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A monopoly on assistance: International aid to refugee camps and the neglected role of the Somali diaspora

This article focuses on the neglected role of assistance provided by refugees themselves within the framework of international aid practices in long-term refugee camps. It builds on earlier work that argues that international aid systems that provide emergency aid or technical assistance to refugees fail to respect the complex gift-giving norms in refugee communities (see for example the pioneering work done by Harrell-Bond et al. 1992, 1994, 2002). I maintain that it is important to look not only at social norms of gift-giving, but also at actual and current social practices within refugee communities. In the Dadaab camps of northeastern Kenya, assistance is provided not just by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and various NGOs but also by Somalis within and outside the camps. The international aid community operating in Dadaab fails to acknowledge the full scale of this assistance provision by refugees, with two serious implications. First, this lack of acknowledgement leads to perceptions of refugees in terms of their needs rather than their agency (see also Horst 2006b; Malkki 1995, 1996, Zetter 1991). Second, the disregard for assistance provided by refugees themselves, whether locally or transnationally, has implications for the effectiveness of international assistance practices.

The insights presented in this article stem from fieldwork carried out in Dadaab and Nairobi over various periods between 1995 and August 2007.¹ My main argument is that refugees need to be acknowledged not just in their role as assistance receivers but also as providers of aid, balancing the power dimensions implicit in the act of giving. The article first discusses the context of the Dadaab refugee camps as a protracted refugee situation, and the mo-

1 The ethnographic data presented was collected for two ongoing research projects: Globalization of Protracted Refugee Situations (GPRS) and Remittances of Immigrants in Norway (RIN). The GPRS project was hosted by York University and funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) in Canada; the RIN project was hosted by the International Peace Research Institute (PRIO) and funded by the Research Council of Norway (RCN). In addition to collecting semi-structured interview data myself from agency staff and refugees in both places, I provided training to three refugees to conduct interviews for both projects. A total of 50 interviews were conducted with refugees in Kenya for both projects so far, of which about one-third took place in Nairobi.

nopoly on assistance that is commonly assumed by international aid providers. A second section discusses assistance provided by refugees outside Dadaab through the lens of international aid provision by distinguishing relief aid; aid for care and maintenance; and more sustainable types of development aid. This discussion aims to illustrate the fact that international aid providers do not hold a monopoly on any of these kinds of aid provision. It also shows that knowledge on the social interactions between assistance providers and receivers is crucial for understanding the gift-giving norms ultimately impacting the appropriateness of international aid practices.

The Dadaab refugee camps in north-eastern Kenya

Many refugees across the world have lived in refugee camps for a decade or more, being in 'protracted refugee situations' (Crisp 2003). The median length of civil conflicts is now eight years, which means that many refugees fleeing persecution or violence may be displaced from their home countries for a decade or more. Recently, this phenomenon has received increased attention again, partly because of an awareness of human rights and, particularly, security implications (see for example Loescher et al. 2007). A textbook example of a 'protracted refugee situation' is Dadaab. The town of Dadaab lies in the Garissa district in Kenya's Northeastern Province. It is situated some 500 km from Nairobi and 80 km from the Kenyan-Somali border. Since 1991/92, there have been three refugee camps near Dadaab: Ifo, Hagadera, and Dagahaley. The camps currently host about 170,000 refugees, with Somalis making up 97.5 percent of the population. Three-thirds of the Somali population come from the Juba River valley and the Gedo region, while 10 percent originate from Kismayo, Mogadishu, and Bardera (UNHCR 2007). They belong mainly to numerous Darod sub-clans, just like the surrounding local populations. Though some new arrivals have come in since the resurgence of violence in Somalia in December 2006, a large influx was halted by the Kenyan government's closure of the border.

The camps are located in a semi-arid region that is otherwise largely inhabited by nomadic pastoralists. This environment greatly limits livelihood opportunities in the camps, and it is highly unlikely that the refugees would survive without assistance from the international community. At the same time, it is highly unlikely they would survive only on the assistance from the international community (Horst 2006b). Food distributions only include maize, pulses, wheat, oil and salt, and a few non-food items. The aid agencies offer incentive worker opportunities for refugees, which pay a maximum amount of 6,000 Ksh. These are the only jobs refugees can engage in legally, as they are not allowed to move beyond the camps or work formally in Kenya. Although the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refu-

gees, to which Kenya is a signatory, allows refugees free movement as well as the ability to set up an independent livelihood, in many countries in Africa such rights are not provided. Regardless of their location and length of stay in countries of asylum, refugees in Africa are treated as temporary guests (Kibreab 1999: 399). Thus, the government of Kenya also prefers to see the refugees confined in camps and penalises any initiative by refugees to invest or settle outside the camps (Perouse de Montclos and Kagwanja 2000: 220). Whereas the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI 2004) and others have advocated the importance of a rights-based approach in the provision of aid to refugees in camps, these refugees are rarely portrayed as persons with rights.

