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## Civil Society in Making - Challenges of the Somali Diaspora Organizations

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## CIVIL SOCIETY IN MAKING

### *Challenges of the Somali Diaspora Organizations<sup>1</sup>*

#### Abstract

This article contributes to the discussion on migrants and civil society by directing attention towards the importance of transnational processes. Somali organizations in Finland will be addressed against the state-failure and conflict in Somalia. Among the Somalis, an NGO largely remains an alien and donor-driven concept, whereas clan, religious affiliations and associational structures may be blurred in complex ways. There is a need to rethink the concept of 'civil society' and how it could be analytically used in understanding transnational civic participation. The data comprises interviews with INGOs as well as observations and discussions with Somali associations.

#### Keywords

Somali organizations • civil society • clan • Finland • transnational.

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During the fieldwork in Northern Somalia, in the region known as Somaliland, Tiilikainen was regularly asked the same questions: First, are you a Muslim? Second, are you married? And third, are you going to open an office in Somaliland and start a new project? A lone foreigner who was dressed up like a local woman raised curiosity. By these questions the local people tried to understand who she was, and furthermore, to set her in the normal order of things. The expectation is that any foreigner visiting Somaliland or Somalia is somehow involved with the NGO business, a booming industry in the country. And not only non-Somalis, but even more so the Somali diaspora is expected to contribute to the rebuilding of the country by bringing resources and funding from their new countries of residence to the country of origin. Those Somalis who have managed to exit and find their ways to affluent countries in Europe or North America and whose families may have made great financial sacrifices to secure their risky journeys, are in turn expected to pay back by helping their families and communities – every returnee or a visitor is expected to have gained something while abroad, something which he or she may share with relatives and the larger community at home, i.e. money, gifts, education, useful skills, or a project (also Tiilikainen 2011).

In this article, we will address some of the challenges of the Somali diaspora organizations as they try to establish themselves as civil society actors, both here and there. On one hand, there are great expectations towards the Somali diaspora to organize, provide a representative platform for Somali migrants and to facilitate the integration of newly arrived migrants. The Somali diaspora is also seen as an important, even a necessary agent in the development and rebuilding of Somalia. On the other hand, there is lots of mistrust

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towards the Somali diaspora, its capacity, representativeness and aims, including increasing fears related to possible radicalization.

This article contributes to the discussion on migrants and civil society, by directing attention towards the importance of transnational processes and dimensions in the lives of migrants. Migrants are often seen and defined as civil society actors in relation to the countries of resettlement, not to the countries of origin (e.g. Penninx *et al.* ed. 2004). However, migrants and their organizations often operate in several national contexts and actively utilize transnational connections. There is a need to look at what 'civil society' in multiple localities may entail, and what are the frictions and opportunities that are produced as people, ideas, resources and imaginaries move between these localities. Civil society is particularly difficult to define in Somalia, where – since the collapse of the central government in 1991 – any social or civic organization basically is a 'nonstate actor' (Menkhaus *et al.* 2010: 325–326).

Our main focus will be on the Somali community and organizations in Finland, but we also try to describe the larger historical, cultural and diasporic context where these NGOs have been founded and function. Moreover, we aim to present the diversity and complexity within one migrant group, hence not taking the Somali community in Finland given or fixed (see Brubacker 2009: 28–32). At least for the first generation of Somali migrants the meaningful life, opportunities and social networks are not reduced to the receiving country, but they are also constructed by transnational kinship affiliations and complex

<sup>1</sup>The article is based on a lecture held at the Nordic Migration Research Conference *Immigrants and Civil Society: 16th Nordic Migration Research Conference & 9th ETMU Days*, 13–15 August 2012, University of Turku, Finland.

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political realities in the fragile state of Somalia. In Finland, the Somalis – 14,000 Somali language speakers in 2011 – are not the largest migrant group in the country, but for various reasons they have raised discussion in the public by far the most. They are, however, the largest group with Muslim, refugee and African backgrounds in Finland. The first Somali asylum seeker groups entered Finland in 1990 when the central government of Somalia was about to collapse and the civil war had started. Unemployment rate among the Somalis is high: in 2010, almost 54% of the Somali speaking population was unemployed (Statistics Finland 2012). (It must be noted, however, that the majority of Somali speakers, more than 9700 people in 2010, are outside workforce because they are children, students or mothers who stay at home taking care of small children.) Somalis in Finland have also experienced lots of discrimination: According to a survey conducted in 27 EU-countries, Somalis in Finland were among the 10 immigrant and ethnic minority groups that had experienced discrimination the most – 47% of them reported incidents of discrimination over a period of 12 months (EU-MIDIS 2009).

