to me - instead of regretting what was not - I learned quite a lot and people began to trust me.

Finally, there was the problem of holism versus focus. It is important to take time to understand the whole context, but inevitably the research has its own particular focus. I found it challenging to achieve an appropriate balance between the two, especially when I feared to be moving too far from my research focus because appointments did not turn out as planned. During such periods, I may not have been patient enough to practice the open and accommodating attitude I described earlier.

Ethical dilemmas

Before starting to write my thesis, I should address *why* I am doing it at all. What is my goal? For the benefit of gaining a PhD in and of itself? To produce something that will positively influence refugee policy? Is it to write something that does not hurt the Somali refugees in Dadaab? Or something that creates an understanding between the various parties involved? Should the thesis aim to stimulate concrete action? I am unsure whether I have found an answer to these question as yet, but I am certainly aware of the dilemmas I face in attempting to put on paper what I have learned.

I find the current and potential future trends in refugee-related issues quite frightening. Both policies and public opinion seem to be moving further and further away from the humanitarian responsibility of assisting those forced to flee. The dilemmas are huge, with questions connected to assisting perpetrators, contributing to the continuation of war, sharing the tax payers' money with those who were never supposed to have any share in it and who might be 'economic migrants', just to name

a few. However, such tough dilemmas faced by the international community make the ostrich policy currently practised even less appropriate and more damaging.

In such a climate, the material I have collected is sensitive and runs the risk of being misused by people who have interests other than mine. With my research assistants in Ifo, I discussed the disadvantages of bringing certain kinds of information into the public domain. There are practices occurring inside and outside the camps, which the refugees have no interest in becoming widely known, and some of these activities would even be branded 'illegal'. It was suggested that the donors might reduce, or even cease, their aid if they were to find out that refugees were assisting each other in the ways they are. Consequently, the government might take action against *taar* and *xawilaad* offices. Overall, life in the camps might deteriorate even further than from the present situation as a result of such official actions.

Obtaining information is one thing, but publicising it is another issue, particularly when interacting with various actors (refugees, NGO workers, and government officials) that mistrust and conceal certain pieces of information from one another. Even collecting the data is a potentially risky exercise. Normally, I would collect information by being honest and open about my intentions and views. However, when interviewing a UN staff member who was asking me lots of questions about the refugees, I felt there was more at stake than simply providing and receiving information.

In this respect, it has been difficult being caught in between various interest groups with misunderstandings between and among them. For example, when participating in a headcount in Ifo, I seriously threatened my relationship with the refugees by being seen affiliated with the UN and governmental staff. Also, I had always assumed that I had a good relationship with most Somali in the region due to my interest in their language and culture. So I was troubled to see that, amongst quite a number, suspicion and even rejection emerged when I also interacted well with Kenyans. Although tensions between the two groups are not outwardly evident, they are significant. I never want to judge people on the basis of the group they belong to, but was forced to operate within existing distinctions and norms.

The dissertation: possible approach

My fieldwork began with a number of methodological/theoretical principles, encapsulated in a few key words, but still somewhat abstract. Human agency, the utilization of a social network, people's perspectives and knowledge-creation as a dialogical process – these were all notions that I could grasp conceptually but not as yet visualize practically. Having spent a year in Dadaab, I learned that these concepts are indeed highly relevant in explaining the situation in the refugee camps. Thus, I would like to use them to outline the interactions and transactions between Somali refugees in Dadaab and those elsewhere.

The Somali refugees in Dadaab have devised ways of coping with life in difficult circumstances. As refugees, they have lost almost everything they owned and have become dependent on UNHCR and the Kenyan government. As such, they are supposed to live within certain rules which restrict their choices. Nevertheless, by

maintaining strong social networks and maximizing upon them, the Somali are able to survive within these limits or even beyond them.

The manner in which they interpret their experiences determines the way they behave. By seeing both UNHCR and the Kenyan government as corrupt institutions that only function for their own interests and not those of refugees, 'illegal' acts become morally legitimate. Similarly, a UN or NGO employee who generally sees refugees to be 'cunning crooks' will have quite a different approach in dealing with them as someone who generally sees them as 'vulnerables'. My research is trying to shed light on these issues by discussing them with refugees, agency workers and possibly government representatives. With their participation, an inter-actional, multi-layered and necessarily fragmented text should emerge, which aims to create a better understanding between the parties involved. Through this understanding, policies can be improved and action taken by relevant parties.