The international aid regime claims a monopoly on assistance based on the perception that the UN and NGOs are the sole providers of aid and that refugees are solely receivers. Agencies operate according to the norms of charity rather than using a rights-based approach or operating in accordance with the gift-giving norms common in the communities they work in. Furthermore, the actual assistance provided by Somalis who leave the camps or have never lived in them is not acknowledged. The impression that a number of international staff members working in the camps have is that international aid enables survival in these camps and that refugees themselves only receive aid and do not contribute to their own livelihoods, let alone assist others. It is, for example, a common perception amongst agency staff that refugees are extremely demanding: they demand to be given aid while being dependent on it unnecessarily (Papadopoulos 2002).

In a conversation on solutions for these long-term refugee camps, a staff member told me that UNHCR had now managed to develop very sophisticated biometric information on the refugees, which would allow them to reduce the number of registrations in the camps. This, according to him, would mean that refugees would not have additional rations to sell and would themselves have to think of something to make a living. His observation overlooks the fact that refugees have for many years been trying to make a living for themselves. In fact, almost all refugees in Dadaab have sources of income additional to the food rations provided, either through (self-)employment or remittances (Horst 2006b, 2007a). And yet, assumptions that refugees were demanding and totally dependent on international food aid were quite widespread. This was partly related to the fact that the camps were seen as isolated areas that were cut off from the rest of Kenya and the world, where people should not and did not move from. And yet, migration has played a crucial part in people's livelihoods in the camps, as those who have moved away from them have enabled those who have remained in Dadaab to survive.

'Assistance' examined: Transnational assistance from refugees themselves

International humanitarian aid practices have been examined through theories on gift-giving, building on the principle that the exchange of goods is not a mechanical but a moral and social transaction. Mauss' (1954) work has been used by Harrell-Bond et al. (1992, 1994, 2002), and subsequently others, to explain the power dimensions of giving and receiving entailed in humanitarian assistance to refugees. Harrell-Bond et al. (1992) argue that in the humanitarian context, providing assistance implies giving to a deserving or worthy (absolutely destitute) recipient, being fully aware that no reciprocity can be expected. International aid systems to refugees fail to pay respect to the complex and often quite different social norms of the receiving group and their understanding of gift-giving and charity. I want to take these observations one step further by arguing that it is not only vital to understand the gift-giving norms of the refugee communities to which assistance is provided; a great deal can be gained by understanding actual gift-giving practices as well. In Dadaab, the assistance provided by refugees themselves, both locally and transnationally, is crucial for survival in the camps (Horst 2006b, 2007a).

In recent years, interest in transnational assistance by refugees, particularly in the form of remittances, has increased (see for example Diaz-Briquez et al. 1997; Lindley 2006; Van Hear 2001). The crucial importance of remittances for Somalis in Somalia and Somali refugees in the region has now been widely acknowledged (see for example Gundel 2003; Perouse de Montclos 2007; Weiss Fagen and Bump 2006). At the macroeconomic level, the country depends heavily on remittances for its functioning. Remittances significantly outweigh export income and Official Development Aid (ODA) in Somalia. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) estimated that remittances to Somalia in 2004 totalled between USD 700 million and 1 billion (Omer and El Koury 2005). Financial remittances as well as other transnational flows have enabled the provision of vital services commonly provided by the state including education, health care, and infrastructure. Furthermore, Somalia has a well-developed private sector and more successful business enterprises compared to other conflict-affected countries due to remittance inflows (Ahmed 2000).

At the household level, remittances are essential for daily consumption but are also used for investments, such as constructing houses and establishing businesses. Hansen (2004) indicates that in Somaliland resources transferred from abroad are increasingly used to fund new organisations and development projects (see also Lindley 2006). Hansen illustrates how Somali

organisations established abroad invest in health and educational facilities including hospitals, schools, and universities². It is not only those remaining in or returning to Somalia who benefit; remittances also have a substantial impact on the livelihood options of Somalis in the region, including, for example, those living in refugee camps or urban areas in Kenya and Cairo (Al-Sharmani 2006). While the literature mainly stresses the vital role remittances play in enabling the survival of many Somalis in the region, insights have so far not been used to address perceptions of refugees solely as receivers of assistance or to understand assistance norms and practices amongst Somalis.

