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Protracted displacement and remittances: the view from Eastleigh, Nairobi

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Introduction

There are more than 5.5 million people around the world struggling in situations of protracted and unresolved exile (UNHCR 2006).¹ These people are allowed to remain in the country where they have sought asylum, but lack basic rights. They often receive meagre - and dwindling - levels of international aid, and must therefore find alternative and additional ways to provide for themselves and their households (Jacobsen 2006).

Remittances from family members in other countries appear to be one way that some people cope with protracted displacement: the money can alleviate poverty and can provide possibilities for improving recipients' situations, within their considerable constraints (Crisp 2003; Jacobsen 2006). On a global scale, remittances are a significant source of income for developing countries: officially recorded flows totalled \$160 billion in 2004, compared with \$166 billion Foreign Direct Investment and \$79 billion Official Development Assistance (World Bank 2006). Most research explores the remittances of labour migrants and the effects in their countries of origin; much less is known about the dynamics and effects of remittances in displacement settings (relevant research includes Dick 2002; Horst 2006; Riak Akuei 2005; Savage and Harvey 2007; Van Hear 2002).

This paper explores experiences of the remittance process among Somali refugees living in Nairobi. Hundreds of thousands of people have fled to Kenya since 1991 as a result of the civil war in Somalia. Many people still live in refugee camps, mainly dependent on international aid, but over time many others have defied the host government's attempts to contain them in camps and sought a living in urban areas. The paper focuses on Eastleigh, a bustling suburb of Nairobi with a large Somali population. Known in Swahili as *Mogadishu ndogo* (little Mogadishu), Eastleigh has a reputation for thriving business activity, dilapidated infrastructure and crime. Many Somali refugees in this district receive cash remittances from relatives overseas through the Somali money transfer system popularly known as *xawilaad*. As we shall see, this money has complex effects on their lives.

The research was conducted in January - April 2005, during which time the researcher lived in Eastleigh with a Somali host. The paper is based on informal conversations, observations, and interviews (with residents of various socio-economic and demographic characteristics and clans, conducted with the support of a local researcher).² The paper also draws on consultations and interviews with people professionally knowledgeable about the politico-legal and socio-economic situation of Somalis in Kenya, including UNHCR.³ While a comprehensive quantitative survey

¹ This estimate excludes Palestinian refugees under UNRWA's mandate, and is based on national groups of refugees of 25,000 living for five years or more in the same country of asylum.

² Thanks go to the research participants for their time; Abdullahi Mohamed Qambi for his excellent research assistance; and Nafisa Nur Osman for her warm hospitality. Thanks also to Oliver Bakewell and Dulo Nyaoro.

³ A total of 24 interviews were conducted with recipients and others. All names have been changed and some details have been altered to preserve interviewees' anonymity. The research was part of a broader multi-sited project also involving research in Hargeisa and London (Lindley 2006, 2007a and 2007b).

was not feasible, the data collected paint a broadly indicative picture of remittance experiences among Somali refugees in Eastleigh.

The next section gives a brief account of the refugee situation, and the changes in the Eastleigh district of Nairobi as it became a major hub for Somali people in Kenya. The third section explores the patterns of remittances and roles in people's livelihoods. The fourth section explores how remittances intertwine with regional and global mobility, and the final section outlines repercussions in the wider urban economy. The paper concludes by summarising the findings and discussing their policy implications.

Somalis in Kenya: from the northern frontier to Nairobi

Kenya has a substantial indigenous Somali Kenyan population, particularly in the North Eastern Province (NEP, known as the Northern Frontier District under British rule). Somali pastoralists have long lived in this harsh, semi-arid area, with its troubled history of political unrest and state repression. Other Somali Kenyans trace their families back to colonial employees or independent traders who settled in Kenya's towns and cities (Anderson 2005; Turton 1972; Goldsmith 1997; Lewis 2002).

When civil war broke out in southern Somalia and the state collapsed in 1991, hundreds of thousands of Somali refugees sought safety in Kenya, initially mainly Marehan (the clan of the former president Siyad Barre) and other Darod clans, but as the violence intensified, people of other clans joined them. They fled on foot or crammed into vehicles over the border into the NEP; by *dhow* from Somalia's coastal towns to Mombasa; and by plane to Nairobi. After initial attempts to block arrivals, Kenya allowed them in: around 400,000 refugees arrived from Somalia in 1991 and 1992 (Milner 2005).

Large numbers of people were registered by UNHCR and sent to camps at Mombasa on the coast, Thika near Nairobi, Liboi and Dadaab in the NEP, and Kakuma in the North West (Crisp 1999). Since the peak of the early nineties, the refugee population decreased. Some refugees returned voluntarily to Somalia (although not always permanently)⁴ and others travelled independently or were formally resettled overseas. Since 1999, the camp population has remained relatively stable in the region of 150,000, although the numbers for 2007 may be higher as a result of developments in the war in southern Somalia.

