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### Forging a 'good diaspora'

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## Forging a ‘good diaspora’: Political mobilization among Somalis in the UK

### INTRODUCTION

The summer of 2013 was a historic moment for Somalis in the UK, as many took part in what turned out to be an unprecedented and unexpected wave of political mobilization. Images of the Somali community protesting against Barclays Bank spread rapidly across news outlets and social media. The demonstrations emerged in response to Barclays’ decision to shut down the accounts of 250 money transfer operators (MTOs). Among the accounts due for closure were four Somali MTOs operating in the UK, including Dahabshiil, the largest in the Somali remittance market and a major player in the economy of the Somali territories. Although the closures impacted on many other remittance companies, affecting Polish, Bangladeshi and Pakistani migrant groups, Somalis were among the most vocal and visible in conveying their discontent. Somali diaspora groups, remittance companies, NGOs, and politicians joined forces to mount a campaign against Barclays – the last bank in the UK to offer accounts to MTOs – and to push the UK government to find a durable solution to the issue.

The announced closures did not come as a surprise. *Al Barakaat*, another Somali remittance company, had its accounts shut and assets frozen by the US in 2001, and accused of having links with a Somali Islamist group (Horst and Van Hear 2002). As with the Barclays Bank closures, the incident brought to the fore ambivalent attitudes towards the Somali diaspora, as simultaneously ‘peace-wreckers’ and ‘peace-makers’ (Smith and Stares 2007). Anna Lindley (2009) has described how, following the *Al Barakaat* closures, the international community cast the Somali money transfer infrastructures as both ‘dirty money’ and ‘development capital’. On the one hand the closures were a result of the post 9/11 geopolitical context, which has led to tighter regulation around the prevention of the financing of terrorist activities. On the other hand, following the closures, UN agencies, and aid organizations put in place a ‘humanitarian defence’, highlighting the importance of the remittance ‘lifeline’ in war-torn Somalia, and emphasizing the potential ‘development capital’ of the remittance industry.

Just over a decade later, in May 2013, Somalis in the UK built on the ‘humanitarian defence’ to initiate a campaign that stressed their role as a ‘good diaspora.’ They requested that the government protect their ‘lifeline’ by supporting the Somali remittance infrastructure, which, they claimed, enabled the diaspora to send money home cheaply and efficiently. They asked not to be demonized as suspected ‘terrorists’, but to be recognized as transnational development actors supporting families and communities back home. The campaigners also requested, at a later stage in the campaign, to be included as stakeholders in government initiatives, and hence to be recognized as a professional, politically active, and integrated community in the UK.

Their mobilization resulted in Barclays delaying the date for closure several times, and in persuading the UK government – which initially ignored their demands claiming it could not interfere in a commercial decision – to set up an Action Group for Cross-border remittances. Part of the Action group included a Safer Corridor Pilot for UK-Somali remittances, led by the Department for International Development (DfID), with support from the Treasury and an Advisory Group, and a technical implementation group led by the World Bank. After some discussion, three Somali ‘community representatives’ and the chairman of the Somali Remittance Association SOMSA were included as stakeholders in the Advisory Group.

The campaign was an important moment for Somalis in the UK, marking the emergence of heightened and effective forms of political mobilization. A decade previously, Somalis had been described as an ‘invisible community’ (Harris 2004), and presented in the academic literature as exhibiting low levels of collective mobilization and political visibility (Griffiths 2000, Hopkins 2006). The scale of involvement, in terms of numbers and levels of commitment in the 2013 campaign, however, proved otherwise. Organized by a number of youth groups, the campaign benefited from the skills and networks of groups which had gained prominence thanks also to their close alliances with government, local politicians, NGOs and academics. Furthermore, the campaign signalled a change in the nature and scale of the demands made. While previous demands made to the state by Somali community representatives or activists had been primarily aimed at resolving local issues around

service provision or representation, the campaign requested that the government support the diaspora as *both* national and transnational actors involved in issues that tied the UK to the Somali regions. It thus required a larger and cross-departmental response from the government.

This article focuses on the mobilizing practices and activities around the closures of the Barclays accounts, to explore the interrelated questions of *how* and to *what effect* young Somali ‘political entrepreneurs’ (Adamson 2012) mobilized around the remittance account closures in the UK. It draws on qualitative research conducted with the Somali diaspora in the UK between April and December 2014 as part of a larger project on ‘Diaspora Engagement in War-Torn Countries’, which is part of the Oxford Diaspora Programme. Led by Nicholas Van Hear, the project analyses diaspora engagement around three spheres: the sphere of the ‘household’ and the extended family, which is largely private and personal; the more public sphere of the ‘known community’, by which is meant collectivities of people that know each other or know of each other; and the largely public sphere of the ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1983), including ethnic, national, religious and other allegiances and affinities. In a joint article which emerged from this project, Van Hear and Cohen (2016) explore the forms of engagement across these three spheres by comparing the experiences of distant and contiguous diasporas which emerge in conditions of conflict. They argue that the disaggregation of these three spheres of engagement can help unravel the discrepancies between those in the diaspora and at home, and to further analyse the diaspora’s capacity and desire to engage (Al-Ali et al. 2001).

The remittance campaign, which I analyse in what follows, engages all three ‘spheres’ of engagement. Barclays’ decision to close the accounts posed a threat to the remittance channels used by Somalis to send money abroad, impacting on their engagement at the ‘household’ level, while much of the collective organizing unfolded at the level of the ‘known community’. Both these spheres, however, shaped, and were shaped by, an ‘imagined community’ based around generation, pan-Somali unity and ideas of ‘professionalism’ (Hansen 2013) drawn from national discourses on multiculturalism and notions of diaspora and development.

