



## DIASPEACE *News*

### *Cooperation Seminar for Horn of Africa Organizations 5.10.2009 Helsinki, Finland*

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The DIASPEACE research project coordinated by the University of Jyväskylä (JYU), in collaboration with “Security, governance and identities in Flux- the Role of Diaspora in Development of the Horn of Africa” research project (financed by the Academy of Finland and coordinated by JYU) and Finnish Somalia Network ([www.somaliaverkosto.net](http://www.somaliaverkosto.net)) organized a **CO-OPERATION SEMINAR FOR HORN OF AFRICA ORGANISATIONS** on 5 October 2009 in the premises of the University of Helsinki.



This cooperation seminar was organized to provide opportunities to discuss the diaspora involvement in the Horn of Africa (focusing in particular but not exclusively on Ethiopia and Somalia/Somaliland) and to share views and experiences between diaspora associations, development cooperation agencies/stakeholders and researchers. The seminar pursued two main aims: a) enhancing knowledge among development cooperation professionals of the potential of

diaspora groups; b) raising diaspora associations' awareness of the importance/viability of collective peace-building and development interventions targeted at post-conflict and reconstruction projects.

Invitation was sent to all relevant stakeholders and interest groups in Finland such as Somali and Ethiopian organizations, representatives of ministries, Finnish NGOs active in peace building and development cooperation in the Horn of Africa, and over 60 people attended the seminar.

## **The current situation in the Horn of Africa and the role of the diaspora**

The leader of the DIASPEACE and “Security, governance and identities in Flux- the Role of Diaspora in Development of the Horn of Africa”- research projects, Professor Liisa Laakso, addressed some critical issues relating to the conflicts in Africa in her opening remarks. She pointed out that traditionally there has been a strong link between state building and peace building which has led to the situation where western actors in conflict resolution activities put a strong focus on state and partners for peace negotiations are selected on this basis. In reality, such as in the case of Somalia, this has not worked out and there is a need to include local level actors in peace negotiations. The role of diaspora is one critical part when the new approaches to conflict resolution are discussed. Professor Laakso stated that more empirical research is needed on the role of diaspora in conflict and peace dynamics in order to overcome the current negative picture that diasporas are only risk factors in conflicts. The role of diaspora in conflict resolution and peace building in particular on the local level can be very important.



The first keynote lecturer Mr. Antti Pentikäinen, Director at the Finn Church Aid, provided an update on the current political and humanitarian situation in the Horn of Africa focusing on Sudan, Somalia and Congo. Mr. Pentikäinen presented the current stages of various conflicts, root causes and consequences of conflicts to populations and stated that in these extremely complex conflicts in peace making initiatives it is extremely important to include all the key actors. If not included, the intervention may do more harm than good. Relating to the conflict in Somalia, which he described as the worst humanitarian crisis in the world but forgotten by the international community, Mr. Pentikäinen mentioned the work planned by the Finn Church Aid with the Finnish based Somali diaspora on peace building focusing on traditional structures in Somali society.

Mr. Pentikäinen in his lecture emphasized the great potential of engaging diaspora groups in peace building activities carried out by external actors, and expressed the interest of the Finn Church Aid to look for the possibilities to realize this.

The second keynote lecturer, Mr. Jeremy Lester, Head of Unit at the European Commission, DG Development/Unit of relations with the countries and the regions of the Horn of Africa, Eastern Africa and Indian Ocean, focused his lecture around the themes of the EU in the Horn of Africa, the role of diaspora in the Horn of Africa seen from the DG Development/ Brussels perspective and on how the European Commission and the diaspora can engage and benefit Europe and Africa in the process. The European Union is actively involved in the Horn of Africa in many levels, such as through delegations, cooperation programmes with governments, project work with civil society organizations, humanitarian assistance and political dialogue. As the EU believes in regional

cooperation, it is actively involved in the Horn also in the regional level supporting institutions such as COMESA, IGAD and the AU.

As for the diaspora engagement in the Horn seen from the EC perspective Mr. Lester highlighted several points as well as related open questions, such as the importance of distinguishing the current role and the potential role, how the transition can be encouraged, and how the host nations can encourage a constructive role of diasporas. According to Mr. Lester the diaspora can be a great source of information and allows country analyst to better understand certain dynamics, and this information could be used more systematically. He stated that the cultural, political and developmental activities are easier for diaspora when one does not fear being sent back. Thus the EU's first path to working with the diaspora is in securing Europe wide sound treatment of asylum seekers and of legitimate migrants.