Kenya has signed and ratified the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1969 Organisation of African Unity Refugee Convention. But until late 2006, when the Refugee Act was passed, there was no national legislation for refugees in Kenya. In contrast to the more open and accommodating refugee policy of earlier years, Milner (2005) characterises Kenya's refugee policy after 1990 as effectively one of 'abdication and containment'. First, the government abdicated to UNHCR the responsibility of determining the status of asylum seekers

⁴ Some of my interviewees in 2005, who were mainly of Darod and Hawiye clans and grew up in the central and southern Somali regions, had tried going back and had traumatic and discouraging experiences. None of the interviewees were contemplating returning to live in southern Somalia while there is still no effective government.

and ensuring their protection. Most refugees were designated *prima facie* refugees as often occurs when refugees flee generalised insecurity and conflict in large numbers and it is not feasible to conduct individual status determinations. Second, the government tried to contain the problem by only allowing Somali refugees to reside in designated camps, restricting their movements and not giving them the right to take up employment. UNHCR only gave UN Travel Letters for people to travel to Nairobi for resettlement interviews, to university students, to people needing medical treatment and people with particular security problems (Crisp 1999).⁵

The Refugees Act 2006 represents a step forward, translating the 1951 and the OAU Convention into national law for the first time. Yet, at this early stage it seems likely that the freedom to work and the freedom of movement of refugees in Kenya will remain considerably restricted. Since the act came into force, further upheaval in Somalia has prompted more people to seek refuge in Kenya, and there have been border closures and evidence of some forcible returns.⁶ There is a clear risk now that the will to deal with the problems of protracted displacement will be subsumed by the emergency response to recent arrivals.

The deep material deprivation and physical insecurity of life in the refugee camps is well-documented (Crisp 1999; Horst 2006; Hyndman 2000; Milner 2005). It has been suggested that, given their size, population, permanence and other features, camps like the Dadaab group (Ifo, Hagadera and Dagahaley) might better be thought of as cities than camps (Pérouse de Montclos and Kagwanja 2000). Of particular relevance to this paper, Horst (2006) criticises the common depiction of refugee camps as isolated places, highlighting the connections between Somali refugees in Dadaab and relatives elsewhere in the Horn of Africa and beyond. She found that a minority – she estimates roughly 15 per cent – of refugees received regular remittances which, given the meagre international aid and limited local income opportunities, greatly affected their lives and the wider economy of the refugee camps.

However, despite the government's attempts to contain them in remote regions, many refugees end up in Nairobi and other towns or cities. A minority of those Somalis arriving in the 1990s had the wherewithal to set up home in Nairobi or Mombasa, or stayed with relatives, and never declared themselves to UNHCR (Farah 1996; Goldsmith 1997). When the Mombasa camps closed in the mid-1990s, many refugees took themselves to Nairobi instead, relocating to other camps or voluntarily repatriating to Somalia. Some refugees from Dadaab and Kakuma also moved to Nairobi. The numbers of displaced Somali people living informally in urban areas are uncertain – estimates in the mid 1990s ranged up to 100,000 (Hyndman 2000; Moret *et al.* 2005; USCR 1997). In general much less is known about the situation of urban refugees, possibly because they can be harder to locate (compared with the 'captive population' in the camps), and are generally not entitled to assistance, and also because the containment policy encouraged politicians to play down the existence of refugees in urban areas (Campbell 2005).

⁵ The latter two groups are eligible for assistance from UNHCR during their stay in the city.

⁶ Jesuit Refugee Service briefing, Nairobi, 23 April 2007, *Kenya: border remains closed to asylum seekers*. See also UNHCR press release, Geneva, 3 January 2007, *UNHCR calls on Kenya to halt Somali returns*.

Most of these people have ended up in Nairobi's Eastleigh district. Located to the far east of the Central Business District, Eastleigh used to be a lower middle class suburb (Goldsmith 1997; Sirola 2001). Eastleigh was formerly a predominantly Asian residential estate, with some shops and businesses, then over the years Kenyan Kikuyu landlords began to buy up property there. There was a small Somali community prior to the civil war - some of the Kenyan Somali shopkeepers in Eastleigh grew up on the estate. The precise population size is unknown: some hazard guesses of 300,000-500,000. Some have suggested that there may be as many as 60,000 displaced Somali people living informally in Nairobi, mainly in Eastleigh (African Population and Health Research Center 2002; Campbell 2005; Moret *et al.* 2005).

Since 1990, Eastleigh has developed dramatically, shaped by its growing population – rural Kenyans, Sudanese, Eritreans, Ethiopians, but above all, in the largest numbers, Somalis. First, Eastleigh has become a major business and shopping district in Nairobi. Businesspeople, including incoming refugees, invested in import and export businesses, retail outlets (from small-scale hawking and street stalls to large shopping malls), chemists, property letting and real estate development, hotels, lodges, *miraa* (khat / *qaad*) outlets, cafés and restaurants, long-distance transport companies, taxis, phone and internet bureaux, and international money transfer and exchange services. The shopping area attracts customers from all over Nairobi and further afield. According to one commentator, “Eastleigh is ‘openly informal’, neither hidden from authorities nor entirely consistent with an official, public place of business. At the same time it is integral to the service economy of Nairobi and its 2.5+ million residents.” (Little 2003: 164)

A second key change in Eastleigh in the 1990s was the effect of the influx of refugees in the local property and housing market. Increased demand from Somalis, as Eastleigh became known as a Somali enclave, raised the cost of accommodation: the rent for single rooms after the influx in the early 1990s was five or more times the previous levels, pushing many Kenyans tenants out into other areas of Eastlands, while the refugees often lived in over-crowded conditions, sharing and sub-letting (Goldsmith 1997; Sirola 2001; Campbell 2005; Hyndman 2000).