This article focuses on how this ‘imagined community’ took shape throughout the campaign. It adopts an approach that treats ‘diaspora’ not as agents but as co-produced by policy makers, international organizations and NGOs through an ensemble of institutions, procedures, discourses and tactics, as well as by migrants themselves who make themselves into diasporic subjects (Axel 2004, Adamson 2012, Sokefeld 2006, Kleist 2008, Horst 2013). Specifically, drawing on Adamson’s work on political mobilization (2012: 25-26), this article engages with diaspora as a specific form of transnationalism, and ‘as the products or outcomes of transnational mobilization activities by political entrepreneurs engaged in strategic social identity construction.’ One of the unique features of ‘diasporic politics’, Adamson argues, is the attempt by political entrepreneurs ‘to reify and reproduce in a transnational and politicized form a particular identity category’ (ibid 2012: 26), or particular forms of ‘imagined communities.’

Rather than focusing on the Somali diaspora as agents, I explore how the campaign, through its mobilizing practices and framing devices produced a particular ‘imagined community’ (Sokefeld 2006, Adamson 2012), which in turn shaped activities at the ‘known community’ and ‘household’ spheres. While most of the literature on diaspora has explored ‘imagined communities’ in relation to ethno-national groups and particularist claims, I focus here on unpacking the generational dimensions of this ‘imagined community’ that emerged in the campaign. I also bring to the fore how young Somalis managed, negotiated, and challenged local, national, and transnational discourses about diaspora and about migrant ethnic and community groups in Britain. I argue that the campaign produced particular imagined notions of Somalis as a ‘good diaspora’ community – as small-scale humanitarian actors, and as unified, impartial and ‘professional’ community representatives.<sup>1</sup> It challenged mainstream views of Somalis as a ‘problem’ community, and presented young Somalis as new political actors in the UK and the Somali regions.

These notions of ‘good diaspora’, which I analyse throughout, are shaped both by discourses and forms of governance around migration in Britain, as well as by

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<sup>1</sup> The focus is on the normative construction of ‘good diaspora’ through the campaign, and hence the term is used to refer to an idealised construction of what a diaspora in Britain *should* do.

transnational discourses on development and professionalism. This article, therefore, brings together the literature on diaspora political mobilization and transnational engagement, which has focused on diaspora formation and engagement back home (Ostergaard-Nielsen 2003; Sokefeld 2006; Turner and Kleist 2013; Sinatti and Horst 2014; Van Hear and Cohen 2016), with that on political mobilization among migrant groups, which has focused on the host country (Reed-Danahay and Brettell 2008; Però and Solomos 2010; Però 2008; Riccio and Russo 2011; Statham 1999; Koopmans 2004).<sup>2</sup> By prioritizing the ‘discursive elements’ of political opportunity (Koopmans 2004: 451), it shows how young Somalis reify, merge, and challenge categories of diaspora, ethnic community, and migrant, which have tended to be kept analytically separate in the literature.

Ethnographic research was conducted throughout the campaign in 2013 and 2014. It involved participating in meetings and informal gatherings, observing online discussions and reporting on the campaign, and conducting over 30 semi-structured interviews with Somali diaspora groups, NGO workers, government officials, journalists and scholars involved in the campaign in the UK. Interviews were carried out between April and December 2014, and questions posed focused on involvement in the campaign, motivations, perspectives on the aims and outcomes, obstacles and tensions, and general background information on the interviewee. Additional research was carried out in Hargeysa, Somaliland involving 32 interviews with policymakers, politicians, directors of remittance companies (*xawilaad*), NGOs and other civil society groups. The research was facilitated by long-term ethnographic research conducted with Somalis in the UK between 2009 and 2011 (Liberatore 2017).

In what follows I account for the recent emergence of Somali youth groups in London – the main protagonists of the campaign – in the broader context of national and international efforts to engage the Somali diaspora. The subsequent section returns to the campaign to elucidate how the activists presented themselves through notions of diaspora engagement, ethnic community, and professionalism, while employing these strategically throughout the campaign. The final section focuses on a contentious

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<sup>2</sup> This literature has tended to expand on the political opportunity structure approach pioneered by Ireland (1994).

issue that emerged between activists and government officials, namely the place within the campaign of Dahabshiil, the largest Somali remittance company in the UK. The issue brought to the fore some of boundaries and limitations of the ‘good diaspora’ identity category.

## **ENGAGING THE SOMALI DIASPORA IN THE UK**

### **Refugee migration to Britain: Somalis as a problem community**

The UK hosts the largest and most established Somali community in Europe, with around 100,000 people of Somali origins residing in the country (Census 2011). Compared with Somalis in places such as the UAE or South Africa (Abdi 2015), Somalis in the UK tend to have a more secure immigration status, and are entitled to welfare support. In recent years many Somalis with EU passports have begun to move from other European countries to settle in the UK.

The largest influx of Somalis occurred during the late 1980s and early 1990s as civil war spread across the Somali regions. Most of the ‘first generations’ arrived throughout the 1988-1991 from the north-western areas (present day Somaliland), and subsequently from southern areas following state collapse in 1990. Most were granted refugee and later citizenship status. With the rolling back of the state in 1990s Britain, responsibility for welfare shifted towards local NGOs and civil society organizations, including refugee community organizations (Però and Solomon 2010: 5). Within the multicultural paradigm, migrants and minorities were encouraged to organize around ‘unified and readily identifiable refugee communities’ based around ethnicity (Griffiths et al 2006: 892). They formed local community or voluntary organizations ‘in exchange for resources and recognition from the state (national and local) that saw them as governmental tools for social cohesion and status quo maintenance’ (Però and Solomon 2010: 5). Somali community organizations were set up to support newly arrived refugees with resettlement and integration processes, but often struggled in the absence of adequate funding and competition over resources (Hopkins 2006).

Writing over a decade ago, Hopkins (2006) notes that, despite the presence of a large number of Somali community organizations in the UK, which provide a range of services from assistance with housing, unemployment, language lessons and legal

support, the Somali community has continued to feel marginalized in terms of collective representation and service provision. It has failed to put together a united, collaborative Somali voice. In a similar vein, Harris (2004: 6) observes that the large number of Somali community groups present at the time of her research had not resulted in their representation in local and national bodies concerned with their welfare. This sense of marginalization was further echoed in academic work on Somalis during this period which, as Kleist (2008b) describes, focused on social problems and challenges of living in the West, often portraying Somali migrants as a marginalized and struggling community. Policy work on Somalis also followed this trend. Often local or regional in focus, much of this work concentrated on housing problems, education and training, unemployment, health, substance abuse and so on. Emphasizing the obstacles and ‘problems’ faced by Somalis, reinforced the image of Somalis as a ‘problem community’ and as ‘passive supplicants of the welfare state’ (Harris 2004: 13-14).