Emergency aid, care and maintenance, and sustainable development aid

In order to examine assistance practices amongst refugees in greater detail, I wish to introduce Rashid Ibrahim. Rashid is a young Somali father who has lived in Dadaab since 1992 and is currently residing in Eastleigh estate in Nairobi in an attempt to complete a bachelor's degree in information technology. His wife and baby girl live in Hagadera, one of the Dadaab camps, with his parents. Rashid is very well-positioned in that he has many relatives and friends in western countries, who have enabled him not only to survive in Dadaab and Nairobi but also to continue his education. He is following in the footsteps of his father, who is an elder and a religious leader in Hagadera. Furthermore, Rashid has been a research assistant for me and other researchers for many years. I have selected excerpts from the various interviews I conducted with him because he has an excellent understanding of the complexities of assistance relations within the Somali community. This understanding is based not only on his own experiences but also on the experiences of a wide range of people whom he has assisted with advice and mediation and whom he has interviewed.

In an attempt to categorise different types of remittances, I make the distinction between 'emergency aid', 'care and maintenance money' (*biil*), and 'sustainable development aid'. Emergency aid is a response to sudden, unexpected expenses that occur in times of communal or personal disaster, and this type of aid is mostly requested from those in the region of origin. In addition to emergencies such as droughts, floods, diseases, or death, sudden unexpected assistance may also be needed in relation to life events such as marriages or births. For those in a position to provide remittances, such types of occurrences have first priority. Rashid indicates a difference between what he calls 'pure contributions' and 'monthly bills'. While the first type gives a

2 This finding is supported by others (Horst 2007a; Kent and Von Hippel 2005; Lindley 2005).

person the right to call his or her relatives and friends elsewhere for assistance, the second type does not automatically do so. Rather, as we will see, 'monthly bills' are only an absolute obligation of close relatives. 'Pure contributions' imply an obligation, but cannot just be for any unexpected expense: it must be something of sufficient seriousness.

Rashid engaged in discussions with his cousin in Norway on this and told me: 'We are trying to figure out who he can assist in Somalia and how he can assist, what his priorities should be. If someone is getting married you need to assist him, and if someone is sick and needs to go to hospital you need to assist him, but you do not expect to assist a cousin from this or that family to come and say just send me money, if there are no clear problems. So we were saying maybe we can contact the family elders in Somalia to know which problems are very urgent and need assistance and which do not'. Though it is not always possible to obtain the full information necessary to prioritise relief needs for people who are not present locally, this shows that attempts are being made to judge the many requests as accurately as possible.

Monthly bills are of a different category in that they are of low importance for senders who are not close relatives. This type of monthly assistance is an obligation when it comes to close relatives, especially parents, children, spouses, and siblings. It is important to realise that if these family members were to live in the same locality, they would also be expected to assist one another. Moreover, the reason for the migration of one of the family members is often exactly because it will enable someone within the family to provide for the others. At the same time as migration and transnational exchanges occur in the context of existing social relations (Monsutti 2004), these relations are also transformed by these processes. Rashid indicates the many subtleties in expectations between close family members when he describes the responsibilities his younger sister in the United States has towards him and his parents:

I feel that my sister has the responsibility to assist me when she can, and I feel that I have the same. But I am her brother, and I am older than her. What I know is, to my parents, she has to do it. And if she is working, if she is getting an income, and she is not sending, in that case, some kind of problems might arise. If she doesn't have, if she is not working, if she's a student, maybe it is ok. There were months when my sister did not send, but by that time she said she bought a car because she could not work without a car and the family accepted it. But if she is in America and she is not sending anything to her parents, that one brings conflict. Of course, her parents will not be happy: why is our daughter not assisting us? That's the question where it starts.

Aunts, uncles, and cousins may also be included if there is a very strong bond or if they have special needs. Rashid's sister assists her *abti* (maternal uncle) in Somalia because he is an amputee with additional health problems. She agreed with her mother that she would assist her *abti* 'as an obligation'.

A last form of assistance, which is far less frequent and only occurs if remittance senders have extra resources or if specific livelihood strategies are agreed upon between senders and receivers, is 'sustainable development aid'. By this I mean assistance that has the longer-term purpose of allowing the receiver to develop a sustainable livelihood. When monthly remittances are sent that enable the daily survival of people who would in normal circumstances be able to sustain themselves, the issue of dependency is thought about. Senders do not want to continue sending remittances and at times prefer to send larger amounts that allow the receiver to move to places where he or she has better livelihood opportunities, to obtain educational certificates and diplomas, or to start up a business.

