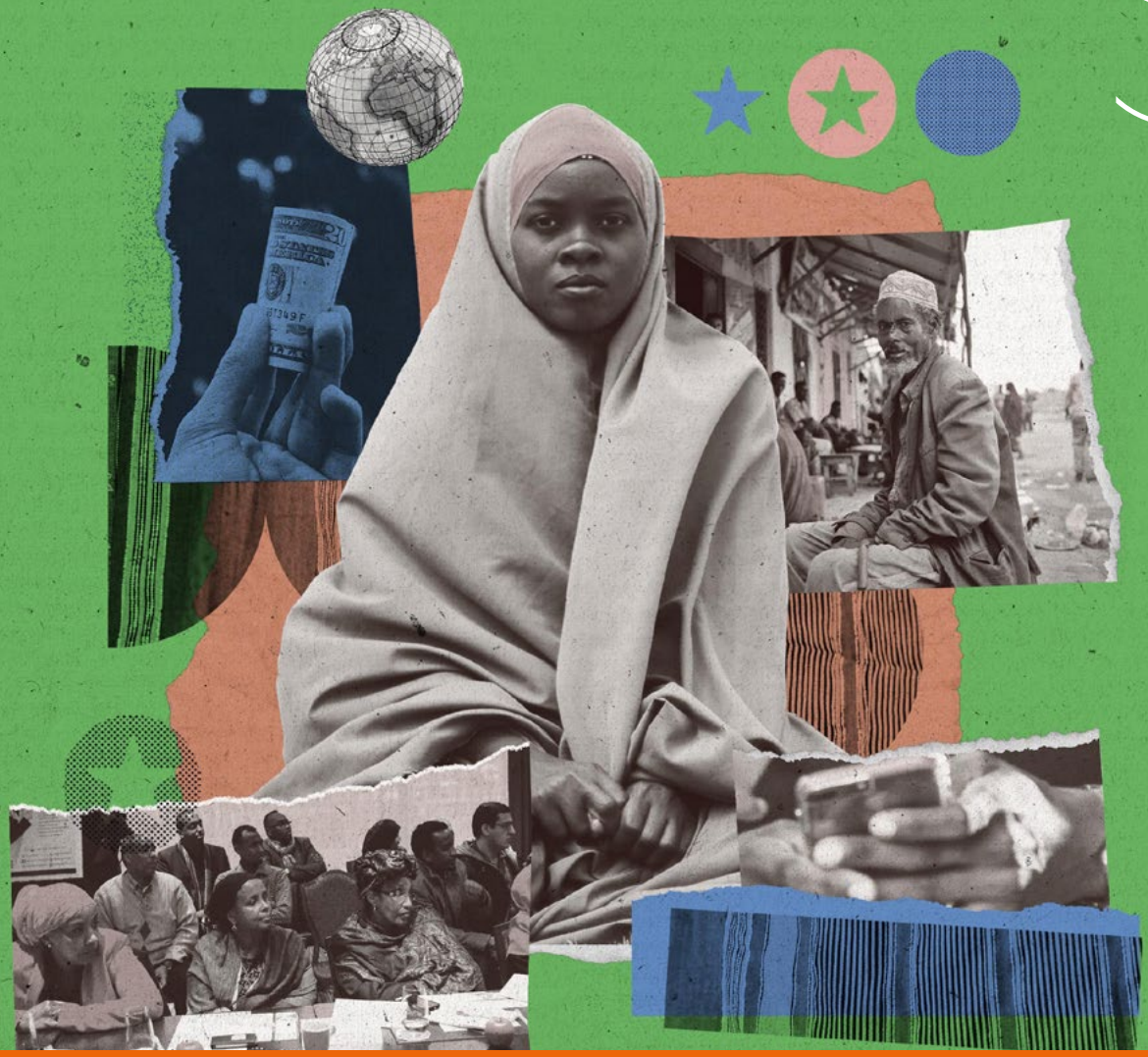

DIASPORA AID IS CRUCIAL FOR EMERGENCY RELIEF IN THE SOMALI REGIONS

Somali diaspora humanitarianism alleviates suffering and saves lives in the Somali regions that are affected by conflict, poverty and natural disasters. Its absence would exacerbate crises and significantly limit the positive impact of formal assistance.