### **Somali Youth: Between development actors and an integrated community**

In contrast to the studies above, policy makers, academics and practitioners in the development field have begun to stress, in recent years, the importance of the Somali diaspora as development actors, and hence as a transnational community oriented towards the development of the homeland (Kleist 2008a). Remittances, which are primarily sent by the first generation, are often referred to as the ‘lifeline’ of the country. They have been central to debates about the Somali diaspora as key agents of change. A considerable body of work has demonstrated the importance of diaspora contributions – at the level of the ‘household’ – towards humanitarian relief and everyday survival and subsistence (Hammond 2013, Lindley 2010).

Increasingly, the younger generation of Somalis abroad have been less engaged in sending financial contributions and more concerned with the transfer of knowledge and skills through their involvement in the NGO sector and public and private sectors in Somalia, Puntland and Somaliland (Hammond et al 2011). Although some young people do contribute to family remittances, the money is often administered by older family members who make the decisions on when and to whom it is sent. Some of the younger people I interviewed emphasized their disconnection from their families



‘back home’ and their preference for contributing through personal involvement in fundraising initiatives or charitable and development organizations, or by returning to the Somali regions to donate time and expertise rather than by handing out cash (see Hammond 2011: 40). This generational shift was captured during a discussion with a young second generation Somali man who explained, ‘They need our time and experience, no longer our wallet!’

This growing involvement of the diaspora in the development-migration nexus (Faist 2008) is part of a global trend that has seen the emergence of diaspora as agents of change in international development thinking. Diasporas have been courted by donors, sending states, and NGOs for their financial contributions, and knowledge and skill transfers (Turner and Kleist 2013: 192). Policy reports, initiatives and academic work on the topic have proliferated. This involvement of African diasporas in the development industry has come with a growing interest, throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, in new development actors such as traditional authorities, churches and migrants. As a result, responsibility for development has become increasingly individualized and depoliticized (Turner and Kleist 2013: 200).

Through these forms of engagement, development agencies have shaped diasporas as particular types of agents of change. In discussing how European development agencies engage and understand the activities of the diaspora, Sinatti and Horst (2014: 7) argue that the work of diaspora is often seen as ‘charitable’ or ‘philanthropic’, small in scale and carried out by volunteers. In addition, the politicized, fragmented, and allegedly biased nature of diasporas’ transnational activities is also often targeted by European governmental bodies and NGOs (Horst 2013). Diaspora activities are juxtaposed with the work of Western development agencies, which are seen to be involved in neutral, planned and rational processes. Diaspora organizations are therefore targeted by development agencies as needing capacity building in order to support them in making activities more ‘professional’ and to incorporate them into the development industry (Sinatti and Horst 2014). They are further expected to be ‘impartial, neutral and unified’ in order to participate in development activities (Horst 2013: 229).

National efforts to engage the Somali diaspora have also been shaped by security concerns both in the UK and the Somali regions. In the post 9/11 climate, and particularly since the July 2005 bombings, Muslim migrants – including Somalis – have been seen through the lens of integration, cohesion and national identity. This has led to a greater concern with incorporating migrant groups into counter-terrorism and integrationist policies (Lentin and Titley 2011). Somalis have been the target of Home Office counterterrorism initiatives such as the Prevent strategy, which is part of the CONTEST government counter-terrorism strategy, and has entailed working closely with local authorities and community organizations.

Security and development concerns have also shaped the UK's foreign policy towards the Somali regions, and hence its engagement of the Somali diaspora, particularly since the establishment of the new federal government of Somalia in 2012, and growing stability across the region. Somalia has emerged as a foreign policy priority in the UK. The 2012–13 Somalia conferences hosted in London led to renewed efforts by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) in engaging the diaspora. A series of diaspora consultations were organized prior to the conferences, involving many of the youth groups who I describe in the following section. One of the legacies of this consultation was the establishment, within the Somalia Unit, of the first and only 'diaspora outreach role' in the FCO. This unit has been creating a database of diaspora groups, meeting with representatives, and financially supporting local Somali groups. Somalis were 'unwilling migrants' I was told by one representative, 'they didn't have much of a choice in being here and are waiting to go back "home."' The comments signal the FCO's recognition of the transnational engagements of Somalis, but also an assumption that a shared ethnicity necessarily entails a desire to return and to contribute to the economic, social and political development of the country (Sinatti and Horst 2014). Diasporas, given their assumed language skills and cultural and contextual knowledge, are also seen as resources or as potential mediators between donors, international organizations and governments and the Somalia government.

These recent initiatives have meant that Somalis are no longer engaged solely as a refugee community, but are incorporated as development agents and active partners in national counter-terrorism, integration and foreign policy initiatives. These changes

have resulted in the formation of new associations which differ to the refugee community organizations of the 1990s and early 2000s. Young people have come to imagine themselves as a community of ‘professionals’, emphasizing their Western education, engagement with the media, mobility and transnational connections, and ability to communicate with host country institutions. They have used this social capital to mark a distinction between themselves and their parents’ generation, as well as their relatives in the Somali regions. As we shall see below, they have moulded themselves around local, national and international notions of the ‘good diaspora’.

