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VARIATIONS ON THE THEME  
OF  
SOMALINESS

*edited by*  
*Muddle Suzanne Lilius*



Centre for Continuing Education  
Åbo Akademi University

Jim Adams

## Return and Reintegration to Somalia: Necessary Interaction of Somali and International Communities

### 1. Opening Statement

The invitation to comment on return and reintegration at the International Congress of Somali Studies in Turku induced a variety of images and thoughts in my mind from my time in Somalia - people, places, moments - some reminding of exciting and positive events, some of painful experiences, some of regret.

In the days that followed, I kept sensing an underlying current to the subject, in fact to my experience. At a point, it occurred to me that more than anything else, more than policy and program discussion, the problems, challenges, and possibilities of return and reintegration for returnees, for governments, and for IOM, are problems of human interaction. This underlying current was and is the interaction of Somaliness and, if you will, international community-ness. And, I might add, a problem of basic consideration by all concerned.

This involves the needed understanding and participation of the international community, the Somali community abroad and in Somalia, and, in IOM's case, the needed understanding and development of workable return and reintegration programs.

The tone of the congress was set in the title 'Variations on the Theme of Somaliness', and the congress call for serious dialogue, compels me to a deeper consideration of the subject than a simple reciting of a return and reintegration program outline. Such a purely program or procedural approach would, I believe, fall far short of the necessary, leaving unfinished business and a lost opportunity. In fact, a purely program or procedural approach to return and reintegration in general does and has left much unfinished business - whether we like it or not. Much such unfinished business has been building up over recent years. I'm not referring to the limited number of actual returns so far. I mean the unfinished business of necessary dialogue, coming to understandings, creative policies, and creative implementation that would better ensure sustainable, and therefore, successful return and reintegration.

Return and reintegration sits at the crossroads of Somali and international community interaction and well reflects the difficulties that all concerned are experiencing in arriving at workable - meaning mutually workable - options. At this crossroads, all issues of Somali and host countries intersect. It is here that Somali and international community interest, issues, authorities, agencies, and personalities engage and present themselves for testing. IOM has labored at this crossroads for sometime now to bring about workable return and reintegration possibilities for Somalis and host countries alike.

This congress is an important opportunity to engage fully in the serious dialogue, even soul searching, necessary for sorting out problematic relationships between and within Somali and international communities, and to put it selfishly, make my job of return and reintegration program development and management easier - it has not been easy. It has not been easy getting various concerned parties to see eye to eye so that work could proceed.

My experience on the Somali scene since 1993 beginning with the reconstruction of an orphanage and community health training center in Baidoa, through my time as a Humanitarian Officer with the UN peace keeping organisation - UNOSOM, on through IOM regional

operations work to develop refugee and internally displaced person return and reintegration programs, all lead me to believe that basic human interaction and dearly held convictions are always at the heart of the matter - that is to say in this case, successful or failed policies and programs. I also believe that fundamentally, such success or failure follows successful or failed relationships.

In Somalia, and I would suppose elsewhere, relationships based on mutual basic consideration and trust will go a long way towards getting over rough spots and getting past obstacles. I advise host governments and Somali authorities accordingly. On the contrary, no manner of effort will generate positive Somali and international community interaction and resulting successful return and reintegration programming if basic mutual consideration and workable relationship is not a deliberate focus.

This interaction, and associated convictions, deeply involves Somalis at all levels, host country governments and communities at all levels, and international organizations at all levels. I think it is safe to say that, so far, interactions at this crossroad have been difficult.

Now, having said all that, I need to qualify for the record that I do not presume to speak for the international community, or any government, or any organization other than IOM; and even then only as to my modest expertise on return and reintegration to Somalia.

Nevertheless, my comments are based on personal experience and reflect my personal and professional opinion.

### 2. Historical background impacting return and reintegration

Before I present a brief outline of the current return and reintegration picture and possibilities, I feel it necessary to address briefly some historical context in which return and reintegration efforts are taking place. Since it's directly relevant to understanding the situation and getting something accomplished, I'm afraid it seems necessary to again peer into the abyss and look at that annoying matter of human interaction. The following is purely my personal perspective although I've arrived at it over time, through my interaction with Somalis and members of the international community.

