

# **Separated Children, Exile and Home-Country Links: The Example of Somali Children in the Nordic Countries**

A Report commissioned by Save the Children  
for the Separated Children in Europe Programme

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2002



This report was commissioned by Save the Children Denmark, with Save the Children Norway and Sweden, as a contribution to the Separated Children in Europe Programme (SCEP). The SCEP aims to realise the rights and best interests of separated children and young people who have come across Europe, by establishing a shared policy and commitment to best practice at national and European levels. As a part of this process the programme has commissioned several studies. The programme hopes that this study will contribute to the understanding of the situation of a specific group of separated children living in the Nordic Countries.

## **SEPARATED CHILDREN, EXILE AND HOME-COUNTRY LINKS**

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Research and information regarding the experience of Save the Children Sweden is extensively referred to in this report. For further information contact Eva Larsson-Bellander, e-mail [eva.larsson.bellander@rb.se](mailto:eva.larsson.bellander@rb.se)

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Separated children and young people come in considerable numbers to European countries seeking asylum, an escape from dire poverty, or as victims of trafficking. They are separated from their parents or other primary caretakers. The Separated Children in Europe Programme (SCEP) was formed in 1997 as a joint initiative of Save the Children Alliance Members and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Save the Children organisations in the Nordic countries have been developing projects to facilitate home-country links and voluntary repatriation for separated young people from the Horn of Africa, more particularly, Somalia. These initiatives have been a response to the perception that many separated African children in the Nordic countries are struggling to integrate and could benefit from opportunities to renew contact with their home country and explore the potential for future return. According to 1999 figures, some 120,000 Somalis live in the European Union, with the majority living in Great Britain, Netherlands, Sweden, Italy, Denmark and Finland. The bulk of separated Somali children is also presumed to be found in these countries.

Alliance members identified a need for further research into the issues surrounding home-country links and voluntary return for separated children, taking Somalia as an example. The objectives of the research were to acquire a better understanding of the mechanisms at work in the home country that result in the movement of separated children and to solicit views on the impact of separation and voluntary return from separated children and young people, "settled" young people and staff in Europe, as well as parents, agencies, and individuals in Somalia. In addition, issues relating to cultural difference and identity formation in exile were explored, in order to see how these might affect separated children in the process of renewing contacts with their home country and affect their thinking about the future. Interviews were carried out in Denmark and Somalia in May-June 2001. A mixture of primary and secondary research, this study is likely to be of particular interest to practitioners who wish to study home-visit schemes for separated children.

### **SOMALIAN CONTEXT**

The civil war in Somalia destroyed much of its infrastructure and there is currently no central government, although there are regional and local governments that are expanding their authority in some areas. Conditions in southern Somalia are not suitable to support the return of separated children, and in certain parts security remains a serious issue. Recent conflicts in 2001 have resulted in a renewed exodus of refugees to Kenya. Somaliland in the northwest, however, has been peaceful for the last few years and can support home-country link/return projects for separated children and young people, depending on personal circumstances.

Somaliland declared independence in 1991, but has not been recognised internationally.

The Arta Conference in Djibouti in 2000 established a Somali Transitional National Government (TNG). This conference was, however, boycotted by some Somalis, and there exists a coalition of parties in the south that is opposed to the TNG. The TNG has not established any degree of authority in the south of the country. Somalia experiences some of the lowest indicators of human development in the world. Life expectancy is 48 years, the child mortality rate of all children aged 0-5 is over 20%, adult literacy is at most 24%, and the average per capita income is \$120 US. In all of Somalia an estimated 10 per cent of school age children are enrolled in school, although the percentage is likely to be higher in the north due to progress made in re-establishing schools. Conditions are generally better in Somaliland, but humanitarian aid remains essential for food security and many thousands of returning refugees live in precarious conditions.

## **SEPARATED CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS IN DENMARK**

Interviews were carried out with 11 separated children living in three Danish children's Homes and with 4 young settled adults. All but three came from southern Somalia. Just over half were aged 10 or under when they left Somalia and most spent periods of time in Ethiopia or Kenya where, because of the armed conflict, they had fled with members of their families. The situation in Kenya was quite precarious for many Somalis, who were subject to grave dangers in refugee camps and police harassment in cities. Personal safety and access to education were the main reasons cited for the decision to send a child to Europe, usually together. In two cases, direct persecution and fear of forced recruitment were cited.

Most of the children and young people were too young to have participated in the discussions leading to their departure. However, since the consensus amongst those interviewed was that Somali parents would not generally consult their children in decisions of this kind, this was not expected. Most of the children and young adults have phone contact with a parent(s), and some have visited Somalia in the last two years. These visits had clearly been very significant.

There was considerable variation in the degree to which children and young people felt at ease in Denmark, had Danish friends, were doing well in school, and felt positive about their futures. Problems related to racism were frequently cited, and some felt they faced discrimination in the work world. However, appreciation for many aspects of life in Denmark, such as peace and safety, democracy, education and social support, as well as the high standard of living, was also expressed. All but two of the children and young people in the Homes had educational goals – vocational, technical or professional – and most of the young adults had achieved their educational goals and had a positive outlook on their future.

Most of the children were sending money to their parents and families, and in some cases parents relied heavily on this contribution. Two of the young adults had been reunited with one or both parents in Denmark. Two interviewees were certain they would return to Somalia and four others wished to do so, given the right conditions there. Six persons were fairly certain they would not return but would make their lives in the West. Feelings of uncertainty and ambivalence about what connections with Somalia would be possible in the future were common, given the difficult situation there, particularly in southern Somalia.

## **PARENTS**

Only four parents were interviewed: one by the researcher, and three by a SCD Somali staff person. Two parents had not been involved in making the decision to send their children to Europe because they had previously been separated from them by the armed conflict. In all cases parents' main concerns were to get their children to safety and to a situation where they could have some hope for the future. The impact of the separations was particularly hard for two mothers who were widowed or divorced. None of the parents felt it was possible for their children to return due to the ongoing conflict, the lack of services in southern Somalia, or their inability to provide for the children. Three hoped their children would return to Somalia when they had achieved educational goals, while a fourth parent wished to be reunited with her children in Denmark. Not surprisingly, parents possessed a limited understanding of what life in exile was like for their children.

## **STAFF IN DENMARK**

Many of the staff members had somewhat pessimistic views as to whether separated Somali children would be able to have a good future in Denmark. They felt that it would be better for some children to return if it was safe to do so, and had concerns that a couple of the children might face serious difficulties if they were to remain. The "type" of young person living in the Homes has changed. Previously, they came directly from asylum centres with the usual refugee problems and perspective, but in recent years children have also been placed in the Homes following the breakdown of family situations in Denmark. Staff may not feel competent to deal with these new issues. Somali staff expressed this by pointing out that they were hired to help children maintain cultural links and form a bridge with the parents and were not trained in pedagogical approaches neither to deal with psychological problems. Overall, staff expressed difficulties in being accepted as authority figures by the children and gaining their respect. One person thought that excessive feelings of pity undermined staff ability to set boundaries and have higher expectations of children.

The response of some sections of the Danish population towards refugees, particularly



the older generation, can be one of rejection. Refugees and migrants from African countries are a relatively recent phenomenon and some people have had difficulties accepting foreigners, thinking they should become Danish as quickly as possible. Separated children can receive mixed messages: on the one hand, they should integrate, even assimilate, and on the other, they face a rejection of their culture, race and religion. The educational system is not sufficiently adapted for refugee children and some have difficulties acquiring qualifications. Since there is generous state support, one person felt that Somali children could succeed, if they were motivated to study.

According to staff, parents in Somalia are preoccupied with their children's educational progress, with their maintaining religious practices and cultural values, and with whether their children can help them by sending remittances. Some children wish to return, but parents do not want them back: they have sacrificed a great deal to send them away and wish them to acquire an education and good financial prospects before returning. Without first-hand knowledge of the problems refugees face in the West – loneliness, language, culture shock, racism – parents cannot understand their children's difficulties. Staff were positive about the impact of the visits to Somalia, and felt these links were vital to help children connect with their families and culture and to form a realistic picture of life there.

## **SOMALILAND**

While most people interviewed felt that young Somalis returning from exile in the West could offer needed skills and resources, this group is not a priority for officials or agencies. Priority is accorded to the thousands of refugees who are being repatriated from refugee camps and whose situation is quite precarious. Concerns were expressed about the behaviour of some young returnees who had adopted Western ways, having a lack of respect for elders, unacceptable sexual mores, etc. Clearly return is accompanied by a second culture shock that is unavoidable and needs to be planned for. Some interviewees were concerned about the situation facing several young Somalis who had been sent back to Somaliland on the pretext of a visit and who were then told they must remain there: some were in very vulnerable situations. Discussions with organisations showed that there is a willingness to work with separated young people from the diaspora in the West and that there are a range of potential activities that could be developed, including family visits, skill training, volunteering, bringing needed material resources and skills, etc. Two youth agencies are presently in a position to offer support for young people with problems connected with reintegration and family relationships.

## **THE MIGRATION CONTINUUM – CULTURAL DIFFERENCE, IDENTITY AND THE RESPONSES OF THE COUNTRY OF EXILE**

Renewing contact with one's homeland and return migration are part of a continuum that began with the initial departure from the home country, and is influenced by the reasons for departure, the hopes and intentions surrounding life in the new country, one's life and adaptation in the receiving country, links with parents and family in the homeland, and the prevailing social, political and economic conditions there.

Separated children are in exile during key stages of their development: they must make a bridge between two cultures and, to some degree, are likely to identify with both. The age at which a child or young person has left Somalia and arrived in the West will also influence their feelings of attachment to their home country and the degree to which they feel identified with their country of exile. This is part of the dilemma of "return." They cannot go back to how they were: they are changed, their country has changed in their absence, and their compatriots who have not been in exile, have radically different experiences. When anyone – child or adult – returns to their country of origin, they bring with them the experiences, strengths, vulnerabilities, behaviour, knowledge and skills they have "acquired" while abroad. They also carry the memories associated with loss, violence, or persecution. The experience of exile embodies the mediation of the "culture clash," the ongoing process of identity formation in childhood and adolescence, and the responses of the host society that encourage or inhibit integration and participation in that society. The tenor of a young person's reintegration in their home country will in part reflect these realities.

Some of the challenges facing those who seek to return can be summarised as: the loss of friends and the adopted culture; the second culture shock of being treated as different by local compatriots; the rejection by the home country of "Western" behaviour—this is particularly acute for girls; the identity problems associated with moving between two cultures; the lack of understanding by locals of the problems arising from exile in the West; the lack of support for reintegration to one's home country; the failure to live up to parental expectations, i.e. to carry out missions or to bring money and gifts; the poor health and education services and the significant differences between educational systems in the West and the developing world; ongoing political instability, unemployment and poverty.

The SCEP's *Statement of Good Practice* makes clear that a long-term or durable solution for a separated child (whether in the country of asylum or the home country) must repose on solid foundations combining guardianship, appropriate care, education and healthcare, a bi-cultural approach, family tracing and contact, a child-friendly asylum process, and a careful examination of the conditions in a child's homeland. The need for international protection – be it for refugee, humanitarian, or other status – is of paramount consideration.

Those working with separated children can assist them to mediate between two cultures and explore whether the child's culture of origin contains any protective elements that can

assist the child to deal with separation and loss. The example was given of the Somali nomadic tradition of prolonged absences from the immediate family. Each culture or sub-culture can be seen to have a "locus of continuity" around which migrants and refugees may structure their experience of exile/immigration: e.g. the dream of return, family unity, or the accomplishment of a family mission.

## **HOME-COUNTRY LINKS**

Nordic agencies such as Save the Children Sweden (SCS) and Denmark have created home-country link projects for separated children. SCS has organised three journeys to Somalia and neighbouring countries for separated young adults. Each journey was more ambitious than the one preceding. The first was about re-establishing family ties and seeing conditions in Africa; the second focused on work experience placements; the last, although discontinued, incorporated skills training and work experience. This reflects the views of many interviewees who felt that the idea of return can be problematic for separated children, since it places too much emphasis on a single outcome as opposed to a process, in which a young person explores opportunities for the future in relation to both countries of origin and exile. Children have been changed by their time in exile and each young person must find a solution to the experience of being caught between two countries and cultures. Visits to the home country that permit young people to learn about the situation there, renew family links, face fears and old pains, and connect to their culture of origin, are generally of great value for them and should be seen as the first step in a process whose outcome cannot be known.

In addition to exploring the range of options with local agencies and with parents and families, concerted efforts to involve young Somalis in exile in the exploratory and planning process will be key to carrying this work forward.

# 1

## INTRODUCTION

### SEPARATED CHILDREN IN EUROPE PROGRAMME

This research was commissioned by Save the Children organisations working in the Separated Children in Europe Programme (SCEP). The SCEP is a joint initiative of International Save the Children Alliance members in Europe and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. The programme is based on the complementary mandates and areas of expertise of the two organisations. The SCEP aims to realise the rights and best interests of separated children and young people who have come to Europe, or across Europe. It is working for a shared policy and commitment to the best practice at national and European levels in the 15 EU member states as well as the 13 Central European and Baltic states.