Commercial development, particularly in the district known as Section Two, also accelerated, pushing up the price of land for redevelopment as shopping malls. The centrepieces of Eastleigh's commercial development are its large shopping malls, such as Garissa Lodge and Amal Plaza. The largely unregulated expansion of business and the increasingly overcrowded population soon outpaced repairs and improvements to public infrastructure. Drains, sewers and rubbish collection are very visibly inadequate. Roads are in a dilapidated condition, with deep mud during the rainy season and rising dust when it is dry.

Third, Eastleigh became strongly associated with crime, which has been on the rise in the wider area of Eastlands, and in Nairobi in general, often associated with the increased hardship created by structural adjustment (Anderson 2002). Muggings and street thefts of mobile phones and cash are common, and *matatus* (buses) to Eastleigh are held up and robbed fairly frequently, particularly at night. Refugees have also suffered from police harassment. Some Somali refugees had obtained a Kenyan or Alien ID card through various means, but the majority just had their UNHCR letter saying that they are a *prima facie* refugee, which was of little use due to their

ambiguous politico-legal situation outside the camps (Hyndman 2000; Verdirame 1999). Threatened with arrest for being in Kenya illegally, many Somalis would pay bribes to be released. According to the refugees, such extortion has varied over time, reportedly reaching particular heights of openness and impunity in 2001-2002. Many people remain cautious, sticking to their area, not venturing into town or out at night.⁷

Finally, the arrival of the refugees has shaped local social relations. Somali Kenyan families were an important source of assistance for their close relatives and clanspeople (Goldsmith 1997; Horst 2006). Although there are some tensions between people of different clans, some more generalized solidarity is derived from being Somali and Muslim in Kenya.

For their part, Kenyans in Eastleigh generally appear to have come to terms with the obvious fact that 'Somalis are our neighbours'. Kenyans, Somalis and other refugee nationalities share washing lines and cramped stairways, their children go to school together; they truck and barter (Goldsmith 1997; Campbell 2005). However, when times are tough, the history of rebel activities in the NEP, Somalia's present disarray and the large numbers of refugees in the capital, make Somali nationals a convenient scapegoat for urban ills (Gimode 2001; Verdirame 1999).

Remittance traffic and livelihood strategies in Eastleigh

Livelihoods are conventionally defined as the capabilities, assets (natural, physical, human, social and financial capital) and activities required for a means of living (DFID 1999; Jacobsen 2006). Several types of livelihoods were evident among Somali refugees in Eastleigh. The most obvious strategies were running small businesses or working in local businesses and homes.⁸ *Prima facie* refugees were considered irregular migrants in the city and were largely confined to working in the informal economy, although some businesses already gradually began to move into the formal economy, by registering with the relevant authorities and paying taxes. Outside the camps, a minority of refugees - only those in the city formally for health or security reasons - receive on-going assistance from UNHCR.

Less obvious livelihood strategies involved people mobilizing social capital to meet their needs. Receiving overseas remittances are a clear example of people using their social capital to obtain financial capital, but there are other examples of people drawing on social capital, with some people being taken in or provided for by better-off families or assisted by the Mosque or other charitable contributions. Of course, people may use more than one of these livelihood strategies, or use different strategies over time.

Although some people never received remittances, many of the refugees in Eastleigh have had the experience at some point of receiving some money from relatives overseas. Recipients are demographically mixed and, like many refugees gravitating towards urban areas in Africa, often lived relatively comfortable urban lives before

⁷ It is still early days to tell how much the new Refugee Act will affect this.

⁸ Wages vary: in 2005 *matatu* drivers were earning around KSh600 per day, and touts half this; cyber café assistants might earn KSh6,000 a month; shop assistants KSh4,000-5,000. Those working in Somali homes may be casual domestic workers, or younger female relatives who are given bed and board but may not be paid for their work. Exchange rate: 0.01322 US\$ to 1 KSh (1 March 2005)

the war (Jacobsen 2005). The assistance commonly came from husbands, siblings and adult children – although other relatives also remit – living mainly in Europe and North America, and in some instances, the Middle East, South Africa and elsewhere. There were varying patterns of remittance traffic into Eastleigh. Some recipients get a set sum of money on a regular, usually monthly basis, commonly \$150-\$250 per month.⁹ Others receive variable amounts on an ad-hoc basis. It follows that the role of remittances in recipients' livelihoods varies considerably. The examples of Rhoda, Abdi, Abdiwali and Mahamoud help illustrate this.¹⁰

Rhoda is a mother of seven in her early forties. When the war broke out in the Central Region, the family businesses and home were looted. The militia killed her father and two brothers. She fled with her husband, children, mother and three sisters to Mogadishu, then Kismayo, then Liboye refugee camp in Kenya. In 1992, some relatives overseas sent \$1,000 and she and her husband, children and two sisters moved to Nairobi. But after their money ran out, they went to Thika camp, then the Mombasa camps, where their home was set on fire three times. They received little international aid, so she began selling charcoal and food stuffs.