The catastrophe that completely destroyed the State of Somalia is the result of a number of factors. These factors continue to directly impact events and interactions at all levels locally and internationally. They certainly impact matters of migration, return, and reintegration. They certainly impact IOM's work.

Somalia experienced decades of massive infusion of modern weapons as payment for strategic loyalty; loyalty which was purchased from and benefiting the government entities in control at the time. These weapons, when put into the hands of a violent and repressive government, assured deep hatreds, oaths of revenge, and suitable ground for the cultivation of warlords. Given the numerous sub-clan divisions, the warlords were many - bitterness pervasive.

The warlords succeeded in driving out Siad Barre. However, the celebration was short. Given deep clan mutual distrust, much of which was generated by the government, and a tradition of violent confrontation born of an age old conviction that he who controls survives, the clan warlords and their private militias turned on each other. The civil war continued in an even more deadly version. The enemy was no longer Siad Barre - Dictator; it was everyone around you. These alliances of clans and sub-clans, warmakers and peacemakers were, and are, in a constant state of conflict, calculations, intrigue, betrayal, reconciliation and realigning again. It is a tradition, that when combined with the devastation of virtually unlimited modern weapons, and too many deadened consciences, got entirely beyond anyone's control.

Add to this mix, dependency (or more accurately, co-dependency) on foreign aid and arms in exchange for Cold War strategic accommodation, in their turn, of Soviet and American vital

interest. Also, prior to the Cold War, many decades of colonization rights were purchased by colonial powers with weapons and economic packages. I believe Somalis knew the arrangement, and have for a long time now seen aid as part of the deal made by foreigners for the right to rule and commercially exploit, or to establish strategic presence in the region. Therefore, aid is often perceived as a deal, a bargain in which both sides benefit for their own gain.

It seems though that now, after generations of this arrangement, some can not distinguish the difference between aid as payment for rights and aid out of compassion and generosity. This clash of perceptions between some Somalis and relief agencies and workers is extremely troublesome and often violent. Combine these factors with the perceived need for fighting over scarce resources - foreign aid being scarce by the time it sifted down and was parceled out to the local loyals at various government and military offices - and aggressive dependency is well cultivated - sometimes very aggressive in the lawless environment of recent times.

In my experience, such historical background accounts for much of the difficulty Somalis and members of the international community equally face in mutually arriving at workable arrangements pertaining to cooperation and viable solutions to numerous needs. This includes, of course, creating viable conditions and mechanisms for reintegration. In order for us to get things done, we in the IOM regional bureau for Africa have found much of our time has been productively spent simply trying to help Somali de facto authorities and host government authorities better understand how to relate to each other.

There has been some progress in the meeting of minds. Much more is needed though.

### 3. Return and reintegration strategy

Leaving behind the human elements for the moment, a basic outline of a return and reintegration program strategy goes something like this:

Due to the unprecedented situation in Somalia governmentally, infrastructure and issue-wise, conventional return practices have to be re-examined for the Somali context. This exploration for viable options and policies, therefore, presents a return situation that is experimental by nature. Obviously, Somalia return and reintegration has implications for host countries, donors, international organizations, the UN and IOM, international and local NGO's, Somali authorities, and of course Somali returnees and their families.

I believe that successful voluntary return from abroad requires mutual exploration and consideration by all affected parties. IOM, therefore, encourages collective dialogue on Somalia return matters. Given the Somalia situation, it's very important that such collective dialogue occur as early as possible during program development stages. This is highly recommended in order to avoid unnecessary difficulties such as conflicting policies and programs, and to better determine measures necessary to ensure smooth, successful and safe return operations. I have to say though, that valuable time has been lost in this regard.

IOM has views on relevant issues and has expressed some views previously, for example, in response to increasingly serious security incidents earlier on, induced by some forced return actions. IOM advised that de facto authorities be notified and consulted regarding such actions.

Numerous studies, reports, books, and articles have been produced on the Somalia political, economic, and social situation. But, there are very few resources that directly address return and reintegration of nationals from abroad to a country in which the infrastructure is largely destroyed, and for which there is not a normally recognized central government to receive its nationals according to conventional practice. Further, there is no normal tax base and system to support needed public services such as health and education. These are additional reasons to focus on exploration of creative policy and creative operational options.

