

## Diaspora Organizations from the Horn of Africa in Norway: Contributions to Peacebuilding?

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### Basic Facts

Refugees and other migrants have been coming to Norway from the Horn of Africa – which includes Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia – for decades. In 2006, the Somali population in Norway consisted of some 18,000 individuals, while 3,190 people of Ethiopian and 2,653 people of Eritrean origin were registered in Norway at the same time.<sup>1</sup> The earliest arrivals of Somalis were small groups of seamen working within the Norwegian shipping industry in the late 1970s. In the mid-1980s, relatively small numbers of refugees arrived from Somaliland, many of whom have now moved on to other countries, including the UK. After the outbreak of civil war in 1991, larger numbers came from southern Somalia, and almost half of Norway's Somali population arrived within the last five years. For their part, Ethiopians have mainly come in two waves: the first wave consisted generally of individuals fleeing the Mengistu regime, mainly between 1982 and 1992. (After Eritrea became an independent state in 1993, many of these registered as Eritreans.) Then, a second wave of both Ethiopians and Eritreans began after 1998, when war once again broke out between the two countries. Like Somalis, more than half of the Ethiopian migrants have lived in Norway less than five years. The Eritrean community, on the other hand, includes many who have lived in Norway for a longer period of time: a total of 44% have lived in Norway for more than 15 years.

Members of the three groups have established and registered a large number of organizations over the last 30 years. In a study commissioned by the Peace and Reconciliation Unit of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, we identified over 200 registered migrant organizations with a background from the Horn of Africa in Norway. Of these, about 150 were Somali, 28 Ethiopian, and 23 Eritrean organi-

zations. Only a small number of organizations that are still registered were established before 1995, and the large majority of registered organizations were founded after 2000. Ethiopian organizations in particular do not seem to have a very long history, whereas a few Eritrean and Somali organizations were established between 20 and 30 years ago. Factors impacting the sustainability of a particular organization include the length of stay of its members in Norway (on both the individual and the communal level), organizational skills and continuity in staffing, individual and communal levels of active political engagement, strong transnational networks within the diaspora, and the sustainability of the organization's cause. At times, migrant organizations are initiated in direct response to particular events in the country of origin or settlement, but this rarely translates into mid- or long-term initiatives or projects.

On the one hand, the relatively large number of these organizations is related to the extreme level of fragmentation within their respective communities, which are strongly divided along regional, ethnic, clan, religious and political lines. On the other hand, it is also related to strong desires on the part of their initiators to address some of the difficulties faced in their own communities – both in Norway and in the region of origin. Also, it is important to note that although these organizations are formally registered, many are currently inactive and only a few are organized on anything like a professional basis. The vast majority are run by a single person or a small group on a voluntary basis, and such organizations are very instable. As formal funding opportunities in Norway are limited, the structural activities each organization is engaged in are also quite limited. The large majority of the organizations focus solely on the situation of their respective communities within Norway, although local

activities do at times have a transnational focus. (For example, Oromo and other minority diaspora groups partly organize their cultural activities in Norway to maintain a sense of identity among community members, combining this with advocacy and lobbying initiatives to improve conditions in the homeland.)

### **What Role Can Diaspora Organizations Play in Peacebuilding?**

In this policy brief, 'peacebuilding' refers to activities aimed at the sustainable transformation of structural conflict factors and patterns. It presupposes a long-term commitment, on the part of both local and external actors, to a process that simultaneously addresses the material and the attitudinal level of a conflict. Diaspora organizations' engagements with peacebuilding can take many forms and can be divided into direct and indirect activities. *Direct activities* focus on the country of origin directly and include material support, advocacy and lobbying in the country of origin, institutional support, and capacity-building. *Indirect activities* focus on the country of origin through mediating actors and include disseminating information to decisionmakers and 'the public at large' about the situation in the home country, lobbying with intergovernmental and state institutions to place an issue on the international agenda or to take action unilaterally, and pressuring NGOs to start campaigning against human rights abuses and the like.

There may be considerable disagreement as to what are the main conflict factors and patterns and what kinds of transformations are needed. Some local and external actors argue that strong government institutions are essential, possibly at the cost of other democratic values, while others insist that an inclusive society is more important than central governance structures. The Network of Ethiopian Muslims in Europe, for example, claims that it is working towards a peaceful, more inclusive society, while others interpret its actions as creating conflict rather than building peace. Furthermore, if not carried out with care, peacebuilding initiatives may have unintended negative effects. In Somalia, one of the main structural conflict factors is the unequal distribution of (generally scarce) resources. Actors providing financial or in-kind support aimed at creating stability in reality often create further conflict.