The SCEP defines separated children and young people as:

*"children under 18 years of age who are outside their country of origin and separated from both parents, or their legal/customary caregiver. Some children are totally alone while others, who are also the concern of the SCEP, may be living with extended family members. All such children are separated children and entitled to international protection under a broad range of international and regional instruments. Separated children may be seeking asylum because of fear of persecution or the lack of protection due to human rights violations, armed conflict, or disturbances in their own country. They may be the victims of trafficking for sexual or other exploitation, or they may have travelled to Europe to escape conditions of serious deprivation."<sup>1</sup>*

## BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

Save the Children organisations in the Nordic countries have been developing projects aimed to facilitate home-country links and voluntary repatriation for separated young people from the Horn of Africa, and, more particularly, from Somalia. A description of some of these projects can be found in Chapter 6. These initiatives have been a response to the perception that many separated African children in the Nordic countries are struggling to integrate and could benefit from opportunities to renew contact with their home country and explore the potential for future return. The projects have developed during a time when the European Union has established the "High Level Working Groups." These groups were established to bring forth a range of recommendations regarding the six countries from which most asylum seekers come, in order to develop a coherent and comprehensive framework on development, immigration, and asylum. The *Action Plan for Somalia*<sup>2</sup> makes recommendations for supporting peace and reconciliation in Somalia, and provides for humanitarian and development aid as well. The long term goal is to enable the return of failed Somali asylum seekers and those who wish to return voluntarily.

Within this framework, European Save the Children Alliance members identified a need for further research into the issues surrounding home-country links and voluntary return for separated children, taking Somalia as an example. The objectives of the research project were:

- to acquire a better understanding of the mechanisms at work in the home country that result in the movement of separated children;
- to gather the views of parents in Somalia, of separated children and "settled" young people in Europe, on the impact of separation and exile on their lives, and on voluntary return and home-country links;
- to gather the views of staff in Denmark and agencies in Somalia on home-country links and voluntary return;
- to explore issues relating to cultural difference and identity formation in exile and how these might affect children and young people in the process of re-establishing home-country links.

The objectives of the research have been only partially realised due to the practical difficulties encountered. These are described in the methodology.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The example of Somalia was chosen due to Save the Children Denmark's (SCD) involvement with separated Somali children in Denmark and the existence of a SCD project in Somaliland, northwest Somalia and Save the Children Sweden's previous work regarding voluntary return and establishing home-country links with Somalia. It was proposed to carry out interviews with separated children and young people in three children's Homes, "settled" young adults, staff caring for children in Denmark, parents, and agencies in Somalia. Certain practical difficulties have restricted the scope of the research.

The researcher travelled to Denmark and to Somaliland in May-June 2001. Some of the children in Europe were ambivalent about being interviewed for various reasons, for example, they were nervous about the implications of the research or they were experiencing personal difficulties. Some had recently been interviewed by members of the media. Staff in the Homes explained the nature of the research to the children well in advance of interview dates and children were also provided with a list of questions. Most of the children's parents are located in southern Somalia, as are many agencies operating in Somalia, but it was not possible to travel there due to serious security risks affecting expatriates. The researcher was therefore limited to travel in Somaliland (northwest Somalia), but some planned meetings there did not materialise. In addition, appropriate organisations located in Mogadishu and Nairobi were contacted with relevant questions by electronic mail, but none responded.

### **INTERVIEWS WERE CARRIED OUT WITH THE FOLLOWING:**

- 11 children and young people in the children's Homes;
- 4 young adults who had come to Denmark as separated children;
- 7 staff of Red Barnet headquarters and in the children's Homes;
- 4 parents in Somalia. The researcher met with one parent in Somaliland. A Somali staff member from a Home was able to interview 3 parents from South Somalia during a home visit with young people from the children's Homes.
- in Somaliland (Hargeisa and Berbera), officials from 3 Somaliland government departments, 3 UN agencies and 4 local NGO's. Visits were also made to Mohamed Mooge Camp for returning refugees, three skill-training workshops and the Hargeisa Orphanage;
- one young person who had been returned to Somaliland by his parents who remained in Europe;
- a Somali social worker and a child psychiatrist working with refugee children in Canada.

## **CONTENTS OF REPORT**

The first chapter of this report provides background material on Somalia, particularly Somaliland. This material includes modern history, the course of the armed conflict and its impact, the current situation and conditions both for refugees returning from the camps and for children and young people. Chapter 3 analyses the interviews held with fifteen children and young people in Denmark, looking at experiences relating to their departure from Somalia, their life in Denmark, their contacts with parents, and their thoughts about the future. Chapter 4 contains material from interviews with adults, including children's parents in Somalia, staff in Denmark, and government, UN and NGO agencies in Somaliland. In Chapter 5 a number of interrelated themes are explored to help situate voluntary return/home-country links within the "migration continuum": the experiences of separated children and young people in relation to cultural difference and identity formation and the responses of the receiving society that encourage or inhibit integration in society. Chapter 6 reviews previous home-country link projects, the lessons learned from these. Chapter 7 contains conclusions and a small number of recommendations. Annex I provides a checklist of issues and questions to be considered within the framework of home-country links. A map of Somalia can be found in Annex III.

## **SEPARATED CHILDREN**

Separated refugee children and young people face a considerable number of challenges in their daily lives. It is within this context that the interview material in this report should be considered. First, there is the experience in their home country which resulted in flight or exile. The reasons<sup>3</sup> why separated children travel are numerous: armed conflict, persecution because of race, religion, ethnicity, political opinion or gender, child-specific human rights violations, such as being forcibly inducted as a child soldier or female genital mutilation, trafficking for exploitation, the death or disappearance of parents, family and institutional abuse, and extreme poverty. Next, there is the journey to the country of destination which can be long, arduous, and fraught with danger because of the means of travel (lorries, ships, on foot), because of hunger, illness, injury, or because of the actions of exploitative adults. Some unscrupulous smugglers are known to take callous risks with the lives of those they bring to foreign countries.

On arrival a child is disoriented and in shock, facing a strange land, culture, and language, without the support of family and friends. They must negotiate an array of bureaucratic systems and the all-too-often bewildering refugee determination process that takes little, if any, account of their status as children. They must discover the mores of an alien culture and adapt to an unfamiliar educational system. All this is normally carried out in a foreign language which they are endeavouring to learn. During their adaptation they are faced with some of the emotional consequences of their departure: grief and loss, guilt that they are safe while family may not be, uncertainty over the fate of those left behind, the sequellae of violence and persecution. They may be isolated from other members of their community

and will most certainly feel keenly the absence of family.

Most separated children are adolescents at a key transitional stage to adulthood which they must now face without the support of parents and their culture of origin. In this challenging phase of life they must endeavour to bridge two cultures with differing values, religions, and behaviour patterns. As is often the case, they come from traditional cultures without any significant period of adolescence, since the end of childhood marks the beginning of adult responsibilities. There is likely to be confusion about identity since they are faced with the challenge of breaching two different cultures. Finally, they may find that some citizens in their country of asylum are far from welcoming, as is attested by the disturbing incidents of anti-refugee racism frequently reported across Europe.

## Notes

1. *Statement of Good Practice*, Separated Children in Europe Programme, 1999, 2.1
2. *Action Plan for Somalia*, Council of the European Union, Brussels, September 30th 1999, 11427/99.
3. See: *Separated Children Coming to Western Europe: Why they travel and how they arrive*, Save the Children, Wendy Ayotte, 2000.



## 2

# BACKGROUND ON SOMALIA

The separated children and young people who were interviewed for this report are of Somali origin. The recent history, culture and conditions prevailing in a child's country of origin are important to consider in relation to home-country links and voluntary return projects. This chapter provides basic information on the recent history of Somalia, the impact of the armed conflict, Somali culture, and the current political, human rights, and economic situation. Details are also given on the situation of returning refugees, and the particular circumstances facing children in Somalia. Specific information, gathered during the research visit, is provided on Somaliland.

## HISTORY, CULTURE AND ARMED CONFLICT <sup>1</sup>

### **Population, Culture, Clan and Family Structures, Minorities**

Somalia is located in East Africa in the "Horn of Africa" (see Annex III). It borders with Djibouti and Ethiopia to the west/northwest and with Kenya to the south/southwest. It has an extensive coastal area along the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. As did many African countries who gained independence from colonial rule in the early 1960's, the Somali Republic came into being on July 1st 1960, when the British Somaliland protectorate in the north merged with Italian Somaliland in the south. The new republic did not include all ethnic Somalis, who were also found in large numbers in neighbouring east African countries, namely the Ogaden region of Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti. The Somali Republic comprises just over 637 thousand square kilometres of mainly arid savanna grassland with only 13 percent of the land suitable for cultivation (located primarily in southern Somalia). The population of Somalia was estimated at from 7-8 million in 1989, prior to the conflict, and in 1996, a UN population estimate placed it at 9.6 million. It is estimated that some two million ethnic Somalis live in the Ogaden, 100,000 in Djibouti and 240,000 in northern Kenya. There are many thousands of Somalis in the diaspora in Western, Arab and other African states.

Somalis are considered to be a Hamitic people of Cushitic culture who share the same language, Somali. The majority are Sunni Muslims – less than one percent is Christian. Until the 1990's, when the armed conflict caused the numbers of town dwellers to increase, approximately 60 percent of the population lived the life of nomadic pastoralists and seminomadic herders, while 20 percent were cultivators and the remaining 20 percent lived in towns, the largest of which is Mogadishu, the capital. Somali identity is derived from two genealogical roots: the Saab and the Samaale. The Samaale descent group comprises approximately 85 percent of the population and consists of four pastoral nomadic clan-families or tribes: the Dir, Darod, Issaq and Hawiye. The Saab are divided into two agricultural clans, the Digil and Rahanwayn. Although there are many areas where several clans cohabit, to a large extent clan location is geographically specific: the Issaq and Dir in the northwest, the Darod in the northeast, the Hawiye in south-central Somalia, the Digil and Rahanwayn in the southwest. The Darod are also found in the Ogaden region of Ethiopia and Kenya, the Dir in Djibouti, and the Hawiye in southern Somalia and Kenya.

While Somalia is usually represented as an ethnically homogeneous country, there are in fact several minorities<sup>2</sup> who inhabit the southern part of the country. One estimate calculated this minority population to form as much as one-third of the total population prior to the armed conflict. Two examples of these minority groups are: the Bantu Somalis, who are small-scale farmers or labourers descended from East African people brought as slaves in the 19th-century, and the Benadari, who are descended from migrant settlers of the Somali coast, probably from Yemen and beyond. They inhabit urban areas such as Brava on the southern coast.

Each clan is also divided into "agnatic" groups, or sub-clans, which trace their ancestry through male descent. Traditionally, Somalis, including children, can recite their family trees going back many generations. Somali family structure is patrilineal and polygamous—under Islamic law a Somali man can marry up to four wives, although the divorce rate is high. *"Each wife forms a separate unit with her children. The mother and her children have their own dwelling and. . . constitute the "uterine family"*<sup>3</sup>. Livestock or land is divided amongst the uterine families. Children in these family structures will thus have many half siblings on the paternal side. Somali families are large, and it is common for women to bear as many as 6-7 children. Both boys and girls are circumcised between the ages of 7 and 14. Nearly 100 percent of Somali females are circumcised<sup>4</sup> and an estimated 87 percent undergo the most radical form known as "Pharaohnic," or infibulation.

## **MODERN HISTORY AND ARMED CONFLICT**

After independence in 1960, tensions arose due to the way national borders had been drawn: clans and families were separated by borders and nomads were no longer able to cross these borders to graze. Clan-based political parties were formed which exacerbated

pre-existing rivalries and in turn undermined the rather shaky unity created by independence. *"The civilian administration that assumed power after independence became hopelessly corrupt and incompetent. On 21 October 1969 it was overthrown in a bloodless coup by Major General Siad Barre who adopted a socialist model ... under a 'Supreme Revolutionary Council.'"*<sup>5</sup> Barre turned to the Soviet Union which, along with the Socialist Party of Italy, became the main supporters of the regime. In order to create a "greater Somalia," Barre attempted to annex the Ogaden region from Ethiopia through an invasion in 1977. The Soviet Union, which was also an ally of Ethiopia, supported Ethiopia, which was subsequently able to defeat Barre and expel his forces in 1978. The regime then turned to the USA for backing. An agreement with the USA provided Barre with financial credits for general needs and military equipment. *"For ten years before the 1992 famine, Somalia was the largest recipient of aid in sub-Saharan Africa, in some years the third largest in the world"*<sup>6</sup> ... *But most of Somalia's 6 million people never saw a penny."*<sup>7</sup> Aid money was absorbed by a corrupt regime and its bureaucracy, or targeted within the population in order to shore up support for the regime. The standard of living stagnated, inflation soared and food production declined. The educational and health systems which had developed in the early phases of independence entered into a serious decline.

As opposition to the regime grew, the Barre dictatorship resorted to increasing violence in order to suppress it by mass executions, torture, and military attacks. Among the numerous clan based opposition groups, the Somali National Movement (SNM) in the Issaq northwest was targeted for brutal suppression. In 1988, both Hargeisa and Burao were bombed<sup>8</sup> resulting in a mass exodus of some 365,000 refugees to Ethiopia, the internal displacement of 60,000 people, and the deaths of an estimated 50-60,000 by government troops. The SNM later formed an alliance with the Hawiye-based United Somali Congress (USC) and the Somali Patriotic movement which finally defeated the Barre regime in January 1991.