We argue that in addition to the short history of 'modern' NGOs in Somalia, there are other inside and outside factors that problematize or even impede the creation of strong Somali diaspora associations. These factors relate to the social and cultural organization of the Somali society itself, the long period of conflict and instability in Somalia, and most recently the global war on terror. First, we will give some background information about the civil society in Somalia and its development past twenty years; second, we will discuss the engagement of the Somali diaspora organizations in general in the development and conflict of Somalia, and how they are perceived by the international community; third, we will focus on the Somali associations in Finland and in particular discuss how clan and associational life are interlinked. Finally, some conclusions will be presented.

This article draws from various sources of data: findings of the EU-funded DIASPEACE project, led by Professor Liisa Laakso (Universities of Jyväskylä and Helsinki); interviews of the representatives of some international organizations that Tiilikainen conducted during the 9<sup>th</sup> Horn of Africa Conference in Lund in June 2010 for the DIASPEACE project; as well as discussions and observations during her six months of ethnographic fieldwork in Somaliland in 2005–2011. Finally, Tiilikainen's observations and discussions for the past two and half years with the member organizations of the Finnish Somalia Network as well as Mohamed's experiences and insights gained through his several roles in the Somali organizations in Finland past 20 years will be utilized.<sup>2</sup>

## 1 Civil society and conflict in Somalia

In the Somali context, the rise of non-governmental forms of associations – NGOs, informal professional networks, political parties and interest groups which organize around issues such as children, women or the disabled – was an outcome of the civil war (Human Development Report 2001: 56.) During General Siyad Barre, who ruled Somalia for 21 years until 1991, it was forbidden to found or run a political or any other organization. The first NGOs were founded in the early 1980s to respond to the Ogaden refugee crisis (Human Development Report 2001: 56). In the late 1980s there were only some 15 local NGOs in the whole country, but in 1995 over 320 NGOs were registered (Little 2003: 47). This development followed

<sup>2</sup>Marja Tiilikainen wants to acknowledge Senior Researcher Christine Jacobsen, IMER Bergen, and Dr. Anna Rastas, University of Tampere, for their helpful comments.

the collapse of the state and disastrous famine of 1991–1992. After the state collapse, associations could be founded freely. To found an NGO also became financially profitable as international aid agencies needed local partners. Moreover, NGOs provided for services that public sector did not provide after the state collapse. However, many of the NGOs did not survive for long, because their capacity was low and they remained dependent on the outside funding (Human Development Report 2001: 56–57). Moreover, the whole NGO concept was alien to the Somalis.

The NGOs were mostly established along clan lines. This is hardly surprising, because clan and kinship have been organizing principles in the Somali society. Clan is an extremely complex issue, which can be manipulated and used with dire consequences, but which also creates trust, safety, cultural intimacy, and effective networks. Kinship relationships may be activated when needed, in particular in times of need and crisis. Power sharing between different clans has also been one of the main issues during the prolonged conflict in Somalia. For example, the highly unpopular Transitional Federal Government was formed according to so called 4.5 formula, which means that the four major clans together with the remaining minority clans occupied the key positions in the government. Clan elders have customarily been the core of civil society in Somalia as they have been mediators and authorities in the social and political spheres of the Somali society. Even today, the civil society in Somalia can be characterized as a mix of different elements and structures, comprising local NGOs and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), other informal social and community groups, professional associations (e.g. teachers, medical doctors, journalists), businesspeople, traditional clan elders and most Islamic movements in the country (Menkhaus *et al.* 2010: 326–328; Shane & Farah 2008: 5, 9).

During the 20-year-conflict in Somalia, NGOs in general, both local and international ones, have been strongly criticized for having used the war for their own benefits: instability and insecurity have created jobs, income and corruption. For security reasons international NGOs have moved their head offices from Mogadishu mostly to Nairobi, where a significant amount of the money, aimed at the Somalia operations, has ended up to international NGO elite and NGO machinery. Local people in Somaliland often complain that they do not know what numerous international, diaspora and local NGOs are really doing; local people just see that seminars are organized at expensive hotels, activities run by NGOs are invisible, and foreigners come and go asking questions but they never seem to come back and contribute to the needs of the people. Local NGOs are often small, inefficient and lacking capacity and resources. In Somaliland, a local researcher criticized:

NGO business becomes elitism! NGOs and politicians are not connected to the people. NGOs have no governance, boards of directors do not exist, they are only names on the paper. They make reports that donors want to have, they use the same reports they have been doing for 20 years. We do not ask hard questions: What do you really do? There is no real civil society. NGOs go and discuss with the government one by one. NGOs have no power base, they exploit the resources. They should have an important role also in following up and guiding the government, but there is no common voice or a platform for advocacy. (Tiilikainen, field notes January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2011.)