Lastly Mr. Lester pointed out some challenges of diaspora engagement relating to the fragmentation of the diaspora from the Horn, which mirrors the existing divisions in the country of origin. This tendency has, according to Mr. Lester, two negative consequences. The first, the economic and political interaction with the country of origin is less conducive for peace and more to encourage division. The second, more of a suggestion by Mr. Lester, is that if diaspora groups recognized their common identity as diaspora, for that they have in common, they would be able to lobby for their common interests more effectively with national governments and with the EU. He stated that meetings such as this one suggest that it is possible, and asked the audience what would be the best way for the EU to encourage this process.

### **Existing projects by the diaspora in the countries of origin: Cooperations and Framework Conditions**



The afternoon session was built around presentations on the ongoing development and peace building projects that Somali- and Ethiopian diasporas in Finland are engaged in with a particular focus on the cooperations they have formed with different actors and organizations. The aim of this session was to provide a platform for different diaspora organizations to present their activities and cooperations they

are engaged in, and to discuss about the challenges and possibilities for further cooperation. In particular the Somali diaspora in Finland is very active in development and humanitarian field in Somalia/ Somaliland, and several ongoing projects by the Somali diaspora were presented. The Ethiopian diaspora in Finland is very small, and

there are only a few concrete projects implemented in the country of origin by the Ethiopian diaspora based in Finland. Thus the presentations and discussion on the Ethiopian case focused on the framework conditions created by the current political situation in Ethiopia, where the space for civil society in peace building and human rights advocacy is very limited.

### **Developmental and humanitarian involvement of Finland based Somali diaspora**

The session started with the presentation by Mr. Matti Lahtinen (Senior Officer, Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA), Unit for Non-Governmental Organizations) on NGO development cooperation support for diaspora associations: experiences of cooperation with Somali associations. In Finland the MFA with NGO development funds have supported projects of Somali organizations. During 2008-2009 total of 59 applications for development projects in Somalia were handed in, and 23 were granted funding. The funded projects are mainly in the sectors of health and education, which indicates that the welfare of people in Somalia is very close to hearts of Somalis in Finland.

The MFA is supporting the Finnish Somalia Network, as it has an interest in facilitating cooperation between diaspora organizations, not by forcing them to work together, but encouraging the cooperation despite the different opinions of various organizations. The Network also provides courses and thus functions as an instrument for capacity building of Somali organizations. Mr. Abdi Hassan Ali (Board member of the Finnish Somalia Network) presented the network more in detail. The network has been set up in 2004, and it has goals of increasing trust among stakeholders, such as funders and fundees, increasing possibilities of accessing funding and increasing active membership. Improved quality of applications for development projects by organizations, greater transparency, cooperation and confidence were mentioned as main achievements of the network.

Mr. Saed Guled (Project Coordinator, International Organisation for Migration, Regional Office in Helsinki) presented an ongoing MIDA Health project “Strengthening the Health Sector in Somaliland and Puntland through the Engagement of Somali Diaspora Health Professionals from Finland”. Since starting the project in July 2008 to date 18 assignments have been completed (duration: 3,5 weeks – 3 months). Mr. Guled mentioned several challenges related to the implementation of the project: 29 October, 2008 Hargeisa suicide bomb attacks were a major setback to the project. All Health Professionals present in Somaliland at that time were relocated to Finland. In addition, the security situation in Puntland is a concern. Challenges remain also relating to the lack of medical equipment needed, difficulty to obtain matching donations from Finland as well as to matching expectations of all stakeholders and matching needs in the field and expert specialization. Another IOM project, QUEST MIDA: Qualified Expatriate Somali Technical Support – Migration for Development in Africa, was also shortly presented.



Mr. Mohamoud Hassan Elmi, Executive Director of Nairobi-based Action for Relief & Development (A,R,D) organization gave a speech on diaspora engagement at the grassroots level from the field perspective. He is himself a diaspora returnee from the USA. Currently A,R,D carries out projects on women's education, water development, sanitation and primary & secondary education in the Gedo region of Somalia. It is engaged in several cooperation projects with diaspora organizations, such as Finland based Gannaane and SOEADA seura and other NGOs, including Finn Church Aid and Norwegian Church Aid. Mr. Hassan Elmi highlighted the importance of diaspora engagement in the grassroots level humanitarian work in the Gedo region. The area is lacking basically everything, but some progress has been made with the help of the diaspora. He appealed

to the audience of importance of bottom up approach: doing actual work in the ground and staying away from politics.

Ms. Saido Mohamed, Expert at the Finnish League for Human Rights talked on the diaspora engagement and work in organizations from the women's perspective. As a qualified nurse she had gone twice to Somalia to work in hospitals, and noticed how women are often left aside in work places and projects. She stated the importance of going back to the country of origin to bring the skills and know how, as well as to teach the basic human rights, such as gender equality.