Inter-clan rivalries filled the power vacuum created by Barre's defeat and southern Somalia was subjected to a fierce battle for control. In March of 1991, the northwestern part of Somalia ceded to form the Republic of Somaliland. In the south, two faction leaders of the USC fought in Mogadishu to gain the presidency of the country. By 1992, most of Somalia was in ruins with no government, police, or basic infrastructure. Looting and banditry were rife, and a severe drought, in addition to the armed conflict, resulted in the deaths of 300,000 people. Some two million people had been displaced because of the conflict, including 200,000 who fled to Kenya and 400,000 in Ethiopia.

In 1993, an international humanitarian mission was launched by the USA and the UN in order to get food aid to famine victims. This mission became embroiled in the Somali conflict, and after the deaths of many soldiers, (mainly Pakistani and US), all international forces were withdrawn in 1994.

## **Somaliland and Puntland**

Following the Somaliland declaration of independence in 1991, the SNM government was hampered by clan divisions and fighting. Finally in 1993, a National Council of Elders agreed on a national peace charter and a transitional structure for government. That year, Mohamed Egal, former Prime Minister of British Somaliland, was elected president. Factions opposed to Egal's government fought with government troops in Hargeisa, which conflict resulted in a fresh exodus of refugees to Ethiopia in 1994. Fighting spread to other parts of Somaliland, but peace talks eventually resulted in a new constitution for Somaliland, which was instituted in 1997. Egal was re-elected president that same year. Somaliland has been more or less peaceful since 1997, but to date, no state has recognised the "Republic" of Somaliland.

In 1998 the autonomous "Puntland State of Somalia" was proclaimed in northeastern Somalia, with a Parliament and charter providing for Puntland's intention to be part of a future federal Somali state. Tensions have existed in the border regions of Somaliland and Puntland.

## **South Somalia**

Throughout the 1990's, conflicts and rivalries have continued to plague southern Somalia. There have been several international efforts to restore peace and governance to Somalia, involving African states such as Ethiopia, Egypt and Djibouti, and the League of Arab States. The most recent initiative was the Arta peace conference in Djibouti in 2000. Nearly 2,000 delegates, including clan elders, religious leaders, businessmen and intellectuals attended. However, the Somaliland and Puntland authorities, as well as some southern clan faction leaders, boycotted the conference. The Arta conference created a constitution and Transitional National Assembly to see Somalia through a three-year transitional period. Representation in the TNA is structured along clan lines and 25 seats are reserved for women. TNA elected Abdiqassim Salad Hassan, a former Barre minister, as president. He received the backing of the EU, the UN, the League of Arab States, and several neighbouring states as well.

## **CURRENT CONTEXT**

At present the Transitional National Government (TNG) has not established any significant authority in south Somalia and remains confined to a section of Mogadishu. The city remains divided into fiefdoms and clashes continue between its factions. Southern faction leaders opposed to the TNG have formed the Somali Reconciliation and Restoration Council whose stated aim is to convene a national conference to lead to the establishment of a broad-based government. The governments of Somaliland and Puntland are also

opposed to the TNG. According to the UN,<sup>9</sup> the many human rights violations that have occurred were connected directly or indirectly to the polarisation of views around the TNG. In the year 2001, conflict in the southern part resulted in a new exodus of refugees to Kenya. Despite the absence of any overarching authority in south Somalia, district councils have been established in most areas, based on local elder's councils. Women exercise little formal political power in Somalia, but are active in many local organisations and operate a large number of small businesses. The International Organisation for Migration recently supported a conference in Hargeisa at which Somali women from Somalia and the diaspora met to create a "cross-clan" network that will support peace, reconciliation and development.

According to the most recent report from the UN Secretary General:<sup>10</sup>

*"Massive challenges of reconstruction and development confront Somalia. No country has ever been so long without a central authority. According to the UN Development Programme's Special Human Development Report on Somalia, 1998, socio-economic indicators for 1997 and 1998 place Somalia at the very bottom of the human development index rankings worldwide. The destruction caused by the cycle of civil war, state collapse and anarchy is total. To recover from a decade of statelessness and conflict will involve not only the remaking of political society but also the total reconstruction of the country's basic infrastructure."*

UN agencies have produced an "Operational Plan to Support Governance and Peace Building in Somalia" which envisages, should the prerequisites be in place, the development of a "*fullyfledged transitional planning exercise with international partners, Bretton Woods<sup>11</sup> institutions and Somali counterparts.*"

The humanitarian conditions in the country are generally poor and are even worse in the southern part due to ongoing conflict. Donor aid for the year 2000 however, amounted to only \$115 million US. Food security and malnutrition remain a serious problem for many people. Figures are available on Somalia as a whole, but because they do not take account of regional variations, data on many subjects is inadequate or lacking. The Gross National Product (GNP) per person—or average income—is only \$120 US per year. Somalia has a GNP of \$4.3 billion and an external debt of \$2.6 billion. Remittances from Somalis in the diaspora amount to several hundred million US per year and now exceed livestock as a source of foreign exchange. All of Somalia has been hit hard by a livestock ban imposed by the Gulf States on Horn of Africa countries. Not surprisingly, Somalia has experienced negative economic growth over the last decade. There are as few as .4 doctors and 2 nurses for every 100,000 persons and the average life expectancy at birth is 47 years. From 1990-1998 only 31 percent of the population had access to safe water and 43 percent had access to adequate sanitation. Adult literacy is estimated at 24 percent.

## **Somaliland**

Although the government is relatively weak and has limited taxation income, it has continued to consolidate its position and capacity over the last few years. The next elections are due to be held in 2002 and the government has passed a bill permitting the formation of new political parties. Although in May 2001 a referendum was held in which Somalilanders confirmed their wish to be an independent nation, according to interviewees, it is unlikely that Somaliland will receive any international recognition. As a result it does not benefit from significant amounts of international aid, nor does it qualify for loans or assistance from the IMF and World Bank. The Gulf State livestock ban is a considerable blow to the economy since livestock constitute an estimated 60-65 percent of the Somaliland economy. Consequently the Somaliland currency has lost value and prices have risen sharply.

Foreign investment is limited due to Somaliland's uncertain political future and lack of international recognition. Mineral deposits and oil reserves in the region will not be exploited without the required capital investment which is unlikely to be forthcoming in the foreseeable future. Investment in construction – which is very evident in Hargeisa – is fuelled to a large degree by Somalis in the diaspora rather than by indigenous economic activity. Overall, Somaliland lacks the resources and investment required for comprehensive infrastructure development and a sustainable economic base.

## **REFUGEES RETURNING TO SOMALILAND**

UNHCR has been conducting a large-scale repatriation of Somali refugees from eight refugee camps in Ethiopia as well as from Yemen, Djibouti, and Kenya. The rate of return has increased rapidly since 1997 and some 131,000 people have been repatriated to Somaliland since that year. Plans to repatriate a further 60,000 people in 2001, and 50,000 in 2002, should mark the end of the repatriation process. Returnees are provided with a travel grant, \$30 US per person, a food package for 9 months, and non-food items such as plastic sheeting, blankets, and jerry cans. In areas where refugees are returning, UNHCR provides basic amenities such as potable water, agricultural hand tools and ploughed land. UNHCR has also rehabilitated or reconstructed 23 schools since 1994. On the whole, returnees find themselves in a precarious situation: they arrive with very limited resources after many years in exile and, once their support package is exhausted, they must try to make a living in a context of high unemployment and limited investment. This group of returnees is clearly the priority for government, UN and international agencies. According to the ministry responsible for resettlement of returnees, the repatriations place heavy strains on the country's very limited resources. He stated that UNHCR has proposed to close down the Hargeisa office by the end of 2001 which, should that occur, will seriously impede Somaliland's ability to provide for the returnee population: no other agency in the region could take over this work.

Refugees returning from Western countries are seen as relatively privileged individuals who are likely to bring with them needed resources such as professional expertise and business investment. They are also likely to receive much greater support from countries of asylum<sup>12</sup> should they seek to return. In Denmark, for example, the Danish Refugee Council provides funds for refugees to visit their countries in order to decide whether they wish to return, and the Danish government provides a grant of \$900 US to refugees wishing to repatriate.

## **CONDITIONS FACING CHILDREN IN SOMALIA**

In 1996 it was estimated that children and young people under the age of 18 constituted 54 percent of the total population.<sup>13</sup> Throughout the whole of Somalia, children are affected by very poor economic, social and political conditions, and the extremely limited provision of basic services. According to UNICEF, the infant mortality rate is 125 per 1,000 live births and the under-five mortality rate is 211 per 1,000 live births. Immunisation levels for one year old children are very low. Maternal mortality rates are extremely high, in part due to the nearly universal incidence of female circumcision. As stated above, there is very limited access to health care and very few health professionals. The lack of safe water and sanitation for much of the child population is reflected in high rates of child diarrhoea, endemic cholera, and other infections.<sup>14</sup>

The infrastructure of the educational systems of Somalia was effectively destroyed by the armed conflict. A process of rebuilding is taking place with limited assistance from UN agencies and international NGO's. However, the current context is characterised by the lack of sufficient school premises, supplies and equipment, poor physical environments, a dearth of trained teachers, and very low teacher salaries. Currently a small percentage of children in Somalia are enrolled in schools: only 9 percent of girls and 18 percent of boys of primary school age. There are very few secondary schools. Many children do not attend schools because their families are unable to pay the school fees.

Girls face particular problems in accessing education in a culture which places a low value on their formal education. In many schools there are no toilet facilities or play areas for girls, which lack effectively bars them from attending. There are very few female teachers who could provide role models for girls. UNICEF Hargeisa reported there are literally only a handful of women teachers in the whole of Somaliland.

### **Somaliland**

As of June 2001, in Somaliland there were 294 primary schools and 72 secondary schools in both the state and private school sectors with a total enrollment of some 74 thousand pupils, a third of which are girls. Since the total population of Somaliland is estimated at

3-3.5 million, this represents a small proportion of school age children. Private schools, often opened by returnees from the West, account for nearly 30 percent of all pupils. Although still relatively few, the number of pupils completing primary and secondary school exams is rising, and the drop-out rate also appears to be declining.

The repatriation of refugees from the camps is stimulating the increase in the number of school places with assistance provided from UNHCR which, along with the Danish Refugee Council and Save the Children agencies, have been the major donors towards school construction and rehabilitation. The Ministry of Education has no budget for construction and only covers salaries and administration. The ministry hopes to open a teacher training facility in Hargeisa in the near future. UNICEF provides primary education school kits, assistance with curriculum development and limited teacher training. There are limited vocational and technical training facilities in the non-formal sector. For example, there are two programmes in the NGO sector<sup>15</sup> where boys learn basic electricity, carpentry and metalwork, while girls are provided with training in computers and sewing. An official in the Ministry of National Planning indicated they would favour the development of non-traditional vocational training for girls and the government hopes to construct two technical training schools in Hargeisa and Burao.

As everywhere in Somalia, unemployment is a major problem and thousands of returning refugees and their children are without the means of making a basic living. There are large numbers of children living in poor conditions in camps for returning refugees outside Hargeisa. Nutritional surveys of Hargeisa camps revealed that nearly one-fifth of children suffered from moderate malnutrition. Some of these children end up as street children, begging and finding alternative ways to survive. One interviewee in Berbera described how street children were organised in groups with their own "alternative economies." One group, for example, relied on selling fish which they caught themselves. There are hardly any girl street children since they tend to be used as domestic servants. For this reason also there are very few girls found in Hargeisa Orphanage.

As stated above, nearly all Somali girls undergo circumcision (female genital mutilation), and the majority in its most radical form. However, there is now an open public debate on FGM: educational campaigns are being carried out by UNICEF and some youth and women's organisations. A group of Somaliland religious scholars visited a prominent Islamic university in Egypt where they were informed that FGM is not an Islamic practice. As a result these religious leaders have spoken out against the practice.



## CONCLUSION

Long-standing conflict has taken an enormous toll in Somalia which has gone without a central government longer than any other country. At this time, conditions in southern Somalia do not support projects for home-country links and voluntary return. There have, in fact, been refugee outflows this year. The situation in Somaliland is far more favourable and is encouraging the return of many Somalilanders from the Western diaspora. Nonetheless, the political and economic future of this region is uncertain and services for children are severely underresourced, although laudable efforts are being made to reconstruct the education system.