In general, the NGO scene in Somalia – as the country itself – is fragmented: During the civil war and instability in Somalia there has been little co-ordination or co-operation between various NGOs as

many are competing over the funds. Moreover, little cooperation if any has been created between NGOs that work in different regions of Somalia, i.e. Somaliland, Puntland and South and Central Somalia. Having said this, however, it must be mentioned that also umbrella NGOs and CSOs in the different regions have been founded. In particular, women-led organizations have been recognized to have been able and willing to cross clan-divides. This may be due to women's social role as mediators through inter-clan marriage (Quinn & Farah 2008: 7). In general, some of the most powerful NGOs have been managed by women, reflecting the central role of civil society as a platform for Somali women's organization and rights (Menkhaus *et al.* 2010: 329).

It also needs to be emphasized that despite many challenges, there are several competent and committed NGOs in place in Somalia, which have also managed to establish themselves and secure funding from local sources or from the diaspora. These have been crucial in addressing community needs and implementing projects in the most challenging and difficult conditions (see also Human Development Report 2001: 56–57; Quinn & Farah 2008: 10–11). Recently Somaliland has passed a Somaliland Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) Law, which aims at coordinating and regulating the local and international NGOs' activities in line with the development plan of Somaliland as well as improving the transparency and accountability of the NGOs (Somaliland NGOs Law 2010).

At the same time as the engagement of the Somali diaspora in Somalia is invaluable, the diaspora is also looked at by locals with some suspicion: For example, members of the diaspora who return to their country of origin are feared to take the good jobs and government positions because they are better educated and networked than the locals are. The diaspora is also seen as culturally different from people who never left Somalia: Those Somalis who have lived several years in Europe, North-America or Australia are believed to have changed their cultural and religious values or adopted new ideas on gender equality, they are seen to behave or dress differently from the local people, and moreover, they may be ridiculed for not mastering the Somali language completely. Any Somali coming from abroad is easily called by a negative label 'dhaqan celis', someone who is being returned to culture. In addition, the diaspora is sometimes perceived by locals as being too clannish and fragmented, in some cases even as warmongers (Abdile & Pirkkalainen 2011: 59–61; Tiilikainen 2011). The international community shares some of the concerns as regards co-operation with the Somali diaspora.

## 2 Somali diaspora, NGOs and engagement in Somalia

The African Union sees the diaspora as the sixth region of Africa (African Union 2005, in Laakso 2011: 1). The importance of the Somali diaspora with regards to the economy of the country has been acknowledged. For example, the total flow of financial remittances from the Somali diaspora is estimated to be 1.3–2 billion USD annually, of which some 130–200 million USD per year is remitted for relief and development purposes (Hammond *et al.* 2011: 41). Indeed, remittances from the Somali diaspora have been a lifeline for many households during past 20 years. In addition, Somalis have been supporting larger community projects by collecting funds for the rehabilitation of hospitals and schools. Somali diasporic organizations have also been able to raise funds from national governments and

donors as humanitarian assistance and for the rebuilding of Somalia. In Finland, for example, several Somali NGOs have received funding from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs for development cooperation projects in Somalia.

International organizations (including the EU, the UN, the African Union and IGAD) consider Somali diaspora as part of the civil society of Somalia. A representative of the EU delegation in Nairobi explained their co-operation with diaspora organizations from the Horn:

... [E]verybody is recognizing the importance of the diaspora and the need to coordinate better with the diaspora. ... [I]n the civil society platform that we are supporting there are many people from the diaspora as well. ... We include the diaspora as civil society actually. But I know that there should be more involvement, more interaction with the diaspora. With, I guess, the same difficulties that we have with the civil society: Diaspora is something which is plural, you have many countries with Somali people living there, you have many political affiliations, you have religious affiliation – we know that some are more inclined to support the opposition, insurgency, radical Islam – some are more towards the government, some are just supporting their families... So, diaspora is something very multiform and a bit vague as well, you know. ... [I]n figures it goes to 1.5 billion sent per year to Somalia, and this is important, this is crucial. ... We don't target diaspora as such, but as part of civil society. (Political Advisor to European Union Delegation to the Republic of Kenya. Lund June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2010.)

On one hand, international organizations and governments regard Somali diaspora as a great potential, which may contribute positively by financial incentives and also by supporting peace building efforts in the fragile state of Somalia (e.g. Abdile 2010; Hoehne 2010; Ibrahim 2010). There are numerous examples of the involvement of diasporic Somalis in peace mediation, recreation of democratic political institutions, as well as capacity building and rehabilitation of the health and educational sectors in Somalia and Somaliland. For international governments and INGOs, the Somali diaspora has in many cases been indispensable, as they master Somali language, have necessary contacts on ground in Somalia and may have been able to visit areas of the country that have been hard to visit by Westerners due to security concerns past 20 years. International community also finds it easy to interact with diasporic Somalis who often are well-educated and who, so to say, 'speak the same language'. As an official of the UNDP described:

They often speak the language that very much resonates with us. They can refer to accountability and transparency and human development, and the language is sophisticated. So, it makes them more approachable. (Country Director, UNDP Somalia. Lund June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2010.)