The act of giving is an everyday practice in many African communities and is embedded in patterns of care, reciprocity and religious obligations. In times of conflict and natural disasters, giving to kin, compatriots or even strangers is a well-established means of solidarity and emergency assistance outside the international humanitarian system.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Somali diaspora aid reflects long-term mutual support systems and religious obligations, which makes the help quick, agile and resilient but also difficult to control and coordinate.
- Even though the diaspora and international humanitarian systems both aim to alleviate suffering and save lives, the relationship between the two systems is characterised by distrust and lack of cooperation.
- The excessive focus on the risk that financial transfers from the diaspora can contribute to terrorism constrains diaspora humanitarianism and hinders the acknowledgment and promotion of this informal aid system.

Somali diaspora humanitarianism is a case in point. Ranging from kinship associations, CSOs, religious institutions and businesspeople living outside the Somali regions, Somali diaspora actors respond to crises and disasters in their erstwhile homelands and beyond in close collaboration with local partners. Indeed, because diaspora actors are often deeply socially and morally invested in the places they seek to help, family ties, social obligations and religious motivations become critical to mobilisation and delivery. While mobilisation is often fast and may span continents, it is usually decentralised in its organisation rather than controlled or coordinated by national authorities or international humanitarian agencies.

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Somali diaspora humanitarianism and the formal international humanitarian system share the aim of saving lives and alleviating suffering, but collaboration and coordination between them is rare. Yet, it is pertinent to understand diaspora humanitarian practices and actors because of their continued contributions to relief. Taking place in contexts characterised by insecurity and (post-)conflict, widespread poverty and recurrent droughts and floods, the absence of diaspora relief would magnify the already extensive needs on the ground. With more than one third of the population in need of humanitarian assistance, this would have detrimental effects, as the international humanitarian system is under pressure and remains underfunded.

Acknowledging and promoting – or at the very least not constraining or hindering – diaspora humanitarianism is therefore key, even if it does not always align with the international system. In short, diaspora humanitarianism is essential for the international system in order for the latter to have a positive impact in a country like Somalia.

Support for families, emergency aid and development

Givers and recipients are often connected in diaspora humanitarianism, whether to the immediate family or through more distant kinship ties. Likewise, who gives and who receives may change and be reversed over time. This pertains to giving at the family and collective level alike. Remittances sent by Somalis abroad are estimated to be between 1.4 to 2 billion USD a year. As approximately 40% of all Somali households receive remittances for purposes of food security, education, health, investments and emergencies, this constitutes an indispensable lifeline. While the biggest share of these remittances is sent to urban residents, a portion is forwarded to other people, including family and kin in rural areas. Diaspora actors also raise money for collective projects that include development, infrastructure and emergency assistance. These initiatives are often characterised by a multi-sectoral and agile approach where funds can be redirected to urgent needs.

It is also important to note that givers include corporations and businesspeople in the Somali regions. Hence, understanding diaspora humanitarianism as a unidirectional relationship of those living outside Somalia giving to those living inside the country would be misleading.

Strong diaspora connections = strong support

Diaspora humanitarianism and the international formal system differ significantly regarding organisational procedures and logics. Reflecting embeddedness in social relations and affective motivation, the scope of potential recipients of diaspora humanitarian support tends to be delimited by shared kinship, regional affiliation or Somaliness, depending on the scale of the crisis. The actual selection within these groups is defined by needs, however, which are usually identified

by local actors deemed knowledgeable and trustworthy. Connectivity and context-based knowledge are thus central dimensions. By implication, individuals and populations without strong diaspora connections may receive less assistance.