When the camps closed they were relocated to Kakuma, where life was really tough: there were more fires, plus it was dangerous as there were armed men and killings, and there was less water. A relative there arranged for Rhoda's husband to go to Canada on a spouse's visa, as the relative's husband. As soon as he arrived in Canada, he and his relatives sent \$500 to Rhoda to move the family to Nairobi - they were worried about the risks in the refugee camp for a woman and children alone. He found work immediately and now he sends to her \$350 each month, \$200 for living expenses and school fees at the beginning of the month and \$150 for the rent later on. In addition to her seven, she looks after two of her sisters' children. Her husband cannot send more as his job does not pay very well, but according to Rhoda, 'he's very good, he's someone who is dedicated, he's stable, he's a father... Life could be much worse.' It remains uncertain how, indeed if, the family will be reunited.

Abdi, who was born in Mogadishu is now a successful wholesaler. He was born in the early 1980s, his father worked in the military and his mother used to sell groceries in a small shop. When the war broke out his father was killed and the fighting was very violent so his mother sent him to Ethiopia with some friends. He went to Kenya in 1994 and made great efforts to locate his dispersed relatives, travelling to the various refugee camps, sending messages through personal contacts and the BBC Somali Service programme, *Baafin*. He finally located, though a *xawilaad* (money transfer) agent, an uncle and sister in Norway and two cousins in the UK: 'I got the contact telephone numbers... They were very shaken... it was a giant cry, when they found me they were very happy and they sent me an express money of happiness.' That sum allowed him to leave Kakuma and go to Eastleigh, where he earned his living by hawking dead stock that large stores needed to shift. He bought the stock at cost price and retained any profit.

⁹ Sometimes the money for one month is sent in two instalments, either to help the recipient to budget or because this suits the sender.

¹⁰ Please note that all names have been changed and some details have been altered to preserve interviewees' anonymity.

A year later, once he had proved that he was working hard, his uncle and sister decided to send a substantial sum. He received around \$2,400 in instalments over the course of two years. He developed a wholesale business, sourcing goods from the Middle East, Asia and the Far East and supplying stores in Eastleigh. His relatives sometimes ask him for particular items, usually traditional crafts or gold, so he often sends goods when people he knows travel to Europe. His relatives there support his mother in Somalia, but he sometimes also helps out.

Abdiwali, a former teacher, lived in the camps for many years before coming to Nairobi. With his monthly income of KSh 8,000 (about \$105), he could not afford to bring his wife and six children to join him, so they remain in Dadaab. He tries to send around \$25 a month to his wife to supplement their rations and her KSh 3,000 teacher's incentive. He also tries to bring money, clothes and other items that they need when he goes back to the camps. Very occasionally, he or his wife receive some money from relatives overseas. He found that "if I have a problem today, for example road accident or maybe I'm arrested, then people will contribute money to solve my problems...Not only in Nairobi. These people will communicate to those who are outside, they will say this person has that problem, he's admitted to hospital, he's [in] a very serious condition. Then they collect money... The first people who will support me is my sub-clan in Nairobi. Then if they are not able to solve at home, then they contribute outside..."

Mahamoud is a shopkeeper in Eastleigh with a young family. He was born in the late 1970s in Beled Weyne. The family was comfortably off and after the war broke out he ran a café with his mother and brothers. His uncle was by that time living in Nairobi, but maintained close contact with Mahamoud's mother, via the *taar*. She told him how badly things were going in Somalia.

The uncle paid for Mahamoud and his younger brother to come to live with him in Eastleigh. Mahamoud was happy to go, as he wanted to help his mother and 'take some of the load'. At that time his uncle was doing well; he had a retail business and was receiving assistance from relatives abroad, but in the mid-1990s this assistance dried up and the business was deteriorating. Mahamoud and his brother turned the business around and he is now pretty comfortably off, although he does not receive any remittances. He is able to send \$50-\$100 to his mother and brothers in Beled Weyne whenever business is bad or a relative falls sick.

These cases exemplify four key points. First, for people like Rhoda, receiving remittances is their primary or only livelihood strategy – providing regular stipends to cover living expenses. Within family groups it is not unexpected that some members rely on others to provide for them. Most regular stipends come from close relatives, reflecting a traditional relationship of support, for example, husbands supporting wives and children, or adult children supporting elderly parents. Thus, often emigration and remitting can be seen as the main livelihood strategy for the family unit in question.

Second, for other recipients, remittances are combined with other livelihood strategies. As Abdiwali's case illustrated, some refugees solicit remittances in response to particular crises, for example, to help pay living expenses when other livelihood strategies collapsed, or to address health or legal crises. Other people have

jobs or ran their own business, but also received remittances, or another member of the family did.

For example, Hussein, a father of ten, worked in the mornings in a friend's shop for KSh100-300 each day, but his family's main source of income was the \$300 per month that they received in remittances. However, in general it was not common for people with regular income to receive regular remittances as well: even if they had relatives overseas, funds would be directed to more needy family members.