## Notes

1. General information has been gathered from a number of sources including the US State Department Country Report on Somalia, February 2001; UK Home Office Country Assessment on Somalia, 2000; *The State of the World's Refugees 2000*, UNHCR; *The System of Education in Somalia*, Nina Hannemann, Danish Refugee Council, 1999; *Somalia: A nation in turmoil*, Dr. Said S. Samatar, Minority Rights Group, 1995; *Africa in Chaos*, George B.N. Ayittey, St. Martin's Griffen, NY, USA 1999.
2. *War: the Impact on Minority and Indigenous Children*, Minority Rights Group, 1997: pp.22-29. Interestingly there is no word for 'minority' in Somali.
3. Hannemann, 1999: p.15.
4. See: *Cutting the Rose, Female Genital Mutilation: the Practice and its Prevention*, Efu Dorkenoo, Minority Rights Publications, UK, 1995.
5. Ayittey, 1999.
6. It is estimated that during the 1980's over \$800 million US came from the USA and over \$1 billion from Italy as foreign aid.
7. Ayittey, 1999.
8. There are still numerous destroyed houses and burnt-out tanks in the villages and bush of Somaliland.
9. "The Situation of Human Rights in Somalia. Note by the Secretariat," UNESCO E/CN.4/2001/105 13 March 2001.
10. "Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Somalia," p.9.
11. World Bank and International Monetary Fund.
12. One interviewee was critical of a Danish project to create a fisheries project to support the return of some 40-50 Somali families from Denmark. He considered this created a privileged group of returnees and was not an appropriate way to support development in Somaliland.
13. Statistical information comes from UNICEF sources: *The Progress of Nations 1998*. UNICEF; *The State of the World's Children 2000*; Website Statistical Information, December 2000.
14. UNICEF *Hargeisa-Annual Report 2000*, p.6.
15. Run by GAVO, a youth organisation in Berbera with funding from Save the Children Denmark, and Havayoco, a youth organisation in Hargeisa (UNHCR funded).

### 3

## **VIEWS OF SEPARATED SOMALI CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS**

This chapter looks at interviews that were conducted with fifteen separated children, adolescents and young adults. Eleven children and adolescents, aged 11-18 – six girls and five boys – lived in three children's homes in different parts of the country. Four young adults, aged 21-23, had come to Denmark as separated children and two had since been joined by parents. Some of the interviewees are related: two are sister and brother; three are two sisters and a brother with a fourth who is their cousin. In order to protect the identities of interviewees, some changes have been made to the sex or age of those described or quoted.

### **LIFE BEFORE LEAVING SOMALIA**

The age at which the children and young adults left Somalia varied from 2 to 13 years. Subsequently most of those interviewed had spent from one to nine years in Kenya or Ethiopia before travelling to Europe. Eight children were under ten years of age when they left Somalia and among these, five had been under five years of age. Thus more than half of those interviewed have little or no memories of Somalia: for some, their memories of Africa are of life in a country neighbouring Somalia.

Nine of the interviewees came from Mogadishu; two came from southern Somalia; three from Somaliland; and one was originally from Puntland, although his family moved to Mogadishu. Almost all the children and young adults have siblings, with several having seven or eight. One person is an only child and another does not know whether he has any siblings. Their family positions revealed a predominance of youngest (6) and middle children (5) and only one is known to be the eldest. Prior to leaving Somalia, four children had lived with only one parent and two had lived with another relative (aunt /grandfather). While six children were attending regular school, others were too young or only had access to the Koranic school. One boy stated that he had attended the Koranic school because his family could not afford to pay private school fees. Those in school had their education

interrupted by the flight from the country and few had received any education in Kenya or Ethiopia. The financial situation of children's families was occasionally referred to: in seven cases one or both parents ran a shop or business, including three mothers who ran their own business. Three young adults referred to their family's situation as being comfortable. In some cases, where children had older siblings in Denmark, or in the West, it is likely that they helped to pay for the cost of their travel.

## **WHY SEPARATED CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE LEAVE SOMALIA**

The departure of the 15 children and young people from Somalia was in all cases directly or indirectly connected to the armed conflict that ravaged that country from the late 1980's and destroyed the country's infrastructure (see Chapter 2). Eight children on leaving Somalia were under ten years of age and five of these were under five years of age. In 13 cases children had first fled with members of their families to either Kenya or Ethiopia, where they remained for varying lengths of time before travelling to Europe. Several children faced grave dangers and traumatic experiences during the flight from Somalia. These included being caught in inter-clan fighting, bombardments, destruction of houses, severe thirst and hunger, seeing dead bodies, injury, illness, and separation from one or both parents in flight. As a consequence of the conflict, two children experienced the death of one parent and another the death of an older sister. Some were separated from one or both parents because of the conflict.

The situation facing Somali refugees in Kenya was precarious. The refugee camps were characterised by high levels of sexual violence against women and girls, inter-factional fighting and were, on occasion, burnt to the ground. In the cities, mainly Nairobi, Somalis had no residence papers and were frequently subject to police harassment, imprisonment and the need to pay bribes in order to be released.

*“ My father was killed in the civil war and it took us three years to get to Kenya facing many hazards, famine, fatigue and living on practically nothing in bush areas. Finally we came to Kenya. At first we kept ourselves close to the border hoping the war would stop, but it did not, and then we went to Mombasa, a sea port, and lived in a refugee camp for one year and were fed and clothed by the Red Cross. It was hard to live there. Four times the camp was set on fire and we lost everything. The houses were made of wood and grasses and they were easy to burn – if anyone wanted to do this on purpose. Sometimes it happened by accident. The last time, we were some 10,000 refugees when the fire was set again. We fled from the camp and encountered Kenyans with guns and axes and spears who wanted to attack the Somali refugees and clear us out of their country. It was so appalling and so gruesome to remember. Luckily we were saved from that disaster, but*

*many were killed at that time. Some people I knew were killed. It felt like doomsday – I didn't think we would survive. It felt like enemies were everywhere.”*  
(Boy who fled Somalia aged 13)

In one case a girl came from a minority clan that was unprotected and vulnerable to attacks. In another a boy and his brothers became targets of militias once they reached adolescence and were considered old enough to fight. Another boy who left Somalia in the late 1990's had been threatened by a gang in Mogadishu and, following the death of his elder sister, his parents were afraid for his safety. One girl had been brought to Europe by an aunt when she was three years old: her mother was deceased and her father has disappeared.

*“In Mogadishu my family lived with a few other clan families in a neighbourhood with people from a different clan. The war changed our friendly relations and our neighbours wanted to kill us. All these people you have known all your life, suddenly turn into your enemy. That's terrible. My Mom sent away her brothers, male cousins and uncle away because she was afraid for them. My Dad was out of the country at the time. One day they wanted to kill us – a neighbour warned us and all seven families left during the night. First we went to another part of Mogadishu. Next day my mother went back and found the house full of holes where it had been shot up. We took shelter with relatives in another part of Mogadishu, but the conflict came to this part – the house was bombed while they were in it. My mother and sisters and I fled from Mogadishu. We went with many other refugees to Kismayo on foot and on the way my Mom was almost killed. I was a bit crazy at that time with fear and danger. There we lived in an abandoned factory. That was the worst and best time of my life. You see dead people being eaten by cats and dogs and yet you are very alive. We had to flee again from Kismayo and were split up. At the time I was with my older sister and we didn't know where my mother and other sister was. We were desperate – we drank seawater and got sick – we had almost nothing to eat. There were lots of dead people floating in the sea from ships that sank when they were trying to escape. We were both sick and fainting a lot. We came to Nairobi. We were arrested and imprisoned and stayed in jail for two months until a family friend got us out. Then we stayed with an uncle. We were there about 6 months, staying inside because if we went out we would be picked up by police.”*  
(Girl who fled Somalia, aged 14)

Others spent time in camps in Ethiopia and in Addis Ababa. For those whose lives were unsafe in neighbouring countries, the motive to flee to Europe was primarily that of personal safety. In other cases it appears that, as the conflict in Somalia continued and children's future chances in Kenya or Ethiopia were uncertain, parents or other relatives decided to send the children to Europe in the hope of their gaining an education and improving their life chances. One young adult came from a well-off family who had a materially comfortable life in Nairobi following their flight from Mogadishu. However, his parents had a "strong education background" and saw no future for him in Nairobi where Somalis had no legal right to stay. Family reunion was another motivating factor. Two boys joined older brothers in Denmark, and one boy joined his father: the living situation with his father and stepmother subsequently broke down.

Some children were very young when they arrived in Denmark (6 were aged 10 and under). They had no memory of why they were sent to Denmark, although other family members in Denmark were able to explain it to them. One boy, who was 11 when he left Nairobi, said that his mother only told him he was going to get an education, but she did not explain why it was necessary to leave Kenya.

*A boy and his family moved to Ethiopia in 1988 when Hargeisa was destroyed. He was 7-8 years old. They travelled by foot – it was too dangerous to drive. It was very difficult but there were guides who showed them where to go. It took fifteen days to reach the first safe place and people were exposed to bombings from the Somali army and starvation. UNHCR took them by bus to a refugee camp. After that they went to Dire Dawa for two years. In 1991 when it was safe, they returned to Hargeisa. They found their house had been destroyed. Their father built another house where they lived until 1993. Fighting broke out again and the whole family fled again to Ethiopia. Eventually an older half-brother sponsored the boy and his siblings to go Denmark.*

(Boy who arrived in Denmark aged 14)

## **THE DECISION TO LEAVE – EXPECTATIONS**

The children and young people were aged from 3 to 16 when they travelled to Denmark: six were ten and under and the rest were aged 11 (2), 13, 14 (3), 15 (2) and 16. The younger children were clearly not involved in making the decision to leave and it is less likely that they were aware of any parental expectations regarding the future. Two interviewees stated they only found out at the last moment that they were leaving.

*“I did not know I was leaving Kenya. I found out when my mother took me to the airport with my younger sister. She was only 6 years old at the time. I was responsible for her. My mother told me I must get an education. After that she wanted me to return. She didn’t tell me what I should study.”*  
(Boy aged 11 on arrival)

One girl was confused when she was separated from her mother and cannot remember what she said about the future. She was upset that her mother could not come with her because there was not enough money to pay for her mother's travel. None of the young people interviewed had been consulted about their departure and seemed to take it for granted that their parents or other adults would make decisions in this way. One young adult, who was 16 when he left, explained it this way:

*“It’s different in Denmark. Here children can talk to their parents and say how they feel – it’s not like that in Somalia. At the time I didn’t have a chance to say how I felt and I didn’t really understand what it meant to leave. Knowing my parents thought it would be best for me helped.”*

In five cases, because the children were separated from their parents, other adults made the decision for a child to leave. In the case of one girl who had fled to Kenya with her elder sister, the decision to leave was made by the sister and uncle. Another girl was only three years old when an aunt brought her out of the country after the death of her mother.

Most of the interviewees had no concept of what life in Europe or Denmark was like – it was not something they had thought of before. One girl was indifferent as to her destination:

*“I didn’t know about Denmark and I didn’t want to think about what it would be like. I was only thinking about leaving my Mother and being safe. I didn’t know when I would see her again. It wasn’t important what Denmark was like. It could have been Greenland. When you have to leave a place that’s bad, it doesn’t matter where you go and there is not a real choice.”*

Two interviewees had a sense of where they were going. One boy said:

*“I had a good idea of what it was like here because my brother told me about Denmark – it was better than Addis. For some time I had an interest to come to Denmark.”*

A young adult said that since his father travelled to Denmark and he had an older brother living there, that he had quite a lot of information about the country. After arriving there he found it matched his expectations.

The views of the parents are only known in four cases as discussed below in Chapter 4. The current thoughts of children and young people on what they wish to achieve are discussed below.

## **HOW CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE TRAVELLED**

All of the children and young people travelled to Europe by air from Addis Ababa, Nairobi or Uganda. In seven cases, those interviewed said they had travelled with a smuggler who brought them to Copenhagen airport and left them there. In order to pay travel costs and the smuggler’s fees – several thousand US dollars – parents sold a house, a business or other possessions. One young woman, who had been separated from her mother in flight, said her mother had sewn some gold jewellery into her clothing. With this she was able to pay some of her travel expenses. A young man’s father had an overseas bank account for his business and was able to pay for his son’s flight with those funds. Thirteen of the children and young people travelled with either siblings, a cousin, an aunt, or a father. Only two young people travelled without a relative, one accompanied by a smuggler and the other alone.

*In one case a boy's father sold the family house to pay for his travel. A smuggler accompanied him along with another boy. They took a boat from Mogadishu to Kismayo, then travelled by land to Addis Ababa from where they flew to Bulgaria and then on to Copenhagen. The whole trip took one week.*

## **SEPARATED SOMALI CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN EUROPE**

There are an estimated 120,000 Somalis living in Europe and they are mainly concentrated in the United Kingdom (30-40 percent), the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland and Switzerland.<sup>1</sup> Separated Somali children are also found primarily in these countries. No information is available as to the age and sex of these children. Their living conditions and care will vary considerably from one country to another. Material living standards in the Nordic countries are fairly similar and tend to be of high quality although concerns<sup>2</sup> have been expressed about the efficacy of guardianship systems and in Denmark there is no guardianship system in place. In the Netherlands a comprehensive guardianship system has been introduced. In the UK, children will be assisted by a non-statutory adviser, but due to an increasing work load, advisers have limited time to devote to each child. However, concerns<sup>3</sup> have recently been expressed about the care and living conditions provided for separated children 16-17 years old as well as many who are younger.