### **Framework conditions for the diaspora engagement in the case of Ethiopia**

Dr. Pekka Virtanen, research coordinator of DIASPEACE gave insights to changing operational contexts for diaspora engagement in Ethiopia by briefly reviewing the new law on NGOs. This law prohibits any domestic NGO receiving more than 10% of its funding from abroad from engaging in activities related to the advancement of human and democratic rights, the promotion of equality of nations, nationalities and peoples and that of gender and religion, the promotion of the rights of the disabled and children's

rights, the promotion of conflict resolution and reconciliation and the promotion of the efficiency of the justice and law enforcement services.

Under the new NGO law, engagement in peace building and conflict resolution is practically impossible for diaspora organizations. In the light of the situation in Ethiopia, as well as restrictions imposed by other governments such as the Eritrean government to diaspora activities, it is important to think of the question of how we can make Horn of Africa governments more receptive for their diasporas.

In the subsequent discussion on the restrictions placed by the new law on diaspora engagement, as well as limitations put on activities by the political opposition, concern about the difficult situation of certain ethnic/linguistic groups and regions in Ethiopia - notably the Oromo and the Ogaden - was brought up by the audience.

### **Linking researchers and policy makers**

Dr. Fantu Cheru, Professor and Research Director, from the Nordic Africa Institute (NAI), Uppsala, Sweden concentrated in his presentation on the diaspora research, policy and practice, showing partial results from a NAI-GW diaspora web survey.

Under the theme of the seminar, “cooperation”, the linkage between researchers and policy makers in diaspora and migration is highly relevant. Professor Cheru suggested seven steps to improve quality and relevance of diaspora research: 1) fund research across the breadth of issues related to diaspora engagement; 2) support improved quality of research; 3) support and reward policy- relevant research; 4) convene researchers, policy makers and practitioners to promote dialogue and idea exchange; 5) researchers must utilize dissemination channels, which may require repackaging research to be accessible; 6) support the creation and expansion of clearinghouses for relevant research; 7) investment should be made to organize the diaspora organizations across sectors.



### **Way forward**

The diaspora groups and individuals from the Horn of Africa are actively engaging with their areas of origin and can play an important role in development and peace processes. Constructive diaspora involvement may, however, become challenging in conflict settings. Moreover, the situation and position of the diaspora groups in the country of settlement affect the capacity to get involved in development and peace-related activities in the areas of origin. Networking and cooperation between diaspora associations themselves as well as between diaspora associations and other development cooperation agencies can enhance the capacities to undertake activities that can possibly contribute to

peaceful development of the areas of origin. Having this rationale as a background, the aim of this one day seminar was to bring together Horn of Africa diaspora organizations (as inclusively as possible), researchers and Finnish actors in peace building and development cooperation to exchange views, to network and to learn from each other. Although some forms of cooperation between diaspora organizations themselves, between diaspora organizations and Finnish authorities/ actors in development field does exist in Finland, challenges still remain and there was a general agreement among the participants that networking and cooperation can and should be further developed on different levels.

In the final discussion some concrete proposals on how to deepen the process of networking, as well as challenges related to that were spelled out. Practical suggestions for deepening the cooperation included an idea of organizing this kind of seminar on a regular basis, annually or bi-annually. In these seminars more time could be reserved for dialogue between different groups/organizations and stakeholders. Another concrete proposal, which is already being realized, is to create an e-mail list of participants of this seminar for information dissemination on upcoming events etc.

One major challenge which makes the cooperation difficult from the point of view of Finnish authorities is the diversity of diaspora groups, and it was suggested that for example Somalis should try to find a common agenda, as the engagement is easier with one common shared agenda. Several ongoing projects in Finland, this seminar and other similar events around the Europe suggest, however, that despite the diversity of diaspora groups, cooperation is possible although there is room for improvement.

This cooperation seminar can be seen as one further step ahead in this process of networking between different stakeholders, namely diaspora organizations from the Horn, researchers, policy makers and Finnish development work practitioners on the area diaspora engagement for development and peace building.

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Two articles written in Finnish on the seminar focusing on the Somali diaspora published at the website of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland can be found on these links:

**“Seminaari: Synnyinmaassa tarvitaan diaspora-somalien apua”:**

<http://www.formin.fi/public/default.aspx?contentId=172703&nodeId=15409>

**”Puhumisen ja politikoinnin sijaan ruohonjuurityötä Somaliassa”:**

<http://global.finland.fi/public/default.aspx?contentid=172704&nodeid=15782&contentlan=1&culture=fi-FI>