In order to assess what roles diaspora organizations can play in peacebuilding, it is crucial that both the capacity of these organizations to engage in such activity successfully and their desire to do so are properly understood. A given organization's

capacity and desire to engage may be determined, first, by factors related to the diaspora group from which it originates.<sup>2</sup> For example, many individuals within the Somali diaspora in Italy are part of the former elite in Somalia who left the country before or shortly after the collapse of their state. They are well-connected at high levels of political life in both Italy and Somalia, which increases their ability to lobby successfully. Second, capacities and desires are affected by home-country factors. In January 2009, for example, the Ethiopian government introduced a Law on Charities and Societies that defines all organizations receiving more than 10% of their funding from foreign sources as 'foreign NGOs' and subsequently bans such 'foreign NGOs' from carrying out peacebuilding and human rights activities. This legal change fundamentally reduces the capacity of diaspora organizations to engage, while simultaneously increasing their desire to do so. Third, capacities and desires are influenced by conditions in the country of settlement. Relatively generous funding opportunities for diaspora organizations in the Netherlands have increased the opportunities for Eritrean organizations to engage with the country of origin, though this funding is biased against oppositional activities. The nature of such funding opportunities does not seem to affect the desire to engage in particular ways, however, which is largely determined by an organization's stance toward the Eritrean government. Table I provides an overview of these three types of factors.

### **Peacebuilding Activities Among Somali, Ethiopian and Eritrean Organizations**

For a variety of reasons, very few diaspora organizations from the Horn of Africa explicitly indicate engagement in peacebuilding. Yet, many organizations and individuals work towards transforming structural conflict factors in their country of origin. The 'peacebuilding' concept is often understood by Western policymakers as something that takes place on a national level. However, many conflicts in the Horn of Africa do not only take place in relations between the state and actors opposing the state – the Somali case providing perhaps the most obvious example. Somali diaspora organizations in Norway engage in peacebuilding through activities that are largely directed at specific regions in Somalia and labeled 'humanitarian aid' or 'development aid'. Projects to improve education in Somalia, for example, are presented as important peacebuilding initiatives, as the lack of educational opportunities in Somalia puts young people at risk of engaging in violent conflicts, either as a livelihood strategy or as a way of passing time. Furthermore, an insufficiently educated young generation will create human re-

Table I: Factors influencing the contributions of diaspora organizations to peacebuilding

	Diaspora characteristics	Country of origin	Country of settlement
Legal rights of settlement and mobility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Length and permanence of stay (out-migration or otherwise)</li> <li>• Migration history</li> </ul>	Entrance policies	Citizenship and residence policies, including right to travel to country of origin
Level of inclusion and access		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Level of (de-)centralization of governance</li> <li>• Security situation</li> </ul>	Active integration policy
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Total population</li> <li>• Trans- and international networking</li> <li>• Socio-economic class</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Availability of financial resources (local/international)</li> <li>• Availability of good local partners</li> </ul>	Funding structures and opportunities
Divisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Level and type of fragmentation</li> <li>• Level of repression within the group</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Major lines of conflict (clan, ethnic, religious; material/political inclusion)</li> <li>• Local views on diaspora and its role</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consistency of policies between different actors</li> <li>• Approach toward major lines of conflict</li> </ul>
Interactions with home government	Stance toward the government	Diaspora-targeted policies and practices – transnationally and upon return	'Foreign policy stance' toward country of origin

source problems in a post-conflict phase. One of the main factors restricting the capacity of Norwegian Somali organizations to engage in their country of origin is the security situation. This has especially affected engagements in border areas between Somaliland and Puntland and in South-Central Somalia, where civil society and humanitarian workers have been repeatedly targeted since 2006.

The main reason why Ethiopian diaspora organizations do not use the term 'peacebuilding' is that the term is highly contested among Ethiopians. Use of the term would be seen as a political statement with inevitable implications for an organization's ability to engage in actual peacebuilding activities, whether transnationally or through (temporary) return. Similarly, activities that focus on democracy and human rights are impossible to carry out in Ethiopia – a factor that has become explicit with the introduction of the new Law on Charities and Societies. In Norway, the majority of Ethiopian organizations are religious and ethnic organizations (largely Oromo) that conduct their activities almost solely in the country of settlement. Organizations indicate that even their ability to engage in humanitarian activities in Ethiopia is limited, because a regional focus is easily interpreted by the regime as supporting nationalist ideals. Ethiopian communities in other European countries, however, are far more actively focused on peacebuilding and human rights on a national, and especially a regional, level. In Germany, for example, where the Ethiopian community is far larger and well established, a variety of human rights groups engage in various indirect activities, including lobbying and advocacy, cooperation with German NGOs and monitoring and reporting human rights violations.

