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Looking for the real refugee crisis: Researching Somali displacement near and far

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The arrival of large numbers of refugees to Europe in 2015 and 2016 has captured public attention and caused government policy and actions to be focused on trying to find solutions to this so-called 'crisis.' Yet as tragic as the experience of those who arrive in Europe is, their experiences can best be understood by tracing their paths back to their countries and regions of origin. By considering the conditions that give rise to mass displacement and movement, one can better appreciate the conditions that push people away from their homes and towards whichever destinations they travel towards: be those in a neighbouring country or another continent.

Displacement has both emanated from, and caused further, disruption of productive economic activities, whether pastoral, agricultural or in trade terms.

I have been working on migration within and out of the Horn of Africa for 25 years. During that time, Somalia has been one of the major source countries for migration and displacement, both within the region and further afield. It is estimated that more than 1 million Somalis live within the Horn as refugees. Another 1.1 million are displaced within the country. And, by another very low estimate, an additional million Somalis (the number may be closer to 2 million) are living outside their region of origin, with large populations in North America, Europe, Southern Africa, and the Middle East.

Displacement in and from Somalia has had a dramatic effect on all aspects of life there. It has resulted in shifting clan territories, and this is one of the factors that perpetuates the cycle of violence in the country. It also influences the process of state formation, first through depleting the country of educated and skilled professionals and more recently through welcoming many of them back to take up jobs that place much of the responsibility for putting the country back together again on their shoulders. Displacement has also altered the economy of the country in several important ways: assistance for refugees and IDPs has been a major economic resource ever since the late 1970s when Somalia hosted refugees from its war with Ethiopia. This political economy of aid – including its incorporation into a system of corruption that provides incentives to some to resist peace

and the construction of an effective state – has continued to be determinative. Displacement has both emanated from, and caused further, disruption of productive economic activities, whether pastoral, agricultural or in trade terms. From another angle, some forms of displacement have provided an essential and positive lifeline, through the provision of regular remittances. Such remittances are used by poor households to pay food, health care, and educational expenses (FAO 2013).

In addition to displacement as both cause and effect of instability in Somalia, other factors that contribute to people on the move include drought, economic depression, human rights abuses, and violence associated with the ongoing conflict between state and non-state actors, in particular the al Shabaab rebels and the Somali Federal Government, backed by the African Union peacekeeping force known as AMISOM.

So complex are the different causes that compel people to move, that it is difficult if not impossible to differentiate forced migrants from economic migrants. Even those who start their journeys as economic migrants, in search of job and educational opportunities, are often subject to such horrific conditions while en-route that they effectively become forced migrants. Policies that seek to control or manage migration can either provide protection and safety to people, or they can force people to stay in unsafe situations or to enter into exploitative smuggling or trafficking networks in order to find safe passage.

At SOAS, we are working on two research projects to examine the causes and dynamics of displacement, irregular migration and conflict in Somalia and the Horn of Africa.

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The EU-funded Research and Evidence Facility for the Horn of Africa is a €4 million, 2.5 year project aimed at understanding the drivers of displacement, conflict and vulnerability in the Horn of Africa. We are leading a

consortium with partners at the University of Oxford's International Migration Institute and Nairobi-based Sahan Research to better understand the dynamics of conflict and migration and to directly inform EU support for areas affected by conflict and irregular migration. A key set of questions that we are considering are: for whom and under what conditions do changes in development conditions – whether access to employment, social services, or improvements in livelihood stability – lead to changes in decisions made about whether or not to move. We are also interested in understanding how changes in migration management strategies impact people's thinking about potential onward movement.

Another project, called Migrants on the Margins, which we are working on with the Universities of Sussex and Durham and with four international partners, with funding from the Economic and Social Research Council, DFID the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and the Royal Geographical Society/Institute of British Geographers, investigates the phenomenon of rural to urban migration in the four cities

of Hargeisa (Somaliland), Harare (Zimbabwe), Colombo (Sri Lanka) and Dhaka (Bangladesh). We are interested in why people move into cities looking for a better life, only to find that they become 'trapped' in a cycle of destitution that leaves them in many cases worse off than they were when they started. We are also interested in finding out the extent to which migration to cities may be seen as a first step towards further onward migration to Europe or other destinations. Research on the drivers, dynamics and consequences of displacement in Somali areas helps us to better understand a statement such as that of the Somali-Kenyan poet Warsan Shire, who in her seminal poem 'Home' wrote: 'You have to understand, that no one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land.' The answers to what compels Somalis to take such risks can best be found by tracing their journeys back to their country of origin – it is here that the 'real refugee crisis' is most acutely felt and seen. Research on these questions can help us to better understand and respond to problems of displacement in our world today, whether in Europe or closer to their source.

References

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Dr Laura Hammond is Reader in Development Studies at SOAS University of London. She has been working in the Horn of Africa since 1993. Her research encompasses the themes of migration and displacement, food and livelihood security, and conflict and humanitarian response. She is currently the Team Leader for the Research and Evidence Facility for the EU Trust Fund for Africa (Horn of Africa Window). She is the author of *This Place Will Become Home: Refugee Repatriation to Ethiopia* (2004) and numerous journal articles and book chapters on Ethiopia and Somalia. She has worked as a consultant for a wide range of UN and donor agencies as well as nongovernmental organisations.

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