### **LIFE IN DENMARK**

On arrival most children stay in an asylum centre while they go through the asylum process and are assessed for placement in a suitable facility. These can include Children's Homes, foster care, shared apartments and so on. Thirteen of those interviewed had spent varying lengths of time (a few months to 2 years) in an asylum centre after they arrived in Denmark. The other two children lived with a relative (father and older sibling) immediately after arriving. After staying in the asylum centre nine children went directly to one of the three children's homes run by Save the Children Denmark. Two then went to live with a relative while another went to a foster home with a sibling. One young adult had lived in an apartment with two other separated refugee children: they were supported by a worker from the Danish Refugee Council. The presence of other family members in Denmark is striking: almost all those interviewed have relatives – mainly siblings – in Denmark and only two appear to have no relatives in the country. Six of the eleven children living in the homes are related to other child residents.

Eventually, due to the breakdown of their living situations, four of those young people living with relatives or in foster care came to live in the children's Homes. One boy had lived with his father, stepmother and younger half siblings, but because he had been separated from his father for many years prior to their reunification, the new family situation proved difficult. A girl explained that she had spent several years in a Danish foster family with her elder brother:



*“At the beginning it was OK with the family, but then it became difficult. I had to visit a lot with their relatives or they came to visit—which I didn’t like. There were two other foster children from Africa. Then my brother moved to Copenhagen and I came to the children’s Home.”*

Thus in addition to the problems of exile, these children also had to deal with the consequences of the failure of these living situations.

With few exceptions, most of the children and youth did not experience difficulty learning to speak Danish: some stated they found it easy and were able to learn quickly. Levels of competence with written Danish were not explored. Seven children and young people are attending regular school, one is in a special class because of a learning difficulty, and one attends a Koran school which also covers all other subjects. Two young people were not in school – although both expressed the intention to return. When asked whether they were involved in any activities, several said they engaged in sports or had joined computer clubs, but others did not appear to be engaged in any extra-curricular activities. Two of the young adults are concurrently working and attending college, while a third has started his two-year "Praktik"<sup>4</sup> (work experience), and a fourth is trying to find a "Praktik." One person was getting regular religious instruction and at one time an Islamic teacher had come regularly to one of the children’s homes. One person said he observed Ramadan and another pointed out: *"It’s not compulsory to go to Mosque: you can pray anywhere."*

Interviewees were asked what they liked and disliked about life in Denmark. A minority mentioned issues in the children’s Homes relating to eating Danish food rather than Somali food and fighting amongst children. One person felt the staff did not carry through on promises to buy things for him. Two girls felt that the gender balance in the Homes was not good. In one home there was only one girl, who said: *“Of course I would like another girl to talk with, but I am not sure I would get along with her!”* One person was unhappy that staff had set a limit on how late he could stay out on weekends. Others said they enjoyed living in the Homes and liked most of the workers, as did the two young adults who had previously lived in a Home. One person appreciated that staff rotated on shifts because that added interest to the human interactions.

Some of the young people appreciated many aspects of life in Denmark, namely their experiences in the Homes, the fact that Denmark is a peaceful and democratic nation, the Danish laws and customs that protect people’s rights, the ease and plenty of material life, and the educational opportunities. Two indicated that they had no personal experience of discrimination or racism. Some were more expansive about their dislikes and difficulties. Two expressed dislike about the use of drugs and alcohol in Denmark, one of them saying that he felt helpless when he saw other young people consuming them. Many found the cold grey weather hard to cope with. One young adult was highly critical about the

treatment of elderly people in the West and observed that it was unthinkable in Somali culture to abandon a parent.

While eight people said they had made friends with Danish youth, some describing these friendships positively, others only had friendships with other Somalis or refugees. One young adult said: *"It is hard to be close with Danish people— they are closed. They seem to be afraid of us. It is easy to be friends with refugees from other countries, they are like us. Even today I don't have Danish friends except the ones in my class."* Despite disapproval of alcohol, one interviewee said he liked Danish people when they are drunk because they are more open and fun.

One girl expressed her relations with other Danish children this way:

*"I have a different race, culture, religion and language from the Danes. They see we are different and we cannot absorb them and they cannot absorb us – there are boundaries beyond which we cannot go. There are things they can do which I cannot because of my culture. I see them as people who are different from me but I have a good contact with them. We are comrades but we do not have a deep relationship."*

The strongest criticisms were expressed by six interviewees about racism and anti-refugee attitudes along with what was described as job-segregation. One person felt that there were no advantages to living in Denmark as compared with Somalia and that because of racist attitudes she feels unwelcome there, that Danish people do not want foreigners coming to their country: *"When you go out into the town, of course there are some nice people, but most will look at you so weird that they "dis" (disrespect) you. They look at you like you are nothing."* Another young person told of being called a "bloody nigger" in the street. Three persons described school experiences which they attributed to racism and ignorance of people from other cultures:

*"The teachers at school were OK but the school director was racist. He couldn't accept that the refugees had different cultures. He told us we had to be Danish. He didn't want to talk with me because I wore a headscarf. He told me to take it off – I said no, I will do it when I want. One day I wasn't wearing the scarf and he wanted to shake my hand, but I refused it. He judged us by our features, not as human beings. I am proud of my appearance. I don't want to be changed and assimilated<sup>5</sup> like he wanted – a sort of brainwashing. I want to be integrated. We were in a vulnerable situation at first. He did not let us play with other refugees from other countries and told us we had to play with Danish children and become assimilated."*

*“At first school was OK, but I remember a class teacher who did not treat us well. He always blamed us if there was a conflict with the Danish pupils. He showed openly that he hates us.”*

*“After high school I applied to go to business school. They tried to send me back to high school for one year, saying my Danish was not good enough. But I had high grades in Danish! This was “pure racism.” I protested and said I was just as good as the other students, but the head of the school told me: “you will never be as good as the Danes.” My high school teachers complained and I threatened to get a lawyer and go to the media. Finally they let me back into business school – but my self-confidence was undermined. When I scored the highest grade on the Danish legal and political system, my self-esteem returned.”*

Some felt they had been barred from the work world in certain ways and that refugees as a whole were experiencing job segregation. One young adult had tried unsuccessfully for some time to be accepted to do a "Praktik" a course of study which is necessary in Denmark if you wish to pursue higher education. She stated that it was common for Somalis and other refugees to be treated with hypocrisy, i.e. they are told that the job has been filled, that they don't speak good enough Danish or they simply do not get a reply to an application.

*“This happens even in (town of residence) where people know us. I don't know if it is because of my colour or my religion. I hate it, it scares me. Sometimes we feel we have come to the wrong country. The people here don't want to use the resources we offer – we are young, we speak Danish, we have studied here. Instead of using us they demoralise us – they accuse us of being idle and unwilling to work. We don't have access to the mass media to make our point of view, although the media is always saying negative things about us. Many refugees have already left Denmark because they don't want to face the future here.”*

However, three interviewees had successfully acquired work placements. There was agreement that discrimination was more prevalent amongst older Danes, including the parents of friends, but that amongst the younger generation there was greater acceptance and inclusion of people from other cultures. Also most of those interviewed distinguished between “good” Danish people and those who were prejudiced.

## EDUCATIONAL PLANS

All but two of those interviewed had some educational plans, and three of the four young adults were carrying those plans forward. Three boys wished to pursue technical educations: two in mechanics and one in construction. Two other boys were interested in electronics and computing. One girl was clear she wanted to go to university but was too young to know what studies she would pursue there. She also considered professional sport, but thought it would be difficult to pursue both at the same time. Two other girls were considering nursing and one of them had a longer term aspiration to become a doctor. Three of the young adults were pursuing business studies, one at an English college, while a fourth was beginning a course in social work.

## CONTACTS WITH PARENTS AND FUTURE PLANS

Three of the young people living in the Homes have no contact with their parents in Somalia. In one case the person's parents are dead or have disappeared. In two other cases, contact was lost. One boy stated that the family house had been sold and his family had moved. Since then he has tried without success to find them through relatives and the Red Cross. All the other interviewees have contact – usually by telephone – with their parents on a regular basis. Two young adults have been reunited with parents who were brought to Denmark. A third is trying to bring his mother to Denmark. Eight children and young people were able to visit their parents in 2000 with the help of Save the Children Denmark and the support of local authorities. Some have returned for another visit in 2001. It was the first time they had seen their parents in four to nine years. They were enthusiastic about the visits:

- *"I was very happy to be in Somalia. I played and visited with my family and friends."*
- *"I saw my mother for the first time in six years. I felt I was at home. I did some household things. It felt good to be around Somalis, to see my people walking around."*
- *"It was amazing to see my mother. I was there six weeks. I wanted to stay with my mother but it wasn't possible. She couldn't support me."*
- *"I wanted to go back again this summer with my sister but she can't go so, I have to wait."*
- *"I visited people, played football. It felt 50% safe in Mogadishu."*

Three young people would have liked to have stayed with their families in Somalia. One girl however had a different reaction:

*“It was great to see my Mom. The first night I arrived I found out I have three new little sisters and brothers. I played with them. Then I went to the Koran school and played with some friends but I couldn’t play in the street because I was a girl. I didn’t like that. When I was in Mogadishu I felt like a Danish girl but also Somali at the same time. I didn’t want to stay there – I was happy to come back to Denmark.”*

In Denmark it is possible for children and young people living in children’s Homes to save money to send to their parents. Many parents in Somalia rely on remittances from children and relatives in the West in order to survive (see Chapter 3). Eight of the children (or their elder siblings) and young adults send money to parents in Somalia. When Somalis return to Somalia after time in the West or another country, they are expected to bring gifts and money home to share with family and lineage members. One young adult said this meant she is not yet able to visit her parents: *“It is too expensive. I am expected to bring money for relatives who think I am loaded because I live in the West. Because I am over 18, my trip can’t be paid by the Commune (Local Authority).”*

## **LOOKING TO THE FUTURE**

Of the 15 Somalis interviewed, two were certain they wished to return home, one of them intending to establish a business similar to that of his deceased father. Four young people stated they would like to return to Somalia if there were peace and the possibility to make a living. One of these expressed the complexity of this hope:

*“Of course I want to go back to Somalia. But I am young and I want to experience life. I don’t want to have children in Somalia where they will not have a future. I don’t care where I live. I just want to have a good life. It will take a lot of time before Somalia is OK. Maybe in the future I will be able to go back with a profession.”*

Another stated that: *“If there is no peace in Somalia, I will have no option but to stay in Denmark. Because of racism here, I find it hard to think I might have to stay.”* Another, who hopes to return said *“My mother told me Somalia was not a place to stay in. It is not safe in Mogadishu and there are no good schools.”*

Two people were ambivalent about the idea of returning to Somalia. They were torn between feelings of powerful attachments to Somalia and an appreciation of the material

and educational benefits of living in the West. One young person – whose siblings are endeavouring to bring their mother to Denmark – expressed it this way:

*“I have the possibility to have free education here and the facilities are much better than in Somalia. But to be in your own country is better than anything else. I do not plan to be in Denmark for the rest of my life. The only thing that will change is when we are reunited with our mother.”*

In contrast to this, an older young adult stated:

*“I value the material life of the West. You won’t get that in Somalia in the next 50 years. The country was destroyed—it will take a long time to build up again. I am used to the ease and comfort of life here. If I said I would definitely go back to Somalia, I would be lying. The living conditions are terrible. I have been out of the country for most of my life. Although I don’t know if I will go back I still have that Somali nationalism. I love being Somali. I don’t know where I will live in future. I just know I will leave Denmark.”*

One person was afraid to return to Somalia because he felt his life was still in danger there. Six others were fairly certain they did not wish to go back to Somalia. As one put it: *“There is nothing there for me now.”* Only one person, one of the youngest interviewees, felt happy about making a life in Denmark. Three people stated they wished to travel and live in other countries once their education was completed in Denmark. A young adult stated:

*“I don’t want to go back to Somalia because I want to continue living in new places, learn more languages and find out about other cultures. If there is peace in Somalia that will be good, but I don’t think I will go back there to live.”*

Three people referred to the UK as potentially a good place to live since they perceived it as a more multi-cultural society than Denmark, a place where Somalis could feel more at home.

## YOUNG ADULTS

The four young adults had diverse views and feelings of optimism for the future: one intended to return to Somalia to start a business, one to travel to other countries once his studies were complete, one to leave when her studies are finished but is uncertain where she will go while another who would like to return to Somalia but is doubtful that will be possible and feels trapped in Denmark. She stated:

*"We are in a dilemma. The younger ones are used to being Danish and maybe can't live anywhere else. But we adults have lost all hope for living here. We wait for the situation in Somalia to improve because we don't see any future here. You can go to school, but you can't get a job and it costs the Danish state a lot to pay for that education. If someone had told me it was like this before I wouldn't have believed them. We cannot return to Somalia now. People there need aid to survive. Here we can go to school, but I am blocked from progressing further. If I went to another Western country, I would have to start all over again and I would need money to leave, but I can't work to get the money. Even when I get a Danish passport, I will be checked at the borders."*

The extent to which the rigours of exile can be faced may also depend on the intentions and hopes separated children entertained when they left their families behind. According to one young adult he was sustained by his "mission":

*"My mission, my journey in coming to Denmark, is to get an education, to work and take care of myself and my family. If that happens then my mission is complete. That's when I feel satisfaction about being in Denmark. If I don't get an education I will never forgive myself. It has taken me some time and I have 2-3 years to go. It doesn't matter how long it takes. But when I have it then I will succeed. I sacrificed a lot being in Denmark alone. Not all people here are nice. Some are good, some are bad. You have to take things as they are if you can't change them. But having a goal in mind, that helps to deal with the hard things. It has been difficult and sometimes I wonder what it would have been like to be in Somalia, but I was too young when I left so I can't really judge!"*

One individual interviewed was very concerned about younger Somalis and felt they needed help from other Somalis to make a better transition to life in exile. She expressed it in this way:

*“When I was younger I was confused like them but now I am older, I know more what to do. They don’t know what is going to happen to them. They have a lack of self-esteem which is really important in these circumstances. I want to set up a service for young Somalis to help them: to talk with them, find out what they want, what goals they want to achieve. I see them as my younger brothers and sisters who need help, not just other Somalis. Sports helped me a lot. Many Somali girls never do any sports and this can help to energise you and make you feel better about yourself. Plus they feel they are often blocked by discrimination or the difficulties of adapting. Not everyone is as stubborn as me, and they give up.”*

Most Somali young people have older siblings in other Western countries who may provide models for these young adults who are in the process of achieving educational goals. One young man had one brother who was migrating to the US, while another brother was going back to Somalia with professional qualifications.