### **THE REMITTANCE CAMPAIGN**

Only a few weeks after Barclays’ announcement of its decision to shut down the accounts of Dahabshiil and other Somali remittance companies, the news had spread among Somalis in the UK, as well as activists and NGOs working in the regions. In mid-June a letter signed by over 100 academics and NGOs was drafted, urging the government to find a ‘durable solution’ to the problem, and demanding that Barclays extend the termination deadline for 6 months. All major news outlets in the UK reported on the issue, and quickly the news went viral on social media. The closures impacted not only Dahabshiil, but also smaller Somali money service businesses, including Mustaqbal, Tawakal and Horyaal.<sup>3</sup>

Among the first individuals to organize around the issue was a small group in east London, some of who were part of the Council of Somali Organizations (CSO) and included a mixed group of both older and younger Somalis. Much of the initial organizing took place in an office adjacent to the Dahabshiil premises in Tower Hamlets, and was organized by the former head of the Somali Money Services Association (SOMSA), the recently launched trade association, which at the time was led by an individual with close ties to Dahabshiil.<sup>4</sup> These initial gatherings brought together the directors of various money transfer companies, as well as local Somali

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<sup>3</sup> The closures posed a major threat to a system considered more cost efficient when compared to large remittance companies such as Moneygram and Western Union. Both companies are not well represented across the Somali regions and charge considerably more than most Somali MSBs.

<sup>4</sup> The Somali Money Services Association (SOMSA) was set in 2012 and is a professional trade association representing the Somali Money Services Businesses in the UK.

community activists. Amongst the latter were several Somali Labour supporters; two planned to stand for the 2014 local council elections.

The Labour party have historically fulfilled a special role in representing minority interests in the UK (Statham 1999: 621), and this connection proved to be crucial in advancing the campaigners' 'political opportunities'. The Labour MP for Bethnal Green and Bow, Rushanara Ali, came on board during the early summer months, and her office orchestrated a large part of the subsequent campaigning initiatives. In July, Ali, along with 47 Labour MPs wrote a letter to Barclays calling for an extension of the decision. The Labour connection was key in securing, on the 17<sup>th</sup> July 2013, one of several Parliamentary debates on the issue. Over the summer months, the Tower Hamlets Labour Party Office, joined by members of the CSO and several of the original organizers, designed a paper petition – entitled *Save Remittance Giving* – that was circulated across the city.

At that stage, among one of the key Somali campaigners to emerge alongside the SOMSA representative was Farah Hassan, a young student from a London university who was already actively involved in organizing various Somaliland-focused initiatives in London. She had been part of the organizing committee for the Somaliland independence day celebrations, and was also involved in setting a network for young 'Somaliland professionals' in the UK. As she explained to me, her engagement with Somaliland emerged following a trip in 2010: 'I realized how things were working and how important it was to support it, to contribute... it really opened my eyes.' This experience had shaped her as a 'nationalist', she explained, 'I don't care about clans... I'm interested in Somaliland as a nation. My family don't understand why I am not defending my clan.'

She had joined the campaign in its early stages, concerned that the shut down of the remittance accounts would severely affect Somaliland, which unlike South-Central Somalia received 'little backing from the international community'. Throughout the campaign she spent the long hot days of Ramadan emailing MPs and local councillors about the issue, analysing campaign trends, liaising with the media, and recruiting young volunteers to distribute the petition across London and the UK.

Within a few months the paper petition merged with the online change.org petition set up by Farhan Hassan, the director of the Somali Heritage Academic Network (SHAN), a transnational educational research and consultancy organization. The organization had been commissioned by the International Organization for Migration to conduct a research project on the Somali Diaspora in England and Wales (IOM 2013), and therefore had previous knowledge of issues relating to diaspora engagement, and experience of working with international organizations. Farhan initiated the online petition on his own, but within the first few months began working closely with the initial group of activists. In August that same year, the petition had gathered over 25,500 signatures, and the endorsement of Olympic champion Mo Farah. It was delivered to 10 Downing Street by Farah and Farhan, together with Rushanara Ali, local labour supporters, a group of NGO workers, and other Somali activists. The campaign group also worked closely with NGOs Oxfam and Adeso as well as with scholars and academics working on remittance issues. In October, Farhan joined by a number of Somali campaigners, alongside staff from Oxfam Great Britain mounted a stunt in front of Barclays Bank in Central London.

As the campaign gained momentum, two additional groups joined the campaign: the London Somali Youth Forum (LSYF) and the Anti-Tribalism Movement (ATM), in West and North London respectively. Both organizations had come to the fore in recent years, with growing government engagement with the diaspora; they had worked closely with the government on its various integration, counter-terrorism, foreign policy and diaspora development projects and had taken part in the diaspora consultations prior to the 2012–13 conferences.

The director of LSYF, Mohamed Ibrahim, a young man with a background in social policy had grown up in Harrow and had previously worked for Hounslow Council. In 2009 alongside a group of young Somalis in North London he launched LSYF, the only Somali-led youth umbrella organization at the time. The group had been contacted by the Metropolitan Police and senior government officials concerned with the ‘invisibility’ and absence of ‘integration’ and ‘self-representation’ of Somali youth in London (Hassan 2014: 111). Following a conference, the forum began working to tackle issues such as educational underachievement, anti-social behaviour, gang-related crime and extremism (*ibid* 2014: 112-238), funded by the Trust for

London and the PVE programme. As Hassan (2014) has described, these engagements with politicians and the police have, on the one hand, enabled the growth of organizations such as the LSYF, but on the other hand have proved challenging for these groups who have sought to maintain some degree of independence, and the trust and involvement of their communities. As Mohamed explained to me in an interview, ‘We are involved in PVE but we want to bring our own perspective to that... it’s about us telling you what the issues are.’

Adam Matan, a young man who arrived in the UK as a young teenager, following his degree founded the second organization, ATM. A transnational youth organization created in late 2009 and early 2010 in London, ATM focuses predominantly on campaigning against ‘tribalism’ or clan divisions among Somalis. With offices in London, Nairobi, Mogadishu and in several US cities, its activities are both local and transnational, ranging from fundraising for various charitable projects in Somalia, to training young Somalis to become role models in their communities. As Adam described, its ultimate aim was to promote ‘Somaliness, a pan-Somali identity’ and to ‘breakdown what our parents tell us about tribe’, emphasizing its difference to the community organizations of the older generations. According to Adam, tribe was impeding the prosperity and progress of Somalia. Like LSYF, ATM receives funding from local authorities, DfID, the Home Office and FCO. Over the years they have worked closely with politicians, including Angie Bray, the former Conservative MP for Central Ealing and Acton. ATM has been critiqued for being too closely aligned with government, or for being pro-Somalia – a claim that Adam dismissed during our discussion by stating, ‘all these political issues, Somalia, Somaliland don’t affect me.’