On the other hand, international community does not really know how to deal with the Somali diaspora, or with Somali diasporas. Fragmentation of the diaspora, lack of one voice, is often mentioned as one of the problems of co-operation with the diaspora. This leads to the key problem of representation – international organizations and governments complain that they do not know with whom they work when they work with the diaspora groups. A representative of UNDP said:

Usually it is an individual [who approaches us], who has the backing of some umbrella organization, which is very often very hard for us to know if this is like a briefcase organization, meaning nothing behind it, or whether it is a genuine organization with backing, experience and commitment by large numbers of diaspora. ... They say they represent an organization, but they really represent an individual, they want to have job. (Country Director, UNDP Somalia. Lund June 4th, 2010.)

A concern for the international community is that by working with specific diaspora organizations they engage only some individuals, or certain groups and clans, whereas they would like to reach civil society at large. There are also doubts if and to what extent the diaspora really may represent and speak for the people who live in Somalia. Previous UN Secretary-General Special Representative for Somalia warned about those members of the Somali diaspora, 'who have a tendency to hijack the debate on Somalia. They are known as using Somalia crisis for personal advancement. Anyone from diaspora can come and say, I am intellectual.' (Lund June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2010.) Diaspora organizations also often lack resources, skills and expertise to manage funded projects and report them. Moreover, the diaspora groups are not always believed to have accurate knowledge on the situation, conditions and developments on ground in Somalia, but make judgements which are misinformed. For example, an advisor to the African Union, said:

This is one of our main challenges, to really inform them [diaspora] about some of the things that have been achieved. You know, when someone leaves his country, he flees with his/her own perceived notions. And most of the time when they arrive in the host country, they maintain them. So, if you left your country with the clannist mentality, when you arrived in Kenya or somewhere else, you stay with the same people from the same clan as you. In fact, I would even argue that the people who left Somalia during its worst times, still live in that time. They have not adjusted to current realities. (Advisor to the African Union, AMISOM, Special Envoy for Somalia. Lund June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2010.)

Among the most serious reservations related to possible cooperation with the diasporas and their organizations is that diaspora in general may promote not only peace, but also instability and conflict in the country of origin (e.g. Brinkerhoff 2006). Parts of the Somali diaspora have been supporting insurgents in Somalia, including the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), Hisbul-Islam, and al-Shabaab by, for example, financial assistance (Abdile 2010). Actually, the invasion of Ethiopia in December 2006 widely raged Somalis, and as followed, al-Shabaab gained wide popularity: They were seen by many as freedom and religious fighters and money was also collected among the Somali diasporas to support them. Some of those who initially supported al-Shabaab did so because they primarily wanted to support their clan members – one of the major clans was powerful in the Islamic Courts Union as well as in al-Shabaab. Somali diaspora has also played a role, sometimes unintentionally, in fuelling local disputes and clan conflicts, for example in the contested area between Somaliland and Puntland. Mahdi Abdile has given a couple of examples of these conflicts in his recent article (2010). Mahdi Abdile and Päivi Pirkkalainen (2011) have referred to 'diaspora's dual role' in the homeland conflict. By the words of a diaspora returnee to Somaliland from Finland, whom they interviewed:

Diaspora have founded educational institutions and contribute economically, but they also have a negative role. A lot of civil war happened in Somalia and Somaliland when money to buy guns came from the diaspora. They have two hands: one hand is feeding people, another hand killing people. (Interviewed January 2011, Abdile & Pirkkalainen 2011.)

It is likely, however, that the money which ended up in buying guns, was initially meant for other purposes such as renovating schools and roads.

Finally, over the past years the possible radicalisation of the diaspora has raised concern. There are some unfortunate examples of young Somalis, mainly boys, who have returned to Somalia from the Nordic countries and the North America, joined the fighting groups and become suicide bombers (Laakso 2011). The concerns that these few extreme cases raise, are linked to a wider discourse of securitization of Muslims. Since 11 September 2001, the global war on terror has led to securitization politics with regards to 'failed' states, including Somalia, where no effective government has been in place since 1991 (Verhoeven 2009). Somalia is seen as a seat for radical Islam where terrorist groups such as al-Shabaab may operate (Marchal 2009). This has led to counter-terrorism operations in the region and also Muslims in the 'West' have become 'suspect communities' (Hickman *et al.* 2011) whose movements, connections and possible radicalization have come under surveillance.

One of the concrete impacts of the war on terror on the Somali households and NGOs operating in the region has been the increased mistrust and suspicion towards the remittance organizations known as *hawala*: They are seen as possible channels for money laundering and terrorist financing. In November 2001 al-Baraqaat, the largest and most well-known remittance organization, was closed down under the pressure from the US government. This was a serious blow to the country, which is dependent on remittances. Other money transfer companies such as Dahabshiil quickly took over the market share, but mistrust and increasing efforts to regulate remittances have been present ever since (Cockayne & Shetret 2012: 34–35). In Finland, Dahabshiil is the most popular money transfer company to Somalia, and it has been able to function without disruptions.