Some number of Somali unsuccessful asylum seekers do not want to return to Somalia, and

are subject to deportation (which could be the subject of a conference on its own) but IOM's role is that of voluntary return assistance and so I'll focus on voluntary return accordingly.

It equally appears though, that some number of Somalis abroad, whether unsuccessful asylum seekers or those with residency status, would prefer to return to Somalia if there were assurance that they could expect to sufficiently take care of themselves and their families after arrival. Some governments abroad have expressed interest in providing voluntary return assistance. Many Somali authorities have, in particular, expressed support for the return of skilled and educated persons who can readily contribute to the recovery and reconstruction of the country.

However, as is well known, Somalia presents fundamental problems that make a conventional approach to return efforts problematic. As mentioned already, there being no normally recognized central government as a counterpart with which governments can conduct business normally. The economy and food production situation in the regions range from crisis to transition to recovery. The infrastructure with which to accommodate the basic needs of a post-nomadic population such as health care, education, training, and employment, is very weak. I specify post-nomadic since, most likely, that is the status of the majority of potential returnees.

The matter of return is compounded by a fragile political situation in general, and chronic instability in southern Somalia due to continued sporadic armed conflict over power and resources. Another proven reality to reckon with in current Somalia is that radical or violent reactions are sometimes employed by some groups to actions for which they are not consulted or in disagreement. Also, there is the exceptionally strong and ingrained clan system and clan rivalry that effects all aspects of work in Somalia.

This can be positive in terms of cohesion, efficient support, and protection. Often, though, clan issues slow or stop project work due to one sub-clan claiming favoritism by agencies or NGOs, particularly when it comes to staff hiring or project location.

These factors and realities directly effect everyone concerned with return. Host governments and Somali citizens abroad and their family members (back in Somalia), traditional and de facto authorities in Somalia, international and UN organizations, and local and international NGOs, political factions and militias. Each of these participants has their own vital interests to promote and protect. Each group has its own principles, whether legal, traditional or of pride. Unless the affected parties feel that their vital interests have been given due consideration, successful return and reintegration activities are at risk.

Therefore, questions and discussion points pertinent to return and reintegration are those that address how successful (meaning sustainable) returns can be accomplished, given the realities of Somalia. And, what arrangement of costs, in terms of principles, money, and effort, can be managed that would be sufficiently acceptable to all concerned. In other words, sufficient success depends on finding those policy and program formulas that are workable and mutually agreeable in terms of principles and practicality. This requires dialogue on all sides. I suspect that some flexibility is in order.

### 4. Further points for consideration

- As mentioned earlier, Somali authorities are interested in educated, skilled, and professional returnees. Even so, authorities express serious concern about their ability to absorb significant numbers of returnees without creating employment or other income generation possibilities to better ensure that they do not add to the burden, or return abroad again.
- According to Somalis I interviewed during return program assessment missions, there is definite interest on the part of Somalis abroad to return. But, substantial returns will not be seen particularly by families, until there is reasonable assurance of adequate schools, health

care, and income generation. Also, authorities are concerned that money sent home from jobs or welfare payments abroad which support other family members will not be sufficiently offset by income generated by the returnees after return.