Both organizations became involved in the later stages of the campaign. In early September 2013, LSYF published a report entitled *Putting Lives at Risk*, which sought to inform a Ministerial meeting, and subsequent roundtable discussion on the remittance issue chaired by DfID. Endorsed by 21 Somali organizations in the UK, including ATM, the writers of the report presented themselves as ‘representatives of the British Somali community.’ Meanwhile ATM had been commissioned by DfID to work alongside consultant Beechwood International to conduct a series of community consultations which would eventually inform the *Safer Corridors Rapid Assessment*:

*Somalia and UK* report.<sup>5</sup> ATM and LSYF's involvement in these initial stages positioned them as close interlocutors of the government, and, as I describe in a later section, they were eventually invited to join as 'community representatives' the UK-Somali Safer Corridor Pilot Project.

On the one hand, the political activities of the campaigners are illustrative of the importance of political institutions in providing resources for, and a model of, organizing (Ireland 1994). Young Somalis have built organizations that have benefited from government policies and funding opportunities around integration, security, and foreign development, and in turn this has enabled them to engage politically. On the other hand, as Peró (2008) has argued, migrant agency should not be ignored when understanding the 'how' and 'why' of political mobilization, as networks and social capital, political socialization, living and working conditions, experiences and values also shape the ways in which migrants negotiate institutional norms and practices, and mobilize around an issue. As this section has revealed, young Somalis were able to network and avail of their social capital not only with local Labour political figures, but also with international organizations such as Oxfam and Adeso. These transnational ties facilitated their political practices but also significantly provided them also with a normative frame of reference in their campaign (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003: 772). As I describe in what follows, the campaigners presented themselves through transnational notions of diaspora engagement in order to effectively raise awareness of the closures of the remittance accounts.

## **DIASPORA AS SMALL-SCALE DEVELOPMENT ACTORS**

In the early stages of the campaign, as part of the *Save Remittance Giving* campaign, the Tower Hamlets Labour Party Office, with the support of various other activists, designed a postcard that would circulate with the petition. The postcard invited supporters to write to their MPs about the remittance closures. The image on the postcard was also reproduced on the online [change.org](https://www.change.org) petition. Set on a red

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<sup>5</sup> The report was hugely controversial and sparked heated debates between a number of Somali community and youth groups and the authors of the report. ATM eventually withdrew its support of the report.

background – the colour of the Labour Party – the leaflet hints at, but makes no direct reference, or claims of affiliation, to the party. At the centre of the leaflet is the image of a young Somali boy, whose mouth is being held open by an older woman – presumably his mother or female relative. A hand comes out of the top left hand corner of the image and stands in for the ‘helping hand’ of the diaspora. The photograph is taken in a rural setting, and resembles the many sensationalist images employed by the media and charitable organizations to attract aid donations. The only difference here is that the feeding hand is that of a black (presumably Somali) man or woman, as opposed to the helping hand of a white donor. The power inequalities between the diaspora and locals reproduce the dichotomies between an affluent Westerner and an underdeveloped, vulnerable African – the diaspora present themselves as the ‘helping hand’ and the source of financial and humanitarian support. The slogan ‘Save Remittance Giving Campaign’, I was told by one of the campaigners, was designed to evoke the Muslim notion of *sadaqah* (voluntary alms) and refer to two forms of charitable giving: remittances from the diaspora to relatives back home, and the help that UK citizens could give to Somalis by signing the petition. The support of the diaspora is presented as a charitable act, and hence as small-scale and piecemeal, and directed towards families and local communities.

The message conveyed through the postcard – that remittances are a ‘lifeline’ to the region, without which Somalis will plunge into a humanitarian crisis – draws on the familiar trope of the diaspora as humanitarian agents. The message was also repeated in most of the letters, petitions and other campaign material, and in much of the media reporting on the issue. Abdirashid Duale, CEO of the Dahabshiil Group similarly echoed these statements in his several public interventions that took place throughout 2013 and 2014. At an event organized by the Overseas Development Institute in April 2014 he insisted that the issue was a ‘development one’. ‘It all started with 9/11 with increasing regulation. And we are where we are today, where it may be difficult to help your family...’ He continued by explaining that the UK government might not want to provide more aid, and that remittances constituted one way to allow people to help themselves, by setting up businesses, trade, and acting independently. His comment reiterated the role of the diaspora as development agents involved in helping families and communities ‘back home.’



The campaigners did highlight other detrimental effects of the closures. For example, NGOs pointed to their use of remittance accounts to pay their staff and to issue cash transfers across the region, and the difficulties they would face with the closures. However, the main focus of the campaign remained on the detrimental humanitarian consequences of losing diaspora contributions to their families and communities back home. My aim in highlighting this element is not to deny that this would have been the case should the accounts have been closed, but to highlight the effectiveness of this narrative in mobilizing the government. By resonating with mainstream understandings of diaspora as humanitarian actors involved in small-scale initiatives, these narratives lent persuasiveness and credibility to the campaign.

Presenting the diaspora as agents involved in locally based activities which target families, communities, home-towns and regions of origin suggests that the diaspora are primarily motivated by kinship, ethnic or national obligations (Sinatti and Horst 2014: 7). It presumes that ethnic or national belonging of diaspora communities necessarily entails a commitment, not only to kin, but to the homeland (Kleist 2013: 301-302), revealing a 'sedentary bias' – an idea that migrants belonging to an ethnic group and will eventually return home to their places of origin (Malkki 1992). Diaspora engagements are thus cast as 'natural', and are thought of in national, and ethnic terms (Sinatti and Horst 2014: 9). Whilst this might be true of some Somalis in the UK, it does not adequately capture the varied motivations that drove individuals to take part in the campaign. It fails to highlight the fact that the diaspora are complexly situated actors with a range of economic, political, religious and social interests and motivations.