It is instructive to compare the material from these interviews with those conducted in 1996 with 35 separated African young people in Sweden<sup>6</sup>. This group was composed mainly of Somalis along with a few young people from Eritrea, Ghana, and Ethiopia. Of those interviewed, 22 boys and 13 girls, all had acquired permanent residence. Some of the main findings relating to life in Sweden were feelings of loneliness and isolation, difficulties making contact with Swedes, the lack of adult authority figures such as parents and elders, resistance to accepting others in this role, difficulties negotiating new patterns of behaviour and cultural difference, problems in schools which do not meet the needs of young refugees and segregation in the work world. These youngsters were also older when they arrived, between 14 and 16 years of age, which can also explain this difference in adjusting and integrating.

## Notes

1. Information from: “Action Plan for Somalia,” Council of the European Union, 30 September 1999, p.9 and *The State of the World’s Refugees*, UNHCR, 2000, p.317.
2. *Separated Children Seeking Asylum in Europe: A Programme for Action*, Sandy Ruxton, SCEP, 2000.
3. *Separated Children in the UK: An Assessment of the Current Situation*, Save the Children UK, 2001.
4. There are two kinds of Praktik: one is for people who have not finished primary school or have learning difficulties, and the other is for those who have finished high school with low grades and wish to pursue higher education. Dependent on one's grades and the studies one wishes to pursue, a 6, 8, 12 or 24-month Praktik is involved. Both native Danes and refugees are often required to take Praktik due to their low grades.



5. Assimilation refers to the total adaptation of the migrant or refugee to the culture and behavioural modes of the new society, while integration generally allows for the maintenance of the culture of origin and tolerance of some form of pluralism.

6. *Interviews with Young Unaccompanied African Refugees*, Päivi Sharifan Holma, Save the Children Sweden, 1996.

## 4

# VIEWS OF PARENTS, PROFESSIONALS, AND AGENCIES

The researcher travelled to Denmark and to Somaliland in May-June 2001. In Denmark interviews were conducted with seven staff members of Save the Children Denmark (SCD) in the children's Homes and headquarters (three Danish staff and four Somali staff). It was also planned to interview parents of the children and young people in Denmark, most of who live in southern Somalia. Since it was not possible to travel to southern Somalia because of the serious security risks affecting expatriates, only one parent in Somaliland was interviewed. However, a Somali staff worker from SCD was able to interview three parents when he brought children on a visit to Somalia/Somaliland in the summer of 2001. In Somaliland, officials and staff of government ministries, UN agencies, local and international NGO's were interviewed in Hargeisa and Berbera. A list can be found in the Introduction.

### **PARENTS OF SEPARATED CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE**

It must be stressed that four parents constitute a very small sample and the results must be considered as extremely tentative given the fact that the researcher only met with one parent face-to-face and had to rely on the notes from three other interviews conducted by a Somali staff person from Denmark. Two parents live in Somaliland and two in Mogadishu. One parent – the only father interviewed – is married, one mother is a widow, and the marital status of the other two mothers is unclear. One parent has six children, all living in Denmark, another has five, of whom at least one is in Denmark, a third parent has only one child who is in Denmark, and the fourth has four children in Denmark, and at least three in Somalia. Parents were asked a number of questions relating to the history of their child's migration, their hopes and wishes at the time, the impact of separation on the family, contact with their child in Europe, and thoughts about the child's future.

All the parents described situations of war, chaos and destruction that preceded the departure of their child: "*Armed militia were fighting the government forces;*" "*There was*

*killing, looting, rape and destruction;” “Many, many children lost their lives either in Somalia during the war or in Kenya in the refugee camps.”* Only two parents made the decision to send their child to Europe. Their main concern at the time was to get their children to a safe place. One parent was also fearful about her children’s future due to the ongoing conflict which had destroyed the infrastructure and twice caused her family to flee to Ethiopia. In this case, the parents sold their business in order to be able to send all their children away as a group. This parent said she felt the children would do better if they had their siblings with them. The other parent sent four of his children (including one nephew) to Europe. He stated that his children had not been involved in making the decision because it was not necessary. One parent, who had not been involved in sending her only child out of the country, described the situation:

*“The day the war broke out in Mogadishu, I was away from home shopping. My mother was taking care of my son and my niece. My mother fled the home with the two children to escape the heavy fire all around. She went with many others, including our neighbour, to get to safety. That was the last time I saw my son which was 10 years ago. When I sneaked back to my home, I passed a lot of dead and wounded people, destroyed homes and cars. I found no one inside my home. As I was leaving my neighbourhood, I found three young children from our neighbourhood, crying and lonely. I took them with me. I found the parents of two of the children and the third one – a boy who is now 14 years old – is still with me. His mother died in the war and his father disappeared. I just saw my son for the first time this summer.”*

Her son eventually left Somalia with his grandmother and stayed in an Asian country for many years. When his grandmother died he was brought to Denmark by a relative. The oldest daughter of one mother made the arrangements to get the children to safety. This parent had no idea of her children going to Europe: she had hoped they would find safety in Somalia.

The impact of the departure and separation was considerable, even more so for parents who were widowed or separated. Parents commented:

- *“I got very sick and developed a heart disease and high blood pressure.”*
- *“I never thought they were alive. But I always hoped for the best and prayed for them to be safe. My family was broken and I felt despair that I might never see them again.”*
- *“My husband and I were poor because we sold our business and belongings to send our children away. Three years ago my husband got ill and died. All my children are in Denmark.”*

- *“We miss them a lot but the important thing is them being safe.”*

Two parents said they would do it again if necessary to keep their children safe and a third said she hoped never to witness the same situation again. The parents receive some information about their children from relatives, Somali staff in the children’s Homes, and from the children themselves. All the parents had been in phone contact with their children – although in one case it was very occasional. Their children had told them they were healthy and doing OK, attending school, were well-fed, clothed and in good hands. One mother said her children had some problems with racism and that they tell her they miss her. Another referred to the difficulties children might encounter: *“I know it is always difficult for children to lose their parents.”* All the parents had received visits from their children in 2000 and/or 2001: these were organised by Save the Children Denmark. Two mothers have tried to join their children in Denmark, and one stated she has been unable to because she lacked the financial means and knowledge to travel to foreign countries.

### **Their Children’s Future**

As might be expected, all the parents hoped their children would get a good education and have a good life, two expressing the hope that their children could become professionals, another that their son might choose whatever work suited him. If they returned to live in Somalia, only one of the parents, the father, would be in a position to support their children. One parent said that she received money from her children in Denmark. The ongoing safety of their children is, however, the consideration that is of paramount importance. Those in Mogadishu were concerned about the precarious situation in southern Somalia: *“Hopes for peace were higher in 1999-2000 and I wanted to bring my children back home. But the situation is very bad now, especially here in Mogadishu.”* Three parents believed that their children’s futures lie in Somalia if there is peace and security:

- *“I want my son to get an education and work hard to do this. After that I want him to return to his own country.”*
- *“After my son gets the necessary education I want for him to get a good life in his own country.”*
- *“Everybody’s future lies in his home country. Home is always best. I am confident my children will come home as soon as peace is secured here.”*

The fourth parent, a widow, was still hoping to join her children, all of whom are in Denmark.

## **Comment**

It appears that the parents possess a limited understanding of the nature of their children's lives in Denmark and indeed, it would be surprising if they did, since none of them has ever travelled to the West. By and large they felt their children were doing well because they were in a secure and materially comfortable setting with access to education. Parents may have found it difficult to acknowledge or consider – particularly in an interview setting – that their children might suffer from the separation. This is, moreover, unlikely to be specific to Somali parents: most parents who feel they have acted in their child's interests or who are powerless to change the situation (two parents did not make the decision to send a child away), will want to focus on the positive aspects of the situation. Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter 5, separations of parents from children – although these are the product of armed conflict – are, to varying degrees, located within the Somali cultural norm and are unlikely to be perceived in the "Western" way.

All but one parent felt their children's futures lay in Somalia, and this can be understood as part of the "mission" of migration, where the child returns with some of the fruits of life abroad in order to make a better life for themselves and their families. Hence the separation of family members acquires meaning and a sense of hopefulness for the future. To the question of why these children travelled to Europe while others remained in Somalia or neighbouring countries of asylum, no conclusions can be drawn. Two parents clearly had the financial resources to pay for their children's travel, while the travel of the others' children was arranged by third parties and financed by unknown persons.

## **SAVE THE CHILDREN STAFF IN DENMARK**

The material gathered during interviews with staff was quite wide-ranging and not all of it can be included here. Some important themes have been identified: issues and problems for children and young people living in exile in Denmark; issues relating to life in the children's Homes; the views of staff about parental attitudes and understanding of life in Europe; the impact of children's visits to Somalia and thoughts on the children's future.

### **Issues/Problems for Children and Young People in Denmark**

Like all newly arrived migrants and refugees, separated Somali children and young people face a number of challenges making a life for themselves in a new country and culture. In Denmark the legal status of some separated children can seem precarious. Most children under 15 years of age are given a form of humanitarian permission<sup>1</sup> to stay in the country, rather than refugee status. Those in this position are at risk of being returned to Somalia if their parents are known to be found in Somalia, however, in practice, this is not usually applied, and the authorities are aware of visits to parents in Somalia.

Prior to the arrival of asylum seekers and refugees in the 1980's, Denmark had little previous experience with migrant people or minority groups<sup>2</sup>. One individual stated that there was a fear of foreigners in Scandinavia as a whole and that the "integration" process in Denmark places high expectations on young refugees: to learn Danish well, to do well in school and work hard at their studies, to become in some way "new Danes." *"There is a feeling that we are the "norm" and that other people have got to fit in with us and be grateful for what they receive. If they don't feel grateful, they are seen as not deserving of help."* Another person observed that Danes do not readily accept that many Somalis live in one part of Copenhagen because this is seen to mitigate against integration and becoming Danish. Two Somali staff persons said that Denmark was a very lonely place, not only because there is much less social interaction in public compared with Somalia, but also because it is a relatively homogeneous country where foreign-born people are highly visible, particularly black Africans. So children and young people are receiving contradictory messages: on the one hand incitement to integrate or even assimilate, and on the other experiences of rejection, of xenophobia.

Several people referred to aspects of culture clashes or differences experienced by the children. Many of these are enumerated in Chapter 5<sup>3</sup>. Only a few examples will be given here. Danes speak to young Somalis as individuals, stressing that they need to make choices and take responsibility for them, but Somali children come from a context where decisions are made by parents, clan elders or as a group. Danes find it hard to understand that separated children have conflicting loyalties between their parents and staff in Denmark as, for example, when their parents have told them to keep certain information a secret or to tell certain lies. Truth telling is highly prized in Nordic countries, even if it can mean being rude.

Sometimes children feel teachers do not like them because Danish teachers are not strict, but rather talk with and appeal to students. Somali children are used to a traditional authoritarian form of education where they listen to and obey teachers. Some of the children, because of the displacements caused by armed conflict, had little if any education on arrival and find it very difficult to adapt to Danish schooling in addition to learning a new language. A few do not go regularly to school and have difficulties concentrating. Children who were quite young on arrival have found schooling much easier.

An experienced staff member reflected that it is difficult for some of the children in the Homes to retain after-school jobs because either they drop them after a short time, or they are unreliable. In her experience they have no difficulties getting these jobs if they have a responsible attitude. Furthermore, the high employment rate in Denmark makes it easier for all refugees to gain employment.

One Somali staff person who had come as a separated young person said:

*“It’s no doubt it will be hard to have a normal life as other Danish young people. First of all, language is an important issue – it’s the key to having a good life. Most young people speak Danish. The next thing is education, which is very important in Denmark. If you look five years ahead, some children may not achieve that, which will be hard. Also, they are missing their families and worry about them. Sometimes they have trouble concentrating. If you don’t feel good about yourself, it is very difficult to achieve goals and satisfy your needs. Your family can provide support in life and if you don’t know where or how your family is, you are missing a key support. Only the strongest can succeed. It was hard for me to be separated from my family, but I was clear about my goals in being here. For some the reason is not always clear, and they sometimes feel life doesn’t have meaning.”*

Another interviewee expressed the view that children who were sent by parents (or others) to escape armed conflict can more easily understand the need for the separation, while those who are sent mainly for education can have difficulties for several reasons. First, they may feel burdened by parental educational expectations. Second, they are usually in regular contact with parents and some, who visited Somalia in 2000, could not understand why they could not remain (before the situation in Mogadishu once again deteriorated). They may thus experience a feeling of rejection by their parents and angrily reject the staff in the Homes and anything associated with Denmark.