### 3 Somali associations in Finland

In Finland, there is a strong tradition of voluntary associations. It is also easy to found an association – already three people who are over 15-years of age may do that. The chairman and the vice-chairman must, however, be over 18 years old and residents of Finland. In Finland, associations have traditionally taken care of important common issues, for example, organized activities and lobbied for the good of children and youth, seniors, disabled people or environment, as well as organized sports or cultural opportunities. Moreover, associations are an important part of the political life in Finland as also political parties are associations.

Also migrants have noted the freedom of association in Finland and have been active in establishing voluntary associations (Pyykkönen 2005; Saksela 2003). They have realized that a registered association may be a channel to be heard, to have an impact on decisions made by authorities and importantly, to apply for funding. A registered migrant association, like any other association, may apply for funding for, for example, activities that support integration of migrants in Finland or development projects in the country of origin.

Different activities may be funded by ministries, cities, municipalities as well as various foundations (also Guglielmo *et al.* 2010: 44).

Among the migrants in Finland, Somalis have been the most active in founding associations. Since 1990, when the first groups of asylum seekers started to enter Finland, Somalis have founded over 100 associations.<sup>3</sup> According to Päivi Pirkkalainen, who is working on her PhD on Somali diaspora associations, in 2010 some 40–50 Somali NGOs were functional and active. The size of the associations varied from some 30 to 900 members, and in most cases the members included also people who resided outside Finland. For example, one of the interviewed organizations, Gannaane, reported that they had some 70 members in Finland, but around 1000 people in other countries (Guglielmo *et al.* 2010: 45–46). The majority of the associations have been registered in the capital region, that is, the cities of Helsinki, Espoo and Vantaa. This is natural as the majority of the Somalis live there. But Somalis have founded and registered associations also in many other towns: For example, several in the towns of Turku and Tampere, and one or two associations may even be found in the towns of Oulu in Northern Finland, and in Kajaani and Lieksa in Eastern Finland, quite far from the capital region.

Associations may have been founded several years before they were registered. According to the Association Database, which is an official register of associations in Finland, the first Somalia-related association registered was Finland-Somalia Association in 1986. It is a friendship association which was originally founded by the Finns who had been involved with development co-operation projects in Somalia in the 1980s. Since 1990 when Somali asylum seekers started to enter Finland, the association's importance and role rapidly increased, and also some newcomers joined it.

The first associations founded by Somali migrants were registered already in 1992: Jaaliya (Somalien Yhdistys Jaaliya) in April 1992 and Somaliland Association (Somaliland Seura) in December of the same year. Somaliland Association exists even today. This was a start for the organization of Somalis in Finland. The number of small associations increased rapidly. Moreover, religious associations and mosques were founded. After their arrival, Somalis in Helsinki joined the Islamic Society in Finland also known as Rabita mosque, founded in 1987 by Muslim migrants, but soon became active in founding new places for worship. Somalis had a central role, for example, in the foundation of al-Huda mosque (Helsinki Islamic Center), which is one of the largest mosque communities in Finland (registered in 1995) and the Islamic Rahma Center, also in Helsinki, registered as a mosque in 1998.

However, most Somalis did not have previous experience of how to run an association, even less so of associational life and regulations in Finland. Therefore, it was difficult for them to administer organizational routines, manage any project funding they might have received or report the use of the money to the donors. Moreover, associations seemed to duplicate their by-laws and plans from each other. Authorities, including that time Ombudsman for Foreigners Antti Seppälä started urging Somalis to find ways to improve the situation and the discussion in the Somali community started. Finally, the first umbrella organization, Somali League in Finland (Suomen Somaliliitto), was founded in 1996. As a result many small associations ceased to exist as their members joined the League. The general aim of the League was to represent the Somali community in Finland, promote the integration of Somalis and to act as a bridge between the Finnish and the Somali communities.

<sup>3</sup>The search from the Association Register was done by words somali\* and Somalia\*. There are also Somali associations in whose names the Somalia connection is not that explicit (e.g. Gollis Women's Association). Therefore, the number of ever registered Somali associations in Finland is not exactly known.

Another umbrella organization named Finnish Somalia Network (Suomen Somalia-verkosto) was founded in 2004. Somali migrants had been actively approaching the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland by a large number of development project proposals, but very few had been granted funding because the Somali NGOs lacked capacity, knowledge and administrative experience. A turning point was a visit of the World Health Organization (WHO) representative in Somalia, Dr. Ibrahim Betelmal, in autumn 2003. He reported about a huge need for help in Somalia and urged the diaspora to return and do more for the country. The idea of creating a cooperation network that would improve the collaboration between different groups and organizations was born.