Many of the campaigners did account for their involvement in the campaign as motivated by personal concerns for their families and local communities, thus fashioning themselves according to mainstream tropes of the diaspora. A young man who had worked with ATM and LSYF throughout the campaign explained, 'First and foremost, for me it's personal, I send money to immediate family... it's a link back home'. Another young person involved stressed that she had joined out of 'selfish reasons... so that my granny can continue to receive our money.' However, many also introduced a range of overlapping explanations. The young man mentioned above explained: I'm also Muslim, and for Muslims it's important to give to those in need...

there's an obligation to contribute.' Whilst many emphasized the personal dimension first, others justified their involvement as a religious obligation, a concern for the state (Somalia or Somaliland) as we saw in Farah's case, or as a universalist concern for 'humanity'. As a young man who took part in the initial SOMSA meetings explained, 'it's got to do with humanity first and foremost, a concern with all human kind.' These overlapping, political, religious or humanist explanations were however downplayed throughout the campaign in favour of kinship motivations.

Furthermore, diaspora activities were presented as small in scale, carried out by volunteers involved in *sadaqa* (charitable activities) and hence somewhat lacking in 'professionalism' (Sinatti and Horst 2014). Whilst some of the younger campaigners sought to challenge these representations, the campaign perpetuated the notion that contributions were channelled primarily towards subsistence costs for families. Hence diaspora support was presented as driven by a sense of kin obligation not political or commercial interests – something I return to in the final sections.

Downplaying other motivations by drawing on these narratives also had another effect on the campaign. The slogan 'let Somalis help themselves', which was reiterated on numerous occasions throughout the campaign, sums up the message of the protestors: Somalis were not seeking more help or money from Western governments, they were simply asking to be able to continue to support their own families and communities. They were presenting themselves as agents involved in an individualized and personalized form of development, underlining the role of the diaspora as crucial non-state development actors. By emphasizing the idiom of self-sufficiency, the campaigners positioned themselves both as neoliberal agents, and grassroots activists (Lindley 2010: 5). Inserting themselves within these narratives about the diaspora, the activists aligned the campaign with mainstream narratives produced by the government, NGOs and other development agencies. They crafted an 'imagined community' based on notions of diaspora and neoliberal development which positioned them hierarchically *vis-à-vis* kin in the Somali regions, and as key actors in relation to development agencies and the UK government.

## **A PROFESSIONAL DIASPORA**

In his work on temporary returnees to Somaliland, Hansen (2013) describes how many left the Somali regions before the civil war and have since returned to work in the international development sector, presenting themselves as ‘professionals’ and as modern political subjects. The notion of ‘professionalism’ emphasizes ‘development’, ‘modernization’, and ‘democratization’ and stands in opposition to clan-based politics (Hansen 2013). It positions these returnees as distinct from local populations through notions of class, status and Western education. This notion of ‘professionalism’, I suggest, is similarly employed by young second generation Somalis, who shape themselves as ‘good diaspora’ subjects. They do so by reacting to local, national and international discourses and policies which position them as fragmented, biased and hence lacking in objectivity. The term, therefore, is not employed to refer to professionalization as a social process (Escobar 1988), but rather to indicate a term used as part of a strategy of self-presentation. Emphasizing professionalism, by stressing unity and impartiality, was central to the later stages of the campaign, as the young Somali activists introduced above pushed to be recognized as legitimate ‘community representatives’ in the DfID-led project.

As mentioned above, European relief and development actors often insist that diaspora-organized assistance is fragmented and does not adhere to principles of impartiality and neutrality (Horst 2013: 229). The fragmented nature of Somalis has also long been a concern for the UK government, which has sought to promote and encourage unity based on ethnic groupings. As Griffiths et al (2006: 892) note, local councils in the UK, influenced by a race relations and multicultural paradigm, have been driven by a need to address ‘unified and readily identifiable refugee communities’. Government officials often bemoan the fragmented nature of the Somali diaspora, and the absence of a single representative for the community. As a representative from the Somalia Unit at the FCO commented in an interview ‘Somali diaspora groups are really impressive... when they work together that is... which is one of the main hurdles of the diaspora’.

Young Somali activists have responded to these narratives about the diaspora by stressing their unity and integration in the host society, as well as their impartiality and political neutrality in national and international issues. Critiques of clan have

played a crucial part in these processes, and also served as a strategy to present themselves as distinct to the older generation. As we have seen, Adam Matan emphasizes the importance of eradicating clan in order to ‘progress’. Similarly, Farah Hassan insists that unlike her family she is disinterested in clan, preferring instead to ‘contribute’ to the development of the Somaliland nation state. For many young people, pan-Somali unity is used primarily to refer to inter-clan unity. These young activists shape themselves *vis-à-vis* the older generation in the UK and the Somali regions, for whom, they claim, community work and political activism are divided along clan lines.

Although clan divisions are seen as problematic for these young activists, regional and political divisions do not necessarily challenge their professionalism or objectivity. Hence Farah like many other young people freely emphasized her allegiance with Somaliland, whereas other young individuals involved in the campaign stressed a Somalia national identity. On the one hand, these young people view clan divisions as problematic and draw on a discourse of professionalism, unity and impartiality. On the other, they view political divisions as fully compatible with this discourse as long as these divisions can be temporarily suspended when necessary.

Throughout the campaign, the activists realized the necessity of publicly emphasizing community and ethnic unity; in the various petitions, reports and documents emphasis was placed on presenting the issue as a ‘community problem.’ As one of the activists explained, ‘when we delivered the campaign to 10 Downing street it wouldn’t have looked good to just have Rushanara and the remittance companies there. We needed to create the sense that this was *a community issue*, that the community were worried about this.’