There are considerable risks involved in sending larger sums of money, both for the sender and receiver. Remittances that aim for more sustainable results are supposed to be used for very specific purposes. Yet these larger sums are often sent to individuals who also struggle to pay their monthly bills. In addition, under the conditions in which they live, many obstacles may prevent the receivers from reaching their goal, as recent developments in Kenya vividly illustrate. Though senders and receivers live far apart, mechanisms to reduce the risks for the senders of remittances operate transnationally as well as locally. Rashid was at one point offered 3,000 dollars by his mother-in-law so that he could start up a business. He was not willing to take up this offer, as he explains:

I said let me first explore the market, although I already knew that I was not going to accept her offer. There is no way I can work with 3,000 dollars. There was a time she sent 2,000 dollars to her brother and after two months he asked for his monthly bill. When she asked where the 2,000 was, he said it has gone. Then there were a lot of shaming words that were said in the market; people in the diaspora and here were exchanging shameful words. So ... I know what people can say if I take responsibility. So when I am taking responsibility I have to see that what I am doing is viable. It will not be said that Rashid started a business and it did not yield profit; they will say Rashid misused the money, yes. That money was given to me, obviously. However it gets lost, whether it is official or non-official, it will be on me. People will say Rashid has taken the money from his mother-in-law, and he used it. Some enemies will say he has chewed it;³ some enemies will say he gave it to others.

When analyzing remittances sent by relatives through the lens of international humanitarian and development aid and distinguishing relief aid, care and maintenance money, and sustainable development aid, interesting parallels and differences become apparent. It is clear from Rashid's observations that the three types of aid entail very different social dynamics between senders and receivers. In conclusion, I will discuss some points that are interesting to explore further in this comparative exercise.

3 Referring to the practice of chewing qat amongst Somalis.

Concluding remarks

My interviews with Rashid and others clearly illustrate that Somalis see assistance to those in need as an absolute responsibility of the individual as a member of a larger whole, whether this is the family, clan, community, or umma. It is a religious and cultural obligation to assist those who are struck by a crisis situation and to contribute to the livelihoods of one's close relatives in need. Assisting more distant relatives and friends shows generosity and goodness, though it is not obligatory in the same way. Rather than a 'social obligation', this could be termed a 'responsibility'. These are long-existing assistance practices in which migration has always played an important role (Horst 2006a; Kleist 2004). After the start of the civil war, an extra dimension was added: Somalia is in shambles both economically and politically, and regional refugees live in situations of great duress, which increases the importance of remittances. Somalis feel a great sense of responsibility to transfer money, especially because of the level of deprivation they know their relatives face.

The ethnographic data presented here was discussed with the aim of showing the usefulness of drawing parallels between assistance provided within a refugee community and international aid. There is a gap in our current understanding of the functioning of refugee camps, as refugees are understood as receivers of assistance only, with this assistance provided by international aid organisations. This understanding has tremendous implications for the power ascribed to the different actors involved and, ultimately, for actual practices as well (see also Zetter 1991). Acknowledging the importance of assistance provided by Somali refugees locally and transnationally to livelihoods in the Dadaab camps is vital. Amongst Somalis, providing assistance to those who need it is the responsibility of those who can do so, and receiving aid thus becomes a right of those in need. Both senders and receivers share a great concern about the independence and dignity of the receiver, and more sustainable types of aid are preferred over 'monthly bills' when senders would in normal circumstances be able to provide for themselves. These are issues that providers of international aid may need to take into account when developing programs in refugee camps.

I have argued that understanding the dilemmas faced by Somali assistance providers, the choices they make and the solutions they find, will prove useful in developing new ways of thinking about international aid in protracted refugee situations. At the same time, it is important not to underestimate the difficulties related to assistance norms and practices amongst Somalis as well. The strong sense of responsibility regarding remittance relations may be more than expected senders can handle (Horst 2007b; Riak Akuei 2005), while receivers may also fail to achieve what is expected of them. This could lead to the poverty cycle Lindley (2007) has warned against,

where senders face such great pressures that they often incur great debts in order to be able to fulfil all the demands on them and receivers are hardly ever assisted in really improving their conditions. Despite the preferences of senders and receivers, remittances rarely consist of substantial amounts for sustainable purposes, but can mainly be classified as aid for relief or 'care and maintenance' money. Besides, remittances hardly ever address structural conditions that obstruct socio-economic opportunities. In order to enable both assistance practices amongst Somalis and international aid practices to have greater impact, however, it is crucial to start exploring these issues as well as the opportunities that may arise from building bridges across these currently parallel systems.

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