Hashi, a scholarship student in his twenties, had a sister in Canada, three aunts and three uncles in the US, an uncle in the UK, and many cousins abroad, but explained that he did not receive any regular support. "It's nonsense to support someone who can support himself so I wasn't really getting regular money... But... if I ask them, if I tell them there is this or that issue, in that case they send... I said that I wanted to start a course, in that case I asked. Such cases... You don't need from them regularly... So when you need support they will support you very happily." In other instances remittances were not expected to fulfil any narrowly economic function, but rather were gifts, either sent on a special occasion (for example, Ramadan, a wedding or a birth), or as a spontaneous act of kindness.

Third, remittances were also often triggered to finance a particular livelihood-related project. The major example here was when people ask for money to establish a business. Some of the more wealthy Somalis arrived in Eastleigh with cash in hand or saved in foreign bank accounts and made investments. But most people lost assets in the civil war – homes and their contents; livestock, land and crops; businesses; money in accounts (when the banking system collapsed); cash (robbed or used up in the course of displacement); and gold (sold by women to raise funds). Moreover, in the camps they were deprived of gainful employment and in Eastleigh informal sector wages were usually low. It was hard to save up money to invest. Thus loans or gifts from local and overseas relatives are a key part of the history of many of the businesses in Eastleigh.

Abdi's case illustrates several points regarding diaspora support for businesses in Eastleigh. There is often more than one 'investor', and the group may include local as well as overseas relatives. Remittances for investment are usually sent in instalments and distinguished from regular subsistence transfers. People do not usually 'save up' remittances. A hard-working independent reputation helps to mobilize contributions as two businessmen explained:

You know... people [are] going out [to other countries], maybe I'm going there and I meet his relative [points to his friend], and they say, what's he doing that guy, and I say, he's a good man, he's working, so they will be happy. Even the people outside is looking for information... so they trying to add some money to establish him.... They like the person who normally works, they don't like somebody they are giving *biil*¹¹... *Friend*: Endless *biil*! *Interviewee*: Yeah, endless. So they like somebody who's working. So they normally look in the family, who is very active. And they pick up the person

¹¹ *Biil* is a catch-all term for living expenses, which is often used as a term for a regular remittance.

who is very active who can generate a business and then they give some money.

Like I tell them I want to start a business, I ask them for support... Now, the relatives over there will consult each other and contribute some money, each one some amount... Maybe you are sent about \$2,000, \$3,000, you start the business. If you are seen to be hard-working, they might even send you more.

As these speakers hint, starting a business is seen by those overseas as an alternative to sending regular remittances, a way to help people provide for themselves and, quite possibly, as time goes on, help out other family members too. Hashi explained:

One thing that is becoming quite common these days is that relatives instead of sending you regular money decide to engage you in an activity. They get together some resources and they ask if there is anything you can do, if you can do tailoring, anything, work in a shop. Once they see what you can do, they'll send you a good amount to start that business... So we've moving away from this dependency, it's not really going to be around much longer...

Last but not least, despite this expectation, many business attempts – diaspora-backed and otherwise - flounder, leading to relapsed reliance on remittances, other family assistance, or aid. Alternatively, the business may not be successful immediately, and they may continue to call on support from overseas to supplement their earnings. Much depends on the resources available to invest, the economic viability of the activity, entrepreneurial skill and luck, and the personal and clan connections of the individual.

Thus, incoming remittances may be a primary or supplementary livelihood strategy, and they may be used to deal with particular crises or to fund specific projects. But the fourth key point illustrated by the cases above is that there is also *outgoing* remittance traffic: a minority of Somalis in Eastleigh also send money to Somalia and to the refugee camps. While smaller than international flows, regional remittances are important, particularly for the turbulent southern Somali region, which still has a substantial regional refugee diaspora. Some people remit out of their wages or business income, like Mohamed, Abdiwali and Abdi. Other people receive money from relatives overseas or from other household members and send it on to relatives in the camps or in Somalia. For example, Saad with his second wife and small children relied on \$250 each month from his older children in the US, and would send around \$100 every two to four months to his parents and siblings who are nomads in Sanaag. Maryan, a housewife, explained that sometimes her husband, an import-export trader, gives her \$50 to send to her mother in Kismayo and she tries to send perfume or clothes whenever someone she knows goes there.

Before turning to the issue of mobility patterns, it is important to mention that some interviewees felt that relying mainly on remittances was negative, for example: 'it takes away the feeling of... the need to be self-sufficient. It takes away your pride to be dependent on someone abroad for all your needs.' But it is also important to remember, as illustrated above, that in many cases remitting occurred between close

family members where co-reliance was seen as entirely normal,¹² and that the strong Somali tradition of mutual support in extended families and clans means that a wider circle of relatives may be reasonably called on for assistance than in many other contexts.

Besides, what constitutes 'normal' relationships and patterns of economic reliance is affected by protracted exile, the fluid and unpredictable patterns of refugee resettlement and the fact that many people working overseas are able quite easily to send what are substantial amounts by Nairobi standards. Moreover, many recipients found it hard to see alternatives, given the policy of containing refugees and giving them such limited economic rights. Finally, people often saw their reliance as a temporary phase, explaining that the remittances were to tide them over while finding work, studying or waiting to emigrate.