Putting aside their own political orientations, the campaigners also stressed the importance of pan-Somali unity, underlining the way in which the campaign brought Somalis together across clans, regional and political divisions. Political and regional divisions were temporarily cast aside for the benefit of the campaign. For example, criticisms of ATM as supporters of the Mogadishu government, and of CSO as Somalilanders, were silenced and many of the activists sought to downplay internal

divisions. As a young man noted, ‘what helped with the campaign is that we were all on the same level... there were no issues of tribalism, regionalism, we were all a mixed group in terms of gender and other things, but we were all young professionals, members of civil society who were concerned with a particular issue...’ Whereas the older generation are presented by young people as concerned with issues of ‘tribalism’ and ‘regionalism’, the younger generation, as modern and enlightened subjects, present themselves as agents able to privatize and hence transcend these divisions.

By emphasizing their unity and professionalism, these young Somalis were drawing on a multicultural framework which conflates ethnicity and culture with reified and bounded notions of community, and using it as a political resource for their campaign (Baumann 1996). They were also reacting to a development discourse which casts the diaspora as ‘unprofessional’ and hence legitimizing their position as community ‘representatives’. Moreover, by de-emphasizing clan allegiances, and to some extent political and regional affiliations, they were presenting themselves as inclusive, objective and neutral in their political orientation (Horst 2013). The activists’ involvement as ‘community representatives’ in the government Action Group, provided further evidence of their impartiality, objectivity and expertise on diaspora and community issues, and hence positioned them as ‘good’ national and transnational partners. Yet, their involvement remained constrained within notions of ‘community’ and, as I elaborate in the final section, by emphasizing their impartiality, the activists were also forced to exclude the involvement of Dahabshiil – the largest Somali remittance company – from the campaign.

## **THE ISSUE OF BIG BUSINESS**

In September 2013, during a DfID roundtable discussion on the remittance crisis, a large demonstration took place outside Parliament. Among the many supporters was a diverse group of Somalis holding placards stating, for example, ‘Freedom to Support our Families’. The event was organized by the chairperson of SOMSA, who, alongside local campaigners, had been in charge of sorting out the placards. The gathering was unproblematic for most, but a few campaigners complained about the

colour of the banners. Whilst the writing on the signs made no mention of Dahabshiil, they were printed on light green cardboard, the colour of the company's logo. Similarly to the Labour leaflet mentioned above, the colour was suggestive of the association of the campaign with the largest Somali remittance company.

In the initial stages of the campaign, Dahabshiil's dominance had not been a concern for those involved. Representatives from Dahabshiil had been the first to mobilize the 'community', and raise awareness about the issue. Furthermore, the company provided essential resources, office space and support throughout these early stages. Young volunteers in Tower Hamlets had been asked directly by the Dahabshiil office to engage in the campaign. 'They said they needed people like me to get involved in the community', a young campaigner explained, noting Dahabshiil's involvement in crafting the campaign as a community initiative.

However, as the campaign progressed and other remittance companies began to join, Dahabshiil's dominance was disputed by a small minority of those involved. Some of these stressed that the company's interference contradicted the 'community' image of the campaign. 'They used the community to support their aims... they don't really care,' argued a young man who had become disillusioned with the campaign. Resentment also came from other money transfer companies who felt that Dahabshiil had become the 'spokesperson of the campaign' and was using the issue for advertisement purposes. Others worried that Dahabshiil had taken over SOMSA and marginalized the other companies.

The most forceful critique, however, came from the government who strongly opposed the alliance of community activists with Somali finance capital. In comments made in one of the early consultations with the Somali campaigners, and reinforced in the *Factsheet on Somali Remittances* issued in October 2013, the government insisted that the closures of the accounts would not cause a 'humanitarian catastrophe' as the campaigners had suggested. It was best to have several small Somali remittance companies, rather than a large company that dominated almost three-quarters of the market. If small companies closed down, then others would pick up their share of the market, and an intervention by the UK government would not be required.

Some of the activists present responded forcefully to these claims, arguing that they did not want the current system to fail, and did not wish to see Dahabshiil disappear from the market. As one of the campaigners explained to me, ‘no one would have criticized British people for supporting British Airways, so why can’t we support Dahabshiil because it’s a Somali firm?!’ According to government logic, however, if the campaign were really about the humanitarian impact of the closures on families and communities, then the commercial interests of Dahabshiil ought to be irrelevant to the campaigners. Furthermore, if the campaigners insisted on defending the company, then they failed to prioritize the interests of the ‘community’. In construing themselves as a ‘good diaspora’ – as humanitarian actors and as unified and impartial – the activists were being forced to exclude the interests of big businesses from the campaign.

The incompatibility of large business interests with this particular notion of the ‘good diaspora’ that I have described above needs to be contrasted with the mainstream views of the diaspora, and of Dahabshiil, held in the Somali regions and abroad. During my interviews with public officials in Somaliland, I was repeatedly told about the diaspora’s role in public and private investments in the region. The diaspora were spoken about in terms of the skills and capital they brought to the country and were often presented as key economic and political players, who contributed to the building of the Somaliland nation-state. Reflecting this perspective, the diaspora’s involvement in the remittance crisis was often described not as a concern for UK-based activists, but as an issue for the private sector, and hence for Dahabshiil and other remittance companies abroad. As reflected by the quote comparing British Airways with Dahabshiil, several of the campaigners understand the diaspora in these terms, and view the Somali remittance businesses as an integral part of the diaspora.

Most Somalis also see remittance companies such as Dahabshiil as an inextricable part of the UK community. The LSYF report *Putting Lives at Risk*, for example, states that ‘MSBs are part of us. They are an integral and critical part of our community’. Often spoken about as a successful diaspora business story, many see Dahabshiil in particular as a ‘home grown’ solution that has been able to thrive despite the conflict

and the absence of involvement from the international community (Lindley 2010).<sup>6</sup> Dahabshiil group is one of the richest companies in the Somali regions, and as mentioned earlier, a symbol self-sufficiency, of Somali families ‘helping themselves.’ The company is a family business and the CEO, who is based for most of the year in London, regularly attends or supports local events and projects organized by Somali groups. Many refer to the CEO by name, and individuals, businesses and NGOs that use its services often stress their ‘trust’ in the company as a reason for using its services. As part of its corporate social responsibility Dahabshiil is also involved in various social projects across the Somali regions. Several whom I spoke to in London and Somaliland went as far as suggesting that Dahabshiil was ‘a charitable organization’ because of these projects, and the access to financial services that they provided to the region.