The situation in Eritrea is similar to that in Ethiopia: Eritrean (diaspora) organizations with a peacebuilding or human rights agenda are banned from work-

ing in Eritrea, and thus none of the organizations operating in Norway explicitly state that they are engaged in peacebuilding. In the case of Eritrean organizations, there is a strong division between those in support of the current government and those supporting the opposition, with room for opposition in Norway being quite limited. Because the Eritrean community in Norway is so small, some of the organizations exist by building on strong international networks as, again, the level of organization among Eritreans in other European countries is much higher. For example, the Norwegian branch of the Young People's Front for Democracy and Justice (YFPD), a pro-government diaspora organization, is very small, but forms part of a worldwide organization with much greater capabilities and resources.

### Recommendations<sup>3</sup>

Since conditions in the country of settlement have an impact on the ability of diaspora organizations to contribute to peacebuilding, there are measures that European institutions can take to facilitate positive contributions by such organizations. This requires long-term commitment, a fresh approach toward the problem of ensuring that resources are distributed equitably, and an awareness of the fact that diaspora contributions need to be understood and facilitated within the wider spectrum of local, national and international actors involved in peacebuilding processes.

#### 1. Long-term commitment and coherent policies

Policies to strengthen the contributions of diaspora organizations to development and peacebuilding require substantial commitment, including the allocation of sufficient time and resources. For European institutions, it takes considerable time and stability in staffing, policy and funding to identify

well-functioning organizations that can play an important role in peacebuilding and to facilitate the capacity-building of less experienced diaspora organizations. For diaspora organizations, it takes time to build up confidence in the fact that European institutions can play a supportive role, so that a more equal, trusting partnership becomes possible. Coherent policies are crucial in this respect, requiring governmental bodies concerned with foreign affairs, development cooperation, immigration law and integration issues to work together to develop policies on diaspora engagements.

## 2. 'Equitable distribution' and the principle of doing no harm

The distribution of (scarce) resources is a common underlying factor in many conflicts, which makes the allocation of resources by donors and implementers in conflict or post-conflict situations extremely delicate. Current attempts to support diaspora organizations often display a rather literal approach to the issue: The major parties to a conflict are identified and resources are then distributed equally between organizations representing those parties. Alternatively, organizations or projects are expected to have representatives from all parties or diaspora organizations are required to cooperate in umbrella structures. In the case of Somali organizations, for example, inclusion of or support by all major clans is often a requirement if an initiative is to secure funding. This policy does great harm, because it does not match political and economic realities on the ground and increases the conflict over resources along clan lines, solidifying dividing lines that in Somalia are often quite fluid. Instead, donors and implementers should focus their support on carefully designed, transparent regional approaches that are based on proper needs-assessment exercises and draw heavily on cooperation with local governance structures and beneficiaries.

## 3. Diaspora contributions within the wider spectrum of peacebuilding actors

Diaspora organizations function within a wider field of actors engaged in activities aimed at transforming the structural factors behind a conflict – including local, national and international actors. When support is to be provided for diaspora initiatives, this can only be done by placing these initiatives in the context of developments within the country of origin, the region and the international community. This requires in-depth knowledge of the types of activities that are already taking place and the various actors (elders, local civil society, local, regional and national governing bodies, intergovernmental bodies, international donors, etc.) that play a role in peacebuilding. In post-conflict situations, for example, diaspora input is easily overstretched, as those in the diaspora often have a relative advantage in financial and human capital over local actors. However, such overrepresentation usually comes at the cost of local legitimacy.

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<sup>1</sup> All statistics taken from Kristin Henriksen, 2007. *Fakta om 18 Innvandregrupper i Norge*. Oslo: Statistics Norway.

<sup>2</sup> The analysis in the following sections builds on empirical data presented in Andrea Warnecke (ed.), 2009. 'Diaspora Networks in Europe: Summary Report of Initial Data Collection on Somali, Ethiopian and Eritrean Diaspora Organisations in Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway and the United Kingdom', unpublished DIASPEACE report. Bonn: Bonn International Center for Conversion.

<sup>3</sup> See also Cindy Horst, 2008. 'Diaspora Engagements in Development Cooperation', *PRIO Policy Brief 8/2008*. Oslo: PRIO.



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