The Department for International Development Cooperation of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs strongly supported the idea, and they actually funded the Network for 5 years, before the Network was registered in 2009. The Ministry had (and still has) an interest in the Network, because they were willing to support Somalia, but in the unstable political situation the NGO funding was almost the only way to channel the money to the country. The Somali diaspora was regarded as an important partner, because they had cultural competence and contacts inside the country.

The aim of the Network from the beginning has been to increase the number of effective development cooperation projects in Somalia. Another objective is to improve the capacity and skills of the organizations working with development cooperation by offering advice and education. Moreover, the aim is to increase co-operation between the organizations working in Somalia. In November 2012 the Network had 34 member organizations, including 6 established Finnish organizations (e.g. Finn Church Aid and International Solidarity Foundation) and 28 Somali organizations. In recent years at least 10 of the Somali NGOs in the Network have been running several development projects in Somalia with the funding provided by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland. This kind of a network, concentrating on the development cooperation in Somalia, which has managed to unite different organizations connected to different regions in Somalia, is seemingly unique in Europe.

### 3.1 The problem of representation – A clan or an association?

A name of the organization may indicate a motivation behind the foundation of an association. Among the Somali associations there are, for example, associations that have been founded to enhance the development of Somalia and Somalis (e.g. Somali Social Development Association); to promote certain activities such as sports or culture (e.g. Somali Sports League in Finland – Suomen Somali Urheiluliitto, SSUL); to support activities of certain social groups such as women, youth or parents (e.g. Association of Somali Parents in Espoo – Espoon Somalivanhempien yhdistys; Somaliland Youth Association of Turku – Turun Somalimaan nuorten yhdistys); or to bring together Somalis in a certain neighbourhood (e.g. Somalis of Kontula – Kontulan Somalialaiset): Kontula is a neighbourhood in Eastern Helsinki. Pirkkalainen has identified at least following types of Somali organizations in Finland: development organizations; youth/student organizations; women's organizations; community organizations; multi-ethnic organizations; and professional networks/organizations (Guglielmo *et al.* 2010: 45).

The issue of clan is not outspoken in Finland: Clans are not touched in the discussions with the Finns, mainly because Finnish people are not believed to understand or know the clan system and its significance. In general discussions between the Somalis,

particular clans are not explicitly named either because they are still such sensitive issues following the civil war in Somalia. However, clans still play a role in how Somali migrants relate to or trust each other, and how they organize and operate transnationally. When the Somalis in Finland started to organize in the 1990s, the NGOs they founded were clan-based in the sense that the members, leaders and funders often belonged to the same clan. Following the civil war the cohesion of the society had been broken and one's own family and clan were the only remaining social groups that might be trusted, in addition to religious leaders which at that time were believed to recreate the unity of the people. Therefore, many small associations were founded in Finland. Another reason was that like in Somalia, a registered organization was hoped to receive some financial benefits and assets, and even bring livelihood. Also, as the founders and most active members were – and still are – mainly men, associations can be seen as an alternative arena for Somali men, who mostly were unemployed in Finland, to regain their traditional male role in the public sphere and politics.

As the Somali community in Finland is very fragmented, it is not clear who can speak on behalf of and represent the community. Authorities often would like to have a body which could channel the views of the whole community, but so far this kind of a strong body does not exist. A key question is, how and on what grounds a group or an association may represent the Somalis in Finland.

Somali League in Finland has been an attempt to create this kind of a forum. Somali League is frequently turned to by authorities and the media in issues related to integration in Finland. In this sense the League has been successful and recognized, but among the Somalis its position has also been questioned. When the League was founded in 1996, all the major Somali clans in Finland were represented. Finally, in addition to a board, a council of elders (60 persons) was selected, based on the size of each major clan in Finland. Moreover, representatives of the two largest mosques, Rabita and al-Huda, were given their share in the committee. Also a couple of women were actively involved when the League was founded, but they were not included in the nominated committee. It was about power sharing, a founding member explained. To a question that who nowadays may represent Somalis in Finland, he replied:

Somali League represents us Somalis in Finland. All the large clans have been founding it, and even today we think of clan balance when we choose people to the board. The board has been selected by all of us. (Tiilikainen, field notes July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2012.)

Since the foundation of the Somali League the committee has decreased in size, currently comprising 25 seats. It is not named as the 'council of elders' any more, but just as an advisory council. However, the council has remained as a clan-based body. In addition, representatives from the mosques have been included since the very beginning – in particular al-Huda has been actively participating in and following the activities of the Somali League. One example of the importance of religious opinions was a lengthy discussion on whether Somali League should accept or not a significant funding it had been granted by the Finland's Slot Machine Association (RAY). The problem was that the Slot Machine Association raises funds through gaming operations and some of the Islamic scholars opinioned that this kind of money was *haram*, forbidden, according to Islam, and therefore should not be used.