For many Somalis the notion of ‘diaspora’ is more varied and includes investors, politicians, entrepreneurs, and professionals. By supporting Dahabshiil’s inclusion, the campaigners were initially drawing on this notion, and challenging ideas of the ‘good diaspora’ held by Western governments and development agencies. As the campaign progressed and criticism intensified, however, the ‘community representatives’ decided to distance themselves from Dahabshiil and from the money transfer sector as a whole. They prioritized the argument around the humanitarian impact and the community concerns around the closures, and thus continued to perpetuate the notion of the Somali diaspora as a community involved in small-scale activities, and as objective and neutral and thus incompatible with large commercial interests. In response to growing criticism, Dahabshiil strategically appointed as CEO a non-Somali and former CEO of Anglo-Irish Bank, shifting the image of the company from a Somali diaspora business, to a large multinational.

## **CONCLUSION**

Following the set up of the Action Group for Cross-Border remittances, public attention and interest in the campaign slowly waned. Public consultations and engagement events were held throughout 2014 to inform Somali communities across the country on the

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<sup>6</sup> Dahabshiil is the largest remittance company in the region with branches in 126 countries worldwide.



work of the Action Group, and over the year the community representatives continued to meet informally with more active campaigners to discuss progress on the safer corridor project. The design of the Safer Corridor, however, was repeatedly delayed and postponed until its official dismantling was announced in late 2015. Since then the U.S State department has taken over the management of the Safer Corridor, and the UK government strategy has shifted towards the long-term development of financial systems in the Somali regions.

Despite this, as I have argued in this article, the campaign marked a key moment among Somalis in the UK. It enabled them to fashion and imagine themselves as part of a young, unified and integrated community in Britain, and actively and professionally engaged 'back home'. It marked the rise of new forms of political mobilization, and the emergence of new 'political entrepreneurs' who forged and reified an 'imagined community' based around notions of a 'good diaspora'. A year later these same key individuals and organizations, who had participated in the remittance issue, were involved in launching a successful campaign which lobbied the UK government to ban the stimulant *khat* in the UK. The 'imagined community', which emerged throughout the remittance campaign, proved to be enduring and malleable. While campaigns and projects declined, lost momentum or changed focus, the ideas, discourses and categories, which were mobilized to construct an imagined community, endured and were adapted towards other ends.

Adamson (2012) has argued that, unlike other transnational political activities, diasporas seek 'particularism' rather than 'universalism' even if this often unfolds on the basis of a universal ideology such as nationalism. As we have seen, the actors involved in the campaign made 'particularist' claims, advocating for pan-Somali unity among young Somalis in Britain. However, they simultaneously presented themselves as global players, and as objective, impartial and transnational 'professionals' involved in a humanitarian struggle. Their aspirations were at once localized and particular as well as globalized and universal. Through the campaign, they challenged mainstream ideas of the diaspora as fragmented, biased and politicized, but also reinforced a development framework which juxtaposes the diaspora with western development institutions. According to this logic, diasporic subjects are expected to 'professionalize' in order to be incorporated within the policy and development

sectors (Sinatti and Horst 2014). Young activists sought to demonstrate the ways in which they, unlike the rest of the diaspora, had been able to transform themselves into professional actors, and hence deserved to be recognized as ‘representatives’ of their community and as stakeholders in the DfID-led Safer Corridor initiative. The ability to shape themselves in these ways, I suggest, signals a shift in forms of youth mobilization in the UK and positions the young campaigners as new political actors in multicultural Britain. In contrast to the older generations, these young activists claim to have transformed themselves – in the words of the LSYF director – ‘from hard to reach communities, to communities that are asking questions of the government’.

Furthermore, the ‘political entrepreneurs’ involved in the campaign navigated social categories of ‘diaspora’ and ‘ethnic migrant community’ that have tended to be treated as distinct both in the literature on political mobilization, and in public discourse. The FCO representative mentioned above, for example, labelled Somalis as ‘unwilling migrants’ who are looking to return ‘home’, suggesting they had never fully settled or sought to integrate and belong to Britain. This view is also reflected in the literatures on integration and transnationalism. Despite research indicating the compatibility of transnational activities and integration (Hammond 2013a), transnational engagements are often viewed as a sign that diaspora actors are not integrated, and vice-versa. As the campaign demonstrated, it was precisely by fashioning themselves as unified, impartial and integrated in Britain, that the campaigners were able to engage in transnational activities and present the views of relatives and communities ‘back home’ who would be affected by the closures of the accounts.

Yet, the campaign also demonstrated some of the limits of the identity categories adopted by those involved. As we have seen, the narratives on diaspora engagement assume that the diaspora act as impartial and united community actors involved in small-scale, development and community-based activities. By emphasizing these elements of diaspora engagement, the campaigners were encouraged to avoid making demands that could be deemed to be based on economic interests. Mainstream notions of diaspora engagement, I have shown, prioritize certain forms of activities, and do not allow sufficient space to account for the complexities of migrants’ lives. They ignore the fact that migrants may hold a range of motivations for engaging in issues affecting the ‘homeland’, and may be involved in diverse, at times conflicting

activities, for example simultaneously supporting families back home, taking part in small-scale community initiatives *and* managing large corporations.

Furthermore, these imagined notions of the 'good diaspora' also rely on hierarchies across generations and between communities in the UK and the Horn. The young campaigners stressed their 'professionalism' in relation to both kin 'back home' who rely on their contributions, and older generations of Somalis, who were presented as divided along clan lines and unable to effectively participate in British society. This narrative has the effect of downplaying the political activities of the older generation and thus potentially delegitimizing their political claims. 'Imagined communities', this article has shown, are forged by engaging with local, national and transnational discourses, but also involve re-imagining one's own community in relation to multiple others, including, in this case, older generations of Somalis, and kin 'back home'. These constructions are at once empowering and enabling, as demonstrated by the campaign, but can also exclude and marginalize those who are not viewed as 'good diaspora' subjects.

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