- There is great concern on the part of Somali authorities regarding possible consequences of forced return actions without prior consultations and agreement. Somali de facto authorities insist on being consulted regarding return matters. We - IOM - agree with this principle.
- A major barrier to sustainable schools and health care services is the general problem of covering recurring costs after a facility is rehabilitated or equipped. It appears that there is some innovative progress being made in this area by local and international NGOs although only on a small scale at this time. These innovations need to be thoroughly explored and expanded.
- It appears that the political, economic, and social conditions in the Northwest (Somaliland), and Northeast, to a somewhat lesser extent, are reasonable for return, and suitable for associated reintegration projects in terms of security and international and local implementing partner potential. A fair number of Somali families are sending back a family member to scout out the situation and subsequently are investing in rebuilding. Hargeisa has been undergoing substantial reconstruction of private property and businesses.
- Conditions for substantial return to large areas of southern Somalia remain marginal due to unresolved political and military conflict with some regions fluctuating between crisis and transition to recovery. In such areas, supervision and sustainability of reintegration related projects are marginal or questionable. Nevertheless, individuals may elect to return to such areas on a small-scale basis, but should be prepared to be more self-reliant.
- Currently, there is already a useful degree of Somali expertise on the ground that can assist with the development of reintegration program planning and implementation.
- There is reliable air transport to most of the larger towns on Daallo, African and Djibouti Airlines with connections through Nairobi, Dubai, and Djibouti.
- It appears that a positive public information and counseling effort abroad involving Somali and host country community members would be helpful. Matters of mutual concern could be addressed such as responsibility, cross-cultural understanding, asylum, and return and reintegration. On this point, a number of Somali authorities have expressed to me serious concern about criminal activities in host countries on the part of a few Somalis and the resulting negative impact on social acceptance and asylum opportunities. Some Somali leaders ask, even urge, information and counseling action within Somali communities abroad in this regard.

## 5. Conclusion

- The size and complexity of a multiple-country return program, with the necessary collaboration, to a non-routine program environment that is Somalia, is substantial. IOM has consistently advised that the greater the cooperation among returning governments, and the greater a collective, meaningful dialogue with all parties concerned, the easier and more cost effective for everyone. The contrary implies, of course, the predictable opposite.
- It appears that interest and conditions are sufficient in a number of areas to proceed with a relatively straightforward but customized return and reintegration program with attention to reintegration related projects in receiving communities that serve returnees and residents alike.
- Program planning, budgeting, and fund raising would be greatly aided by having profile information on the potential returnee population such as the number, age, sex, occupation (especially professionals and skilled persons), and return destinations. Specific family information: age, sex and number of and education level of children and the number of

information: age, sex and number of and education level of children and the number of single parent households headed by women. This information would, in particular, be helpful to organizations wishing to assist women and families.

- It would be helpful if host governments and IOM established an ongoing Inter-Governmental Working Group For Somalia Return - one level in Europe for participation from capitols, and one level in Nairobi for host government and IOM field representatives. This, of course, implies greater dialogue and collaboration among host country governments. The greater the collaboration and synchronized the policies, financial assistance packages and programs, the greater the cost effectiveness and smoother the operations.
- A general philosophy for program strategy and implementation: start at a modest level by providing return assistance to those prepared and wishing to return sooner rather than later and have minimal assistance needs. Establish good working relationships with Somali authorities and implementing partners. Fully explore creative options for returnee and receiving community reintegration related assistance. Gain experience and knowledge (abroad and in Somalia) on viable return activities. Apply the most viable options and expand programming with increasing returns as appropriate.
- IOM hopes to receive funding for an IOM operational presence initially in Hargeisa and Bosaso. This would significantly accelerate appropriate and effective return and reintegration program development and implementation. Collective funding of, and collaboration on this capacity by host governments and donors would cost effectively facilitate this badly needed process.

Successful individual and reintegration related community projects would serve as an engine to encourage further involvement by donors, agencies, and host governments.

The longer meaningful return and reintegration action (meaning appropriate policy and funding) is delayed, the more the concept of return to Somalia bleeds into the migration crisis versus refugee crisis debate and thus further confuses matters.

The encouragement offered in this forum for serious reflection and dialogue is a positive occurrence and badly needed. I hope the exchange proves beneficial beyond simply an intellectual satisfaction. This is a good time and place for frankness, honesty, and a serious assessment of our own opinions and an openness to each other's views.

In the rush of urgent actions, immediate problems, field assessments, report writing, and meetings - all with a shortage of staff and too few funds - having time to thoroughly think things through is a luxury. So, I highly value the more considered pace made possible by academic and scientific method, and the resulting insights. At the same time, I am fully aware that, in the end, the results of careful thought and discussion are needed practically by someone on the ground - and so I very much appreciate being able to share in the dialogue of this congress.

Finally, I regret that I've only experienced a Somalia and her people in a time of great stress. I've seen a darker side of Somaliness. At the same time, I've also seen real Somali courage, dedicated service under extreme conditions, and imaginative positive creativity.

I look forward to the day in which I can experience a peaceful and renewed Somalia.