Remittances and mobility patterns

Beyond shaping people's livelihoods in Eastleigh, remittances often intertwine with mobility to and from Nairobi, as the cases above illustrated. Interviewees' decisions to leave Somalia were commonly prompted by the killing of relatives, often parents or siblings, in the early 1990s. During displacement, families were often split up, with parents allocating children to the care of relatives, particularly their siblings, aunts and uncles, where this seemed best for their security and welfare. This is quite common in Somali culture, but in the process of displacement the shuttling of people between households (in Somalia, in the refugee camps, and in urban areas) became a more urgent and frequent strategy for survival.

This regional mobility is often facilitated by someone sending money from abroad. People still leave Somalia, largely in response to the insecurity in the south. Leaving overland is hazardous and where possible people prefer to travel on *qaad* or commercial flights, in which case the flight and necessary documents have to be paid for. People also have various reasons for wanting to leave the refugee camps for Nairobi: to avoid the harsh conditions (heat, scarce rations, recurrent sickness among their children, risk of rape and violence); to access better educational opportunities and health facilities; to find work and build a different future for themselves and their families; and to get in contact with relatives abroad with a view to resettlement. Travelling from the camps to Nairobi can be costly and risky for those without proper documents. As there is the risk of ambush and attack by bandits, most refugees prefer to travel by the main road, but are frequently subjected en route to police detention and extortion or return to the camps, incurring extra costs that sometimes trigger requests to relatives overseas for assistance.

Once in Nairobi, it can take a while to start earning your living: in the interim, relatives often help out – those overseas with cash and those locally by providing somewhere to stay, food and sometimes work. There is a group of people whose presence in Eastleigh is contingent on receiving remittances, otherwise they could not afford to live there and would have to return to the camps. Thus, Rhoda moved to the city with money from her husband overseas, motivated by a mixture of health and

¹² This is the general view of remitting in labour migration contexts, although here too, a sedentarist bias in development studies can sometimes obscure this (Bakewell 2007).

security concerns. Conversely, some come to Nairobi intending to contact relatives overseas in order to secure assistance – as telephone, internet and money transfer services are more widely available in the city, at competitive rates.

Moreover, households receiving remittances are often less likely to fragment, with parents able to provide for all their children rather than sending them away to relatives, and able to expand, by taking in relatives, from the camps, and from Somalia, particularly siblings or their children, and often subletting rooms to others. In a fluid and sometimes hazardous economic setting, such solidarity is an important cultural and economic asset.

The second key point is that remittances also intertwine with mobility beyond the region. Many people come to Nairobi to try to arrange resettlement in the West, often with the heartfelt wish to be reunited with much-missed children, husbands and wives, and parents resettled overseas. The circumscribed legal and economic existence of Somali refugees in Kenya is another major motivation:

Many people were supposed to make money here, but the government... Even me myself, if I get a permit to stay in Nairobi... then I can make money, I can try to sustain my own life... [but] there is no way... my last incentive was \$50 per month... When I was *teaching*... Not enough for myself alone, not enough for the family.

I would love to export myself! Otherwise, you know the suffering here. You can't find jobs, you can't find any other opportunities... personally, the only thing I can do is... community service. But that will not pay me much to take care of the family. It is difficult.

While idealized images of the West certainly abound, the basic material inequalities are staggering and undeniable. Indeed, remittances seem to have a potent 'demonstration effect' for the benefits of migration:

Once they are here, they are not very useful, they are not very productive, they're just consumers, because there's no source of employment, there's no way they can find money, so they have to ask for money every time... So, it is better for us to go to the countries where there are opportunities, the greener grasses, so we eat that grass and send some of it to our relatives back home!

There are three main channels of onward migration to the West. First, there is family reunion or sponsorship. Conditions for family reunion vary across countries, usually applying mainly to spouses and children under 21, and sometimes requiring a financial guarantee of some kind. The second channel is through official resettlement programmes aimed at resettling individuals or groups deemed to face particular persecution. There were around 4,000 refugees resettled through UNHCR in 2006 (UNHCR 2007).

Third, there are other channels often termed 'irregular', sometimes piggy-backing on elements of the two 'official' methods outlined above, sometimes involving brokers (*mukhalis*). Sperl (2001) points out that originally UNHCR used 'irregular' only to describe unlawful methods of entry, but the term 'irregular mover', carrying pejorative overtones, is increasingly applied to all refugees leaving a first country of

asylum. He challenges this: ‘What is “irregular” about people who seek to leave an often de facto hopeless situation in a camp or a slum, in order to seek a better future through education, employment or resettlement?’ (Sperl 2001: 26).

Indeed, although viewed by governments as illegal, ‘irregular’ migration has a rather everyday quality when viewed from the streets of Eastleigh. Against the background of the constraints of life as refugees in Kenya, arranging to be smuggled to a richer country is seen by those involved as entirely acceptable behaviour. In contrast, going abroad and earning a good living but failing to help relatives back in Kenya or Somalia is seen as unacceptable behaviour. According to UNHCR, ‘irregular secondary movement... may... be a symptom of protracted hopelessness among long-standing refugee populations,’ (UNHCR 2004: 5). Put another way, this onward movement can be part of the quest for self-reliance and rights.

