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DIASPORA
HUMANITARIAN
ENGAGEMENT IN
SOMALIA
REAL-TIME REVIEW



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This Real-Time Review was conducted between July and November 2023 by Consilient research team Hannah Marcus, Mohamed Amin Abdirahman, Abdulkadir Ahmed Mohamed and Mubarik Abdillahi.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

Somalia has suffered from recurrent shocks and crises for the past decades, with climate disasters, conflict, and other intersecting drivers contributing to continuous humanitarian needs. These challenges are compounded by access constraints that impose barriers to reaching some of the most vulnerable populations with life-saving assistance. Past research has suggested that the Somali diaspora play a critical role in responding to humanitarian emergencies across the country, often emerging as first responders while filling key gaps in the sector. However, the specific operational modalities employed by diaspora organizations (DOs) and their strengths and challenges as humanitarian actors remain poorly documented and underexplored.

This real-time review (RTR) of the Somali diaspora response to humanitarian crises was designed to respond to this knowledge gap. Two recent crises in Somalia provide cases for the RTR's focus on diaspora's humanitarian responses: the Gu rainy season floods in Beledweyne during spring 2023 and the increased conflict between the Somali government and Armed Groups and de facto Authorities (AGDAs) in Jubaland between August 2022 to August 2023.. The findings and recommendations from the RTR are intended to contribute to improved collaboration and coordination between and among diaspora and other actors, and to an overall strengthened humanitarian response in Somalia.

Methodology

A total of 86 Somali diaspora organizations with headquarters spanning 13 countries were mapped through diverse online search platforms and consultation with diaspora members and organizations. The mapping of DOs shed light on their diversity as well as key similarities in aspects such as fluctuating activity levels, use of crowdfunding and diaspora donations for fundraising, and multi-sectoral focus across humanitarian and development activities.

Beyond the DO mapping, further insights for the RTR were obtained from qualitative interviews with 23 key informants including seven representatives of six DOs which responded to one or both of the crises under review, three district-level stakeholders (two Somali NGO Consortium district sub-office representatives and two local NGOs), six national-level stakeholders (two Somali diaspora organization representatives, two institutional humanitarian actors, two national government offices), and six representatives of communities receiving diaspora support.

Findings

In the assessment of humanitarian responses to crises in both Beledweyne and Jubaland, the RTR found examples where DOs' wide Somali networks and close connections to affected communities enabled them to meet key humanitarian needs and access hard-to-reach populations. The Beledweyne response was found to be overall more formalized and integrated into the broader humanitarian ecosystem, due to better visibility of the response towards local, institutional, and government actors. In Jubaland, the DOs' response remained mostly unknown to other humanitarian actors although it was of great support to affected communities. In both responses, there were gaps in documentation and coordination with institutional humanitarian actors, further corroborating previously identified trends that DOs often work in a relatively informal, behind-the-scenes manner.

The results of the RTR add to a growing evidence base that diaspora actors play a critical role in Somalia's humanitarian response. Some of the major DO strengths identified include skills in fundraising through crowdfunding mechanisms, capacity to rapidly mobilize financial, technical and human resources to reach affected populations at the onset of an emergency, and strong embeddedness with local partners, staff and volunteers.

These local connections translate into myriad benefits including capacities to access hard-to-reach populations, understand local contexts and clan dynamics, gain community trust, mediate clan disputes, and recruit and coordinate vast networks of volunteers for on-the-ground project implementation.

In addition to identifying strengths and contributions, the RTR also shed light on key challenges that DOs face, such as a lack of access to international funds, gaps in understanding and coordination between DOs and institutional humanitarian actors, and a lack of recognition and credibility from institutional donors due to perceived shortcomings in accountability.