When the council members are selected, certain criteria, apart from the clan background, are considered: age – as the representative

council member should not be too young; good reputation – as the elected person should be moral and respected from the religious point of view (e.g. he/she should not use alcohol or identify too strongly with the clan background); and the person should also have some educational background or other useful knowledge and experience. Women may become members of the executive committee and advisory council, but only a handful of women have been interested in these positions. This also reflects the clan-based male-dominance and traditional hierarchical structures of the association.

Political divisions and tensions reflect in the organizational life. When the Somali League was founded, all the major Somali clans were represented, including those originally inhabiting the Somaliland area. Since a couple of years the Somalis and associations in Finland who identify themselves as Somalilanders have withdrawn from the Somali League. The reason is that the Somali League has a nationalistic agenda and supports the unification of all Somalis under one flag. This is unacceptable for those Somalilanders who support independent Somaliland, as they feel that Somali League cannot represent them.

In the Finnish Somalia Network, the other umbrella organization of the Somalis, the representation has been solved a bit differently. In the Network the members are not individuals, but organizations. Moreover, the member organizations are not only Somali organizations, but also Finnish organizations. At the board, in 2011 there were representatives of 8 member organizations, out of which 5 were Somali and 3 Finnish associations. The chairperson of the association is a Somali woman. The participation of women in the activities of the Network is encouraged, but the number of active Somali women is small. When selecting new Somali associations to the board, an issue to be considered is the previous experience and history of a candidate association. In addition, the area where the association is linked to in Somalia is important, because the Network wants to cover and have access to as a wide area in Somalia as possible. This means including representatives from organizations that work in different areas and political regions in Somalia – basically it also means including representatives from different clans, although normally it is not said aloud.

The Finnish Somalia Network makes an effort to remain politically neutral, and it has managed to attract member organizations from all regions in Somalia, including Somaliland. The presence of Finns and Finnish organizations also neutralizes the atmosphere and helps to increase collaboration towards a common goal, that is, the development of Somalia. However, political disagreements and clan conflicts in Somalia are sensitive issues that at times create tensions within the Network, and therefore, sensitive topics and discussions are avoided when possible.

Although many Somali associations originally have been founded around a clan, it is not justified to claim that they would be (exclusively) clan-based. Indeed, the associations strongly criticize the use of the clan-factor in politics or associations and often claim that clan does not have any importance for them. The activities of the associations are said to be open to everyone, also the membership has widened to include people from other clans and regions – even Finns – and the money is collected from different sources, not only from one clan. Moreover, there are associations that clearly have been founded for joining, for example, certain professionals such as people from the health sector (also Guglielmo *et al.* 2010: 48).

However, for the individuals and associations that conduct development projects in Somalia, clan and regional affiliations are still significant. In practice, during the 20-year-long instability in Somalia, clan roots in a certain area in Somalia have been instrumental in

providing access to implement development projects. The Somali diaspora NGOs have mainly been running projects in areas where their family lineages are rooted. Clan affiliations create trust networks that make it possible to send money and implement projects without being there all the time. Even travelling and monitoring the projects inside Somalia has been possible once the clan has been able to provide necessary protection and safety. On the reverse side are situations, when a Somali from the diaspora is not able to travel to a certain area in Somalia during a clan conflict: A diasporic Somali, automatically counted as part of a (fighting) clan, would be an evident target for killing or kidnapping.

Clan membership may complicate the implementation of a development project also otherwise. Whether a person wants it or not, in the Somali context a person is automatically seen as part of his/her clan. It is like an address or a hallmark which helps to know who a person is. Some of the members of the Finnish Somalia Network who have been running projects in Somalia have told how their clan members may find it difficult to understand when a Somali coming from Finland tries to promote good practices in the projects funded by the Foreign Ministry and hire project staff in an open and competitive manner, instead of hiring a relative. Also in Finland, a Somali or his/her actions may easily be interpreted from a clan framework (for example, why a person has been invited to an event or not), even though in reality the clan had not played any role in a given action.

But an NGO may also be used as a way to support one's own family and clan. Once a family- or a clan-based organization in Finland has managed to secure funding for a project in Somalia, it may help relatives by employing them in the project. This will decrease the amount of personal remittances that otherwise should be sent to relatives in Somalia. Moreover, a successful diaspora NGO and positive image locally in Somalia may be used to gain a certain status, for example a position in the Somali politics.

## 4 Conclusions

Somalis in Finland have actively organized and founded numerous associations. Founding an association has been motivated by the need to influence issues relevant to the Somalis both in Finland and in Somalia. Many organizations are active on both fronts – they conduct activities that may ease the life and integration of the Somalis in Finland, and also support peace-building and development efforts in Somalia.