The diaspora often plays a key role in facilitating and financing resettlement in the West. First, they provide information, are sometimes able to request reunion, and deal with paperwork or other arrangements from abroad, and assist on arrival. Second, they often meet the costs of emigration, which can range from nil – on some resettlement programmes - to around \$5,000+ for alternative arrangements. In both official and informal emigration arrangements, Nairobi is a key location, where people can meet, make arrangements through social networks, access brokers, and attend interviews at the UNHCR and the Joint Voluntary Agency (JVA) which resettles refugees in the US. A third common element is to send money so that relatives can come and stay in Nairobi while making their arrangements.

Yet while many people come to Eastleigh with *buufis* (longing for resettlement, explored in detail by Horst 2006), those doing successful business are less likely to be affected. Moreover, many people come to Nairobi to arrange resettlement, but months gradually turn into years.

For example, Fadumo, a young woman originally from the north east of Somalia, now has a business in a market in Eastleigh. When the civil war broke out and the relatives she was living with fled, she was forced into a marriage at a young age for protection. Later her husband left for Europe and cut off contact with her and her first child. An aunt helped her to come to Nairobi, so that she could be resettled in the US with the aunt’s family. But she was rejected during the screening process and was left high and dry in Eastleigh with her daughter, with no resources and few contacts. She made friends with women working in the market and began selling clothes for them on credit to other women she knew, gradually building up the funds for her own business. She keeps in touch with her parents, who are pastoralists, via the *taar* (radio operator), and every four months or so, when she is able, she sends them \$50 or \$100. She is not a registered refugee and has no prospects of resettlement.

Repercussions in the wider urban economy

Beyond the direct effects on those receiving remittances and their immediate families, which was the main focus of the fieldwork, remittances have some indirect effects in the wider urban economy, in terms of social differentiation and economic activity.

First, remittances can affect relative socio-economic statuses. The task of assessing the impact of remittances on social differentiation in Eastleigh is particularly complex both because the Somali refugee presence is relatively new and transient, and for some their presence in Eastleigh is entirely contingent on remittances. Moreover, their fortunes are likely to be particularly fluid compared with a more established population. The socio-economic status of individual refugees has anyway changed dramatically since 1991 as many were dispossessed of assets in Somalia, and, in the words of one interviewee: 'Up till now, we have not regained the life we had in Somalia.' Thus, both the reference group and the baseline for comparison are unclear.

However, on the whole, refugees in Nairobi are more likely to be from urban than rural backgrounds, and those benefiting from remittances generally come from originally comfortable families able to finance long-distance emigration of a close relative to the West. People who receive regular remittances, although often living frugally, are visibly more comfortable than those eking out a living at the harder end of the informal economy. According to one businessman: "You see a difference between those who receive remittances and those who do not – even in simple terms, those who receive usually dress better. They can afford to send their children to good schools. Other people live in much more critical situations."

While it is a place of both deprivation and entrepreneurial wealth, Eastleigh is a long way from being the poorest district in Nairobi, and there are much more deprived parts of Eastlands and the slum settlements. Remittances provide for a number of families who might otherwise be competing for low-wage jobs in the informal economy. Moreover, the benefits of receiving remittances are to a degree re-circulated through local family and social family networks, building the social capital of recipients.

A second wider repercussion of remittances involves the effects of the spending and investment of this money by recipients in the local economy. In contrast with the outward-bound traffic of remittances by Kenyan residents to rural relatives and investment in their rural homes, Somali remittances are largely in-bound traffic. Money transfer operators usually pay remittances and trade transfers out to recipients in hard currency, which is then converted into Kenyan Shillings. They are spent in the city economy, indeed mainly in Eastleigh as many refugees tend to avoid going into town, contributing to high levels of local demand for goods and services, fuelling business expansion on a considerable scale.

Many of the businesses meeting this demand are Somali businesses, initiated with the help of relatives overseas. By 2005, a total of 2,800 business people, mainly Somalis, were registered with Eastleigh Business Community, which was established in 1999. Eastleigh is increasingly attracting customers from all over Nairobi, and becoming an important part of the wider city economy. The tax revenue losses on informal business is increasingly being used by refugee advocacy groups to argue for the regularisation of urban refugees (RCK 2006)

More specifically, there is a thriving business in providing services specifically of use to Somali and other refugees, including money transfer and exchange, travel agencies, telephone and internet bureaux, language schools, many of which are meeting a primarily remittance-driven demand. Money transfer is the most obvious example:

there are numerous money transfer operators, popularly known as *xawilaad* in Eastleigh.

In Kenya, officially only banks or money transfer operators in partnership with banks are licensed to transfer money. Western Union offices are everywhere, but it has made little headway with the Somali refugees who tend to use Somali operators, some of whom have forex licences and others operate entirely in the informal market.¹³ Money exchange is also in great demand in Eastleigh, in part because many remittances are collected in dollars and may then be exchanged into Kenyan Shillings. There is a large informal market with numerous small-scale operators.

Another example of making business out of recipients is language schools. For example, Yusuf came to Kenya as a boy and grew up in the camps. In his mid twenties he came to Eastleigh and borrowed money from relatives living locally to establish one of the district's many one-room private schools for adults. By the third month he had 50 students, keen to learn English, Arabic, and Maths while trying to arrange onward migration to the West or the Middle East. He had also begun to repay his relatives: 'So life's not now bad, it's moving. To me, I get no other help from like, UK or from America, but I get indirectly because the students I have at school, they get assistance from their relatives in the UK, Europe or America or elsewhere.'