### **Issues Related to Children’s Homes**

According to staff members, the children who first lived in the Homes came from the asylum centres and had "normal" group problems. They treated each other as siblings and took care of one another in the "Somali way." The children could readily understand Danish ways and make new friends. Since then, some children have come to the Homes for non-refugee reasons, after the breakdown of living situations with family members, and as a result, carried with them a sense of past failure. The positive group atmosphere has changed and, in some Homes, a different dynamic has arisen. The staff is not trained to deal with these type of problems and Somali staff had no previous pedagogical training before starting work. One worker said: *“It’s very difficult to understand their problems. I am not a specialist. I am just a Somali man who can understand their background, but not the problems of today.”* A Danish worker stated: *“Only one of the current group has a friend from outside. The others don’t go outside for activities despite staff efforts. They are not motivated: they are rootless and restless.”* Some older adolescents resent that staff make decisions and impose rules, saying that: *“If I were in Somalia, I would be deciding about my life.”*<sup>4</sup>

A Somali worker described the role he tries to play: "We try to play the role of their parents but sometimes it is hard. I work very hard so the children don't lose respect for adults. I talk to them and try to get my point across. I try to talk with them as though we are family and the adults are like parents. If they don't have respect for anyone they can't be alright." He felt there was a risk that some would lose all respect for adults, but added that this could also be seen in part as normal adolescent behaviour. Another person felt, that since authority in Somalia is vested in clan elders and parents, it is very difficult for children in exile to accept others as authority figures.

One person was of the opinion that there is too much "pity" for the children and that this undermined the ability of some staff to set boundaries, or to make demands of the children. Pity was an unhelpful emotion because it meant children were only seen as victims. As a consequence, in some cases, some children took little responsibility and viewed staff as servants who were there to provide for them.

## **Parents**

Many views were expressed by staff about the perceptions and attitudes of parents in Somalia. These opinions were partly the fruit of contacts between Somali staff members and parents. The most significant preoccupations which parents relayed to staff related to religion, culture, educational progress and whether children can help them by sending remittances. Given the fact that the children are in a Christian country, parents feel it is important that they pray, receive Koran instruction and maintain Somali customs. Concerns were expressed about children being influenced by "lax" Western values. Several workers were of the view that parents do not understand the emotional problems their children experience in exile, that this is not within their frame of reference. A Somali remarked: *"It is very common for children to go and live with a relative in Somalia and they don't miss their parents because they are part of a big tribe. Parents don't understand the loneliness in the West – they can't imagine what it is like to go a whole day without seeing someone they know. Materially, the children are well clothed, go to school, etc., but they don't have mother and father, brothers and sisters and cousins to be with. Parents don't know what the child is missing inside and children cannot complain to their parents about this – it is not done."* This interviewee commented that Somalis in Africa know the suffering of war and the destitution in refugee camps but not the suffering of isolation and loneliness. Another worker asserted that parents have no idea about how difficult it can be for some children to adapt to school in Denmark, particularly the older ones who had little schooling prior to arriving.

One person observed that many children want to return to Somalia and Somali staff have told some parents their children are having difficulties, but the parents do not want them back because they would not be fulfilling their purpose in exile. It was pointed out that parents have made considerable sacrifices to send children to Europe. The trip and



associated costs (smugglers, etc.) can cost as much as \$4,000 US, which is a huge amount of money in Somali terms and involves selling businesses, property, jewellery, etc. A Somali worker commented: "*So if the kids are saying they want to go back it's 'a big disaster' and the parents will never forgive them. Things are different in Somalia. You just can't go to your parents and say 'I want to do this, what do you think?'*" Furthermore, most of the young people send money to Somalia on which many parents rely. One person maintained that children are under a great deal of pressure to send funds to the extent that some older young people have changed phone numbers so they will not be solicited by family members.

### **Visits to Somalia and the Future**

Several children had visited Somalia in 2000. Workers stressed how important these visits had been. According to a Somali worker, one boy who had visited his parents had had a great experience and was a changed person. Before the trip, those who visited didn't do well in school or feel happy. "*They were missing something in their life. The visit allowed them to fill the gap. For some of them their educational progress has improved.*" Some wanted to stay with their parents and did not understand they could not. Another worker observed that after the visit to Somalia, the children's memories of their first separation from parents were revived and they "acted out" a great deal. A Danish worker who travelled with children to Somaliland, felt that the parents were mistrustful of SCD staff, including the Somali staff. She thought their main fear was they might undermine a child's right to remain in Denmark.

A Danish worker described a boy (who no longer lives in the Home) who was very happy he had been able to visit his parents and be reintroduced to Somalia. Now he is very proud of his country, is studying hard and pursuing Koran studies. He is enthusiastic about getting an education before returning to Somalia. However, his sister had not visited, because she was afraid her family would not accept how she had changed: she had become "too Westernised." She says she will never return. A Somali worker described a girl in his Home as, "*mentally a Danish girl,*" and he thinks it would be very difficult for such girls to return to Somalia, that it is much harder for girls due to expectations in relation to dress, behaviour and gender roles.

Several workers expressed concerns about the future prospects for some young people. One is concerned that two may get into serious difficulties in the future. On leaving the homes – at age 18 – young people face a potentially precarious transition since they receive less psychosocial and financial support. They won't be able to send money to parents or buy new clothes, etc. One Somali worker commented that it was difficult to speak with young people about their plans. They feel confused about the future and what will happen to them. He added that the key issue is the parents' wishes—if they want the children to return or remain in the West. In his view: "*If the kids don't know what they*

*want of their life in Denmark, it will be really tough. It takes a whole lot of work to get an acceptable life in Denmark. Some go well, some do not.*" Another Somali worker felt that fundamentally only a child's parents could help them. He stated that the parents are the arbiters of where children will live, either in Somalia or Denmark, and that even when children become adults they will respect their parents wishes. At the moment, most parents are living in southern Somalia, where the situation is precarious and fighting still occurs in some areas.

Children's perceptions of the future are influenced by what happens to other children. Two brothers had returned to live in Somaliland in 1997 (see Chapter 5), and one child thought they had been sent back because they were problematic. In her mind, she feared she might also be sent back if she was not cooperative.

One person was more optimistic and asserted that Somali young people do have a future in Denmark despite the difficulties they face of being black African refugees. If they are willing and able to work hard, their studies will be generously subsidised by the state and she has seen many "success stories." However, in her view, the Danish school system is not adapted for refugee children, and since integration of refugees is now the responsibility of some 235 municipalities,<sup>5</sup> she is concerned that many smaller local authorities have insufficient resources and experience in this area.

The Danish government provides \$900 US to returning refugees, including children, and this is too little to provide for a child who cannot work on returning. One worker felt that there could be a substantial government subsidy for children who wished to return to Somalia or elsewhere, since currently it costs \$5-6,000 US per month to maintain a child in a Danish children's Home.

## **Comment**

In general, staff members conveyed a rather pessimistic view of the difficulties faced by children in Denmark, and their future prospects if they remained there. Several felt strongly that it would be better for some children to return to Somalia if it was safe to do so. While this may be a valid assessment in the case of individual children, some of these perceptions may be a reflection of staff frustration over the difficulties experienced at that time in the Homes. On the whole, the problems described are not particular to this group of children: many separated refugee children face these issues in exile. Indeed children who come with their parents can also face similar problems. In many cases their parents are not able to parent them effectively in exile because they are suffering the effects of armed conflict, persecution and culture shock. Not unusually, it is the children who provide the bridge to the new culture for the parents.

## **INTERVIEWS IN SOMALILAND**

Interviewees in Somaliland were asked questions about the current situation in Somaliland and more particularly about conditions relating to children. Some of this information is found in Chapter 2. They were also asked about the activities of their agencies, their opinions on voluntary return/home-country links for separated children from Europe, and their views on how separated young people could be involved in Somaliland. Some details have been changed to protect the identity of individuals.

### **Clan Dynamics / Refugees Returning from Camps**

Many interviewees commented on difficulties that young people returning to Somalia might face or, in their experience, were facing. Somaliland has been peaceful for a few years: it is therefore feasible to think of establishing some home-country link projects there, in contrast to southern Somalia. However, in the opinion of one interviewee, it would not be possible to return non-Issaq children to Somaliland. Somaliland led the struggle against the Barre dictatorship which had targeted Issaqs as his clan enemies. For Somalilanders, to receive separated children from Europe who came originally from the south, would be the same as "*asking your former enemy to care for your children.*" It is not possible to "hide anything" in Somalia, because information circulates so efficiently and quickly: it would quickly become known if children from "enemy" clans had arrived. Having said that, the clan system has flexibility through inter-marriage: one boy from Mogadishu, who had lived in Europe, was able to visit Hargeisa for the summer without difficulty because his paternal grandmother is Issaq. Somaliland already has many thousands of returning refugees, and is overwhelmed by the problems of these populations who are in a precarious situation. Those returning from Europe are not a priority for agencies or government. One government representative pointed out that war and displacement creates many forms of separation from parents, and it is possible to see many street children in Somaliland. Comparatively, those in Europe are in much better conditions.

### **Local and Parental Expectations**

As previously discussed, some interviewees thought parents in Somalia might not understand the problems their children face in Europe. Frequent mention was made of the Somali tradition of children being sent to live with relatives or being separated from family to travel with animal herds in search of pasture. Interviewees who had lived in the West were aware of the impact of exile and separation. Nor do parents appreciate the limited financial resources children have in Europe. Many adult Somalis have returned with considerable financial resources from countries in the Gulf region and the West, which creates both a model and a myth that fuels expectations. When young Somalis visit

wearing "trendy" clothing, this manner of dress is associated in Somaliland with material success. If children and young people are able to send money regularly, this can be interpreted to mean they are well-off which, in Western terms, they are not. This imposes a burden on children who may feel they cannot visit Somalia unless they bring gifts and funds for their extended family. According to a Save the Children Denmark project report: *"In Somaliland – as elsewhere in Africa – the expectations of expatriates are high ... to the expatriates it is a matter of honour to let everybody know that they are not failing."*

## **Cultural Differences**

Several individuals mentioned the problems that adaptation to Western mores could produce. Discipline in the West is more liberal and young people who return may pose "behaviour problems" and be seen as a bad influence on local Somali youth. Lack of respect for elders, dress codes, and sexual mores were described as examples of these behaviour problems. A government representative commented: *"Children in Europe learn a new culture and forget their Somali culture which can cause disturbances. He or she might expect material and social resources that are not available in Somaliland and may become "mad." You can see such youth on the streets."* The example of one young adult was cited: a young man, who had some form of mental illness, was sent from Denmark back to his parents in Somaliland. He could not cope and went to Berbera where he climbed into the undercarriage of a plane that was going to Saudi Arabia. He was found dead on arrival.

It was frequently acknowledged that returning to Somaliland involved a culture shock and a difficult adaptation which some young people will traverse successfully, depending on numerous factors such as extended family support and access to suitable education. One person referred to the emotional healing that can take place when one finds community and family again. The age at which a child originally left Somalia will be an important factor, since the younger children have spent more "formative" years in a foreign culture. A local youth organisation representative offered this opinion: *"Of course there will be problems for children who have been out of the country for several years. They need to see what it is like here and find out about their country again. They can come and see our projects and how we work with children. There will be difficulties, but we can work together to solve them."*

## **Education/Employment**

As discussed in Chapter two, educational resources in Somaliland are very limited and severely under-resourced. The educational system also differs radically from the Western approach in terms of discipline and pedagogy, and many young people may have difficulties studying in the Somali language. A positive response to the latter problem was

cited by an official from the Ministry of Education, who explained that some young people returning from Canada were allowed to take secondary school exams in English in order to facilitate their reintegration. Returnees are likely to be more technologically advanced and those seeking to continue their education may be frustrated by the education available. The serious unemployment in Somaliland is another challenge for returnees of all ages and family/clan links are crucial to acquiring employment.

A European working in Somaliland observed, that even those children who return with their parents can have a hard time adjusting. He felt that the poor health and education services available in the country are a major consideration when returning children, as are the uncertainties overhanging Somalia's economic and political future and consequently, the long-term opportunities for youth. *"The situation is much more complex than just training people in certain skills before or after returning. Somaliland has no economic framework to provide sustained development."* Nonetheless, in his view, the best interests of separated children lay in being reunited with their families as soon as possible.

### **Standard of Living**

Another interviewee from an international NGO felt that children could cope with the loss of the material benefits they had in the West, because *"they are not essential"* when compared with whether a child or young person is accepted and finds a place in Somaliland. In this respect, how they can negotiate their sense of identity is important: she receives many visits from children who have previously lived in Denmark and want to maintain the link.