The RTR of the Somali diaspora response to humanitarian crises, with a focus on the spring 2023 flooding in Beledweyne and the conflict in Jubaland, sheds light on the role of the diaspora in Somalia's humanitarian response. Considering both the strengths and challenges faced by Somalia diaspora actors, the following recommendations are provided to leverage DOs' value as humanitarian responders while addressing barriers to their involvement and coordination in the humanitarian sector:

Recommendations for DOs:

- Routinely document, publicize, and disseminate information about activities on DO websites and social media pages to ensure awareness and understanding of DO's work to institutional actors, other diaspora, and local partners.
- Participate in existing diaspora-led coordination platforms and establish new platforms where needed (e.g., sector- or location-specific ones) to enhance dialogue, advocacy, and knowledge sharing between Somali DOs and to collectively strengthen DOs' participation in humanitarian response coordination meetings with institutional humanitarian actors (IHAs) and local actors.
- Explore further opportunities for pooling funds across regional or global diaspora networks to streamline fundraising and create financial opportunities to scale humanitarian activities.
- Collectively review processes and practices for beneficiary selection, to ensure that they are aligned with humanitarian principles and do not inadvertently exacerbate pre-existing vulnerabilities or cause harm. When good practices are identified, document, and share these with other DOs and communicate them to institutional humanitarian actors to counter negative perceptions. When relevant, collaborate within the diaspora and with local and institutional humanitarian actors to improve approaches for reaching those most in need.

Recommendations for institutional humanitarian actors:

- Dedicate funding and human resources to strengthen the capacity of DOs through, for example, providing organizational development support, technical assistance, or mentorship via flexible modalities based on DOs' needs and requests.
- To harness DOs' capacities as humanitarian partners, establish, make use of, and pilot existing operational frameworks for engagement with the diaspora, such as the Framework for Diaspora Engagement in Humanitarian Assistance¹.
- Invite and reduce barriers for diaspora actors to access coordination mechanisms with local and institutional actors (i.e., cluster meetings) for example by providing financial support in covering costs related to staff time, logistics, etc. to increase coordination and information sharing with diaspora responders.
- Partner with DOs to harness their expertise as transnational actors with knowledge from both international and local contexts. Partnerships could take the form of providing directing funding to DOs to maximize their unique responses or enlisting DOs' advisory services as experts of local contexts in hard-to-reach areas, and/or settings with notably complex clan dynamics, recognizing the unique pool of knowledge they have.

¹ International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2023. Framework for Diaspora Engagement in Humanitarian Assistance. IOM. <https://www.idiaspora.org/en/learn/resources/project-materials/framework-diaspora-engagement-humanitarian-assistance>

Recommendations for DEMAC, IOM, and other diaspora support partners:

- Provide capacity development and technical support tailored to DOs' self-expressed needs to support and strengthen their role as humanitarian responders on topics such as accountability (including monitoring and reporting), fundraising, and humanitarian principles.
- Support and facilitate coordination and collaboration among DOs. This can be achieved by supporting already existing initiatives or by supporting the establishment of online platforms for regular DO coordination, convening in-person meetings, and supporting DOs to navigate operational constraints for coordination. Key areas where coordination can be strengthened are joint fundraising, project planning, operational response and knowledge sharing.
- Support DOs operating across Somalia in establishing unified leadership that can represent the diaspora at relevant forums and interface with institutional humanitarian actors, OCHA, and stakeholders. Efforts should be made to ensure minority clan representation in diaspora leadership, including within the membership of DoDA's recently established Diaspora Council.
- Support and facilitate dedicated forums for engagement, networking, coordination and partnership-building between DOs and institutional humanitarian actors. These can include conferences, meetings, and sector-specific technical workshops where relevant actors can come together to build trust and understanding of each other's work, whilst identifying further opportunities for collaboration.
- Continue to systematically monitor, document, and promote the activities and initiatives of diaspora actors to further advance ongoing progress towards increasing the Somali diaspora's visibility and attracting greater interest from donors, partners, and sector stakeholders who have yet to harness the full benefits of diaspora engagement.

By adopting these recommendations, essential progress can be made in harnessing the full power of the diaspora to contribute towards Somalia's humanitarian sector.



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