Conclusion

Many people displaced from Somalia and living a protracted exile in Kenya have self-settled in Nairobi's Eastleigh district, defying the Kenyan government's attempts to contain the refugee population in remote areas, not content to wait for elusive durable solutions. The newcomers have had a significant impact on the urban landscape and social and economic relations in Eastleigh.

While Nairobi is a distant outpost from the regions of the Horn of Africa that they have historically occupied, it has become a crossroads for displaced people from Somalia. It is an important hub in Somalis' increasingly global information, trade, finance and family networks. For many, Eastleigh is a staging post to an uncertain future. It is a place where, by connecting into wider social networks, opportunities might arise. A minority, it seems – and generally people with secure status in Kenya or business interests - actually make a conscious decision to settle there. For many, though, a few months turn into a few years, passing the time working, strategizing, or simply waiting.

While many of the uses of remittances in this context were similar to those in the countries of origin, remittances were also used by people to deal with the specific problems of protracted and unresolved displacement. For example, people are moving from Somalia and the camps to Nairobi, often with the help of funds from relatives in the region or overseas. Women with children sometimes receive money from relatives overseas to relocate from the camps to the city because of fears for their safety.

¹³ Consultations with businesspeople and international agencies (February 2005) and www.centralbank.go.ke

Once in Nairobi, some people's living expenses are covered by people overseas. By investing larger remittances in businesses, some refugees are able to provide for themselves and often subsequently assist others locally, in the camps or in Somalia. But interviewees' investment of remittances was limited to the informal sector and constrained by their ambiguous politico-legal status in Nairobi. Sometimes people requested money to secure release from police detention. Remittances and other forms of diaspora support are also intertwined with patterns of onward movement.

All this has consequences in terms of reducing reliance on international aid in the refugee camps. An unknown number of displaced people from Somalia never registered with UNHCR sometimes because they received diaspora assistance and were able to stay in the city. Receiving remittances allowed many people to leave the camps. It is well-known that those leaving the camps routinely give their cards to another family, so that they can benefit from the rations, before the card is eventually cancelled (Hyndman 2000; Kibreab 2004). It seems likely that a portion of Eastleigh's refugee population would have to return to the camps if they did not receive remittances to cover their living expenses. Thus, remittances can partially or fully release refugees from the aid relationship.

Yet there is a strong sense of contingency about remittances as a livelihood strategy among recipients in Eastleigh. A minority of Somali people in Eastleigh - often those occupied in successful trading activities or those who themselves receive remittances - send remittances to Somalia or to the refugee camps. But they are less often able to completely cover the recipients' needs, and if there are relatives *dibadaha* (outside), these are usually the main port of call for assistance.

Turning to recipients in Eastleigh, if there are other relatives in serious need in Somalia, then their needs may be prioritised. Most regular recipients in Eastleigh did not expect to continue to receive remittances in the long term. Even people relying on remittances as a primary source of income, whose sender had a strong social responsibility to support them, usually had a plan to emigrate, or find a job, or start a business. Few people saw their current situation - in Eastleigh, relying on remittances - as a feasible long-term status quo.

While certainly ameliorating the living conditions of many refugees, the extent to which remittances, in this context, are generating sustainable livelihoods is in doubt. The general view is that 'a livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capability and assets both now and in the future' (DFID 1999: 1). Although remittances clearly responded to crises experienced by recipients in many instances, often the transfers left people no more capable of dealing with future crises themselves than they were before. The major exception was when remittances were invested in providing an independent livelihood, by establishing a business.

There is a growing recognition of the role played by resettled refugees and labour migrants in the welfare of refugees affected by protracted displacement (Jacobsen 2006; Sperl 2001; UNHCR 2006; Van Hear 2003). Van Hear asks whether '...transnationalism may in itself be a "durable solution" for conditions of displacement - or at least an "enduring" solution. This might mean considering the encouragement or promotion of transnationalism,' (Van Hear 2003:15). According to UNHCR's 2006 report *The State of the World's Refugees*, UNHCR has been

considering the possibility of encouraging migration for work as a means for refugees to provide for themselves.

It is important to underline, as Van Hear does, that refugees engaging in transnational activities have not necessarily found a 'durable solution' to their original displacement. For example, a Somali man working in the Gulf, with a permit to work as a labourer may send money back to help maintain his family who are *prima facie* refugees in Kenya. While this can certainly improve the welfare of the recipients, and the arrangement may indeed continue on a long-term basis, it is clear this is not a solution to their legal predicament in the way that repatriation, local integration or resettlement in a third country can be. Neither party has regained in their countries of residence the rights denied them in their country of origin. Indeed, the remittance economy is in some respects maintained by immigration and asylum restrictions that can separate close family members.

Moreover, in contexts of protracted and unresolved displacement, it is hard for refugees to maximize the potential value of any remittance funds that they receive. Furthermore, the capacity of resettled refugees and labour migrants to offer support to family back home is often rather limited (Lindley 2007b; Riak Akuei 2005). In sum, while remittances are an important aspect of refugee livelihoods, it is critical that we continue to campaign for the rights of people in situations of protracted displacement in Kenya and elsewhere.

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