The authorities in Finland and other countries with Somali populations have welcomed the organization of Somalis as this in principle is believed to ease communications with the fragmented community. Somali and other migrant organizations are encouraged by municipalities and ministries to develop their administrative structures and routines further, and in the future take a larger responsibility on the service provision for migrant populations. Also international community has acknowledged the contributions that the Somali diaspora has done for the development of Somalia, and they try to find ways how to utilize them and enhance the collaboration even more. Transnational networking capacities and skills, including successful fundraising from multi-local communities for families and projects in Somalia, are among the acknowledged strengths of the communities.

At the same time as the diaspora is seen as an important agent in the development and rebuilding of Somalia, it is also increasingly framed as potentially 'suspect'. This dual standing may impede

the inclusion of Somali migrants as civil society actors. The first investigation into Somalis in Finland regarding suspected terrorism funding and recruitment started in September 2011. The case came as a big surprise to the larger Somali community in Finland and many found it hard to believe that anything criminal had happened. The case, however, worries many people as they fear that anyone who remits money home may easily be labeled as a terrorist – even when the receiver is a family member, one can never know for sure where the money in Somalia ends. Moreover, the policies aimed at the securitization of Islam, counter-terrorism policies and profiling of Somalis or Muslims in general may increase the sense of insecurity among the families, and even increase the risk of radicalization. However, so far the Somali community seems to trust that Finland is a state ruled by law where everyone will be treated according to law and justice.

Somali NGOs in Finland have gradually learnt to better manage associations according to laws and regulations, but there is still plenty of space for improvement. Somali NGOs struggle with the same issues as any other association: The number of active members is small, voluntary work is difficult due to family and income related obligations and worries, and the funding of associations is insecure. In addition, Somali NGOs face other challenges, which may explain why they remain weak as civil society actors in Finland: short history and experience of NGOs in Somalia; lack of skills and capacity; unrealistic expectations regarding income or job security that an NGO could provide – once it becomes clear that an NGO does not provide them, but demands a lot of voluntary work, the motivation decreases; clan and political divides within the community, resulting to many small associations, mistrust and lack of co-operation; and the diasporic life itself which entails commitments, compelling relations and interests both in the receiving country and the country of origin.

In Finland and many other Western countries NGOs and civil society organizations have an established role as platform for active citizenship. Among the Somalis, however, an NGO largely remains an alien and donor-driven concept. A closer look at the Somali diaspora organizations reveals in how complex ways kinship, clan, religious affiliations and associational structures may be utilized and blurred. Founding an association may have been a way particularly for the first generation Somali refugee men to regain self-esteem and social status in the public sphere, both in Finland and in Somalia. It remains to be seen if the second generation will be likewise active.

Clan elders and religious leaders are still respected and listened to among the Somalis. Therefore, for those who need to find 'representatives' of the Somali diaspora community, it may be wise, on one hand, to approach the community on a wide front, including NGOs, religious authorities and some respected individuals and clan representatives in the community. On the other hand, traditional clan-based and patriarchal institutions may exclude women and the younger generation. Therefore, their participation has to be particularly searched for and encouraged.

For the Somali diaspora, learning about and adapting to new organizational structures and decision-making mechanisms may also be protecting and empowering. Those Somalis, who want to take distance to political and clan tensions in the community, or those groups such as women who may not get their voice directly heard in the traditional structures, may find the Finnish association law and decision-making procedures as good tools to more equal, transparent and neutral collaboration and advocacy. Co-operation with the Finns in the associations has been mutually enriching and educating, and for example in the Finnish Somalia Network increased trust between different member organizations.

Finnish authorities are likely to regard the foundation of migrant associations and participation in organizational life as sign of successful integration and positive activity in the civil society. From a Foucauldian perspective, migrant associations and their regulation may even be seen as a way for a nation state to govern, control, 'normalize' and even securitize migrants (e.g. Pyykkönen 2007). Through the example of the Somali diaspora associations, however, the question of civil society widens across national borders and habitual civic actors. It suggests a need to rethink the concept of 'civil society' itself and how it could be analytically used in understanding transnational, socially and culturally structured civic participation and agency. Finally, the complexities of the lives of Somali migrants, the various (multi-local) affiliations and social ties that they have, as well as internal struggles for representation and power presented in this article call for careful analysis on migrant groups and their internal heterogeneity.

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## Notes

1. The article is based on a lecture held at the Nordic Migration Research Conference *Immigrants and Civil Society: 16th Nordic Migration Research Conference & 9th ETMU Days*, 13–15 August 2012, University of Turku, Finland.
2. Marja Tiilikainen wants to acknowledge Senior Researcher Christine Jacobsen, IMER Bergen, and Dr. Anna Rastas, University of Tampere, for their helpful comments.
3. The search from the Association Register was done by words somali\* and Somalia\*. There are also Somali associations in whose names the Somalia connection is not that explicit (e.g. Golis Women's Association). Therefore, the number of ever registered Somali associations in Finland is not exactly known.

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