Another distinction is that accountability is grounded in mechanisms of trust. Local businesspeople or religious authorities often receive and distribute funds, the logic being that they are trustworthy due to their position – and that fraud would damage their reputation. Accountability is usually documented by testimonies of givers and recipients, lists of donations and visual evidence rather than formalised and bureaucratic accountability procedures. Somali diaspora humanitarian actors also emphasise that their contributions are without overheads, as they cover logistics and administration costs themselves. This is in sharp contrast to formal humanitarian organisations. Furthermore, both parties believe that the actors in the other system have a political agenda and values that guide their engagement. They are both right: no intervention – humanitarian or otherwise – is ever neutral or detached from political interests. Both are also needed.

Scepticism, dilemmas and shared challenges

Given the differences between the two, it is perhaps no surprise that the relationship between the formal and diaspora humanitarianism systems is characterised by scepticism and mutual distrust about motives, practices and results, even if exceptions and collaborations also exist. The fact that diaspora engagement in fragile and conflict-affected places like Somalia tends to be perceived as being high-risk in terms of financial abuse or susceptible to terrorism aggravates such scepticism. This situation has resulted in excessive restrictions of money transfers, especially larger sums, to the Somali regions, meaning that diaspora aid may be delayed or unable to reach crisis-affected areas and communities. While there is no easy solution to the dilemma between preventing terrorism and supporting diaspora remittances to emergency relief, the current level of restrictions may ultimately aggravate crises and cause loss of lives.

That said, there are also shared traits between the formal and diaspora humanitarian systems. First, both systems marginalise or are unable to support certain groups of recipients, either because these groups do not have 'strong' diasporas to mobilise for their cause

Refugees from southern Somalia in the Dadaab refugee complex in northern Kenya, 2011, displaced by severe drought and famine that caused approx. 250,000 fatalities and displaced hundred of thousands of people.
Photo: Abaca Press / Alamy Stock Photo

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or because they live in hard-to-reach areas that are difficult to access for formalised humanitarian systems. Second, they both tend to be reactive rather than proactive, which raises questions about sustainability and compassion fatigue in the face of recurrent, protracted and/or preventable emergencies.

Diaspora humanitarianism is already part of the solution

Critical humanitarian studies have highlighted the reproduction of power inequalities in mainstream humanitarianism, including racial and colonial hierarchies. Here, a key insight has been the mission of 'white saviours' donating to 'distant strangers'. This portrays humanitarian actors and recipients as fundamentally different and unknown to each other, as well as divided by social and geographical distance. The repercussions of this insight can hardly be overstated. Yet, such critique risks ignoring the roles of non-white humanitarian workers in the formal system and emergency assistance outside it. Perspectives from diaspora humanitarianism thus nuances both critical and mainstream perceptions of what constitutes humanitarianism and humanitarian actors.

Finally, it is pertinent to note that Somali diaspora humanitarianism has existed for decades. Considerations amongst donors and humanitarian organisations of how they can coordinate diaspora actors and activities so that they can become part of 'the solution' miss the mark. Not because support or collaboration should not take place – or that diaspora practices are devoid of challenges – but because acknowledgement of what diaspora actors are already doing is a pertinent point of departure for collaboration.

HUMANITARIANISM

Humanitarianism aims to save human lives and reduce suffering. The formal system includes international and national organisations, while diaspora humanitarianism revolves around social connections and takes place outside the formal system. Based on fieldwork in sending and recipient sites, the D-Hum research project examines how Somali diaspora actors in Africa and Europe mobilise, channel and deliver relief to the Somali regions.

This is an output from the Diaspora Humanitarianism in Complex Crises (D-Hum) research project, funded by the Danish Consultative Research Committee (FFU). Read more at www.diis.dk/d-hum.

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Authors: **Nauja Kleist, senior researcher nkl@diis.dk, Peter Albrecht, senior researcher paa@diis.dk, Mohamed Aden Hassan, Founder and Director, Rako Research and Communication Centre, Hargeisa m.a.hassan@rakoresearch.com and Karuti Kanyinga, Research Professor, Institute for Development Studies, University of Nairobi, karuti.kanyinga@uonbi.ac.ke**

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