One young man was sent at age 18 to discover his country and meet his relatives. He said he was happy doing this since he had a return ticket and had a choice about returning to the West. The need for safety in the home-country links process was stressed. Those who have citizenship of a Western country are clearly in a position to make a choice that need not be final. Two interviewees felt that talk of repatriation places a huge burden on children and young people because there is no safety, no going back. It is a final step that affects the rest of their lives.

A Somali psychologist directing a local NGO, and himself a returnee after long years in the West, voiced strong reservations about the European political agenda which is promoting repatriations to certain countries of origin. He considered that:

*"State-monitored returns of people have something cynical and racist about them. I see this obsession, in Europe more than in North America, to return refugees to their land, which smacks of preserving the purity of the race. Basically, what European politicians are saying is this: "We would really like to throw them out,*

*but because we cannot say that explicitly, we have to find a way of making it 'voluntary'. " But you can't just train people and send them back. Training is just one part of a complex situation. Also, if local Somalis have to compete with someone coming from abroad, there can be resentment. So, it's a very, very difficult issue."*

In his view, the sorts of problems facing Somali youth in the West are faced by all first generation migrants, parents and children alike. They all share adaptation problems and they can be understood and helped to go through them, in the context of their culture of origin and that of the country of reception.

*"The teenager who has made some roots in the West and adapted to the teenage culture there, has a different way of being and behaving in the world. If you bring him or her back here, to a very conservative culture, there will be problems, particularly for girls. They can visit and learn about their country, but they must be given a genuine choice."*

It is possible to see young Somalis who have been abroad in different countries "*huddling together on the street*" to give each other support because they share the same problem of being different and there is no support for them. This sentiment was echoed by other interviewees who observed that those returning from the West can be considered by local Somalis as different and in some cases, no longer Somali. The psychologist added that nationals of the same country should not all be lumped together with regard to return: they are individuals who have differing capacities for adaptation and particular needs and problems.

### **Young People Returned to Somaliland by Families in the West**

Several people interviewed raised concerns about the involuntary returns of young people who had been living with their families in the West. These children are also separated, but under very different circumstances. They form part of the larger picture of the climate of return. A typical case involved a child, young person, or young adult being brought to Somaliland on the pretext of a holiday or visit, and then abandoned there without the means to return. In one reported case, a girl had been told she was going to Canada and ended up in Hargeisa. Three interviewees described several case histories and the researcher met with one young person who had been returned from Europe (see below).

The Somali psychologist is treating on an informal basis several young people who have

been "dumped" back in Somalia. He is very concerned for many of them. One particularly tragic case involved a boy whose parents had been killed in Somaliland, after which he fled to the UK with his siblings. His behaviour changed while in exile and his relatives decided to send him back. He was taken first to Addis Ababa, where his documents were removed, and then to a clan village in Somaliland, where he had a breakdown. His sister in Hargeisa heard he was ill and went to get him. There she found him naked, "crazed," and chained up. She suffered flashbacks to the death of their mother who had been run over by a tank, and subsequently she herself suffered a breakdown. Now both siblings are in Hargeisa and kept tied up in a small shack by their relatives. There are no therapeutic facilities in Hargeisa and the psychologist visits them and provides money for their food and some drugs. He hopes to open a clinic in the future, but for now has no place to take them to. In his experience, many Somalis who suffer on returning, are being prescribed drugs by poorly trained doctors, regardless of their symptoms. These drugs are also available without prescription. He recently saw an 18 year-old young woman whose family sent her back. She had been prescribed these drugs to "help her adapt to life in Somalia."

Another case involved a boy who had got into trouble in a Western country. His family brought him to Djibouti to live with a relative, who then brought him to Hargeisa. In Hargeisa he began a relationship with a young woman who became pregnant. They married, but separated after a short time. A case which was reported in the Danish media, involved a 14 year-old girl, brought back to Somaliland from Denmark on the pretext of a holiday. She was forcibly circumcised and during a two-year period was passed from one family to another. Her father lived in Hargeisa, but was not providing for her. Her stepmother was responsible for sending her to Somaliland and had retained her passport. A relative managed to get hold of the passport which was then brought to Somaliland. Eventually the girl managed to return to Denmark.

The following case history was taken during an interview with a young person in Somaliland.

Abdi, aged 16

*Abdi and his family fled to Sweden when he was seven years of age. He has five brothers and sisters. He loved going to school, playing football, had many Swedish friends and spoke very good Swedish. His parents separated and in 1995, when he was aged 12, his father brought him to Somaliland with his younger brother. They thought they were going for a holiday in Scandinavia, but instead flew to Moscow and from there to Addis Ababa and then to Hargeisa. Their clothes and possessions were left behind in Sweden. Their father stayed with them for two months and then left them with an aunt and uncle, saying he would soon return to take them back to Europe. Since then the brothers have lived with their aunt and uncle and are able to attend school only part-time since their relatives can barely pay the school fees.*

*Recently their uncle lost his job and now they are very poorly off and receive no money from their parents in Sweden. Abdi had heard from visitors to Hargeisa that his parents have been reunited, and at one point he was told his family would come back to Somaliland, but that did not happen. His parents have not communicated with him for six years; he does not know why. He said: "You cannot feel good about your parents if they never write you, phone you, never tell you how your brothers and sisters are." He and his brother speak Swedish together and they also talk about their friends in Sweden – What are they doing now? Where do they live? He told the researcher: "I believe I would be much happier if I could just visit my favourite teacher and say hello to him and my friends. I would feel better about staying in Hargeisa. I never got a chance to say goodbye to anyone."*

Why do parents return children under these circumstances? In some cases it appears linked to the young person's behaviour problems in exile. Perhaps the hope is that being back in Somaliland will solve the problem. It was suggested that some Somali parents are unhappy about the schooling in the West: it is too "open" and lacking in discipline and respect for teachers. Parents may also fear their children become too Westernised and forget their Somali culture. They may want their children to find a Somali spouse. It may also be the case that parents intend to return themselves at a later date, but this intention becomes impossible to fulfil. This group of young people are placed in a painful situation: in addition to the standard problems of readjustment, they must endure a second involuntary exile within the span of a few years, accompanied by parental abandonment. Their ability to adapt to Somaliland is likely to be greatly compromised by longing for people and places they did not choose to leave behind and by the powerlessness of their predicament.

### **Suggestions on Home-Country Links**

To date, European and Somali staff based in Europe have accompanied and supported young people on a journey to Somalia (see Chapter 6). While these staff are known to the young people and provide continuity, they do not live in the country of origin and experience day-to-day life there. Those who are living there will be able to provide guidance on how to conduct themselves and understand local conditions. One person stated: *"The only way to make a project for separated children sustainable is to have it community-based. If you don't have the back-up of the surrounding community you might as well close it down."* One suggestion was to bring local staff to the Western country to meet with children and young people prior to their undertaking a journey. This would also help local staff appreciate conditions in the West and assist them in helping parents understand why their children may not be able to fulfil the family expectations.



Local NGO's and UN agencies in Somaliland suggested that separated young people might participate in a number of ways. Havayoco, a youth agency, has several programmes, some of which could involve youth from abroad, such as:

- a circus project – acrobatics, gymnastics, theatre
- a shelter for street children
- HIV awareness campaign
- vocational skills training – funded by UNHCR for young people returning from the camps

Havayoco is also working with young people who have returned from the diaspora by facilitating discussion about behaviour, sexual mores and khat chewing.<sup>6</sup> They are considering providing some family counselling in the future. It is possible that Havayoco could use volunteers to help with computers, sports training (basketball and football), teaching English, doing office work, and working with street kids and children in the returning refugee camp. Havayoco received a donation from a Somali youth group in the West who had raised funds through theatre performance.

Gavo, a youth organisation in Berbera, provides skill training (electricity, carpentry and computers) with funding from SCD, and also works with street children. Gavo would encourage young people to visit their projects, stay with them and work as volunteers. Their social work staff could help young people overcome reintegration problems and address family issues. The Widow and Orphans Association is a group of war widows in Berbera, who care for their own and orphaned/street children, and run an ice-cream project to generate income. They are also hoping to start a café. Numerous other organisations operating in Somaliland could be approached, such as, Hope Worldwide, an International NGO that organises sporting events in Somaliland, and the Red Crescent Society, that provides health and first-aid training for youth.

Save the Children Denmark is exploring the possibility of establishing a "folk highschool" in Hargeisa, where separated young people from the West could be provided with accommodation for a few months, be able to learn a skill alongside young local Somalis, and to learn about their country. It might also be an opportunity for them to engage in other sorts of activities as described above. The provision of accommodation was conceived as a way to allow young people a measure of independence from family expectations and greater flexibility in re-establishing family ties – a place for young people to be themselves on their own terms. Staff working at the facility could provide family counselling to help children and parents deal with problems and misunderstandings.

## **Comment**

Interviewees were concerned to point out the challenges that face young people visiting or returning to Somaliland after a period of exile, but clearly the potential also exists for their involvement in local projects which are open to working with separated young people. Local support and assistance with the reintegration process will be vital to the success of future home country link projects.

## **Notes**

1. Residence permits are granted under Section 9.2.4 of the Danish Aliens Act for “particular reasons.”
2. With the exception of Greenlanders, with whom Danes previously had a colonial relationship.
3. See Hannemann, 1997, pp.37-40 for discussion of this issue in relation to Somali children in SCD homes.
4. This is not necessarily the case given that elders and families would make these decisions, although adolescents would have more responsibilities in Somalia and the status/self-esteem that go with that.
5. Formerly the Danish Refugee Council had this mandate but operated in a much smaller number of municipalities.
6. Khat is a leaf that is chewed for its narcotic effects and is used widely in Somalia.

## 5

# CHALLENGES OF EXILE AND RETURN – THE MIGRATION CONTINUUM

In a preliminary and open-ended way, this chapter explores a few themes that emerged from the interviews and relevant literature. Its purpose is to highlight some of the issues related to culture, identity, and interventions in the country of exile that can affect separated children's relationship both to the country of origin and the country of exile, and have a bearing on the establishment of home-country links. Some of the material relates to Somali experience and some is of a more general nature. The section is divided into three parts: pre-migration, exile, and home-country links/return to home country. This reflects the growing recognition that migration is a continuum of which home-country links and return migration are but one aspect. Indeed many forms of migration are "circular" or repetitive, as people move back and forth between countries of origin and countries of migration. This reflects the greater mobility of populations not only at the international level, but also at the national level, where people relocate within their own countries several times in the course of a lifetime.

According to a recent major publication on return migration:<sup>1</sup>

*"Although an integral part of the migration process, return movement, including its social and economic implications, has so far remained inadequately unravelled in the migration debate. One of the most neglected areas of migration research, it also has failed to receive adequate and systematic attention from policy makers."*

Furthermore, when return has been the subject of policy makers, there has been a tendency to regard returnees as an undifferentiated group without considering various factors such as personal situations, length of stay in exile or "*motivations underlying the different types of return.*" Return migration is defined as a *voluntary* process, while the term "*repatriation*"

designates an involuntary or forced return by a political authority. Return is one part of the migration process – one which may span the lifetime of an individual – and which can be influenced by many factors: the particular characteristics of the individual (age, sex, education, alone or with family in exile, etc.); the reasons why an individual has left their home country; their dreams, hopes and intentions for the future; experiences in the country of migration or exile; and the conditions prevailing in their country of origin when return is contemplated.

## SEPARATED CHILDREN

Large-scale returns of separated children have taken place during the last decade but have normally occurred in the developing world as part of a larger process of returning refugees following a mass exodus into one or more neighbouring countries<sup>2</sup>. Children have been returned to parents or extended family members, or to communities of origin or, in some cases, to institutional care. These children did not experience a radical rupture with their culture of origin, since they normally remained with large numbers of compatriots and some family members in exile; furthermore, there were likely to be many cultural similarities between their countries of origin and exile. The sense of physical proximity to their homeland may also have been beneficial (depending on circumstances in exile). Since the early 1990's, Europe has experienced the large-scale arrivals of separated children from the region of the former Yugoslavia. Although they came from another European country, many were Muslims and therefore part of a minority in Europe. Some of these children have returned, but little appears to be known about the aftermath of this process. In addition, separated children have come to Europe from 60 or more countries from all regions of the world, bringing with them different values, cultures, languages, religions, and behaviour. It is therefore the case that most separated children in Europe are faced with a major geographical and cultural rupture which has many implications for their experience in exile. Since WW II, and with few exceptions, organisations and states in Europe have limited experience of the voluntary return of separated children or facilitating links with their home countries.

When considering this process for separated children, it is helpful to examine the individual's continuum of experience from the period before departure, their separation from parents, through settlement in a country of asylum or exile – which may include an initial stay in a refugee camp – their contacts with family in their home country, and the hopes and fears which constellate around ideas of return. The *Statement of Good Practice*, which is the basis for the SCE programme, makes clear that a long-term or "durable" solution for a separated child, should be based on firm foundations, such as admission to a safe country of asylum, proper identification, guardianship provision, appropriate care, education and healthcare, family-tracing and contact, a child-appropriate refugee determination process, and careful exploration of conditions in a child's home country. Assessment of the need for international protection in any form – refugee status,

humanitarian status, temporary protection, residence permit, etc. – is essential.

*"Best practice on return of separated children needs to start at the point of arrival. The way in which children are treated from the outset will affect the quality of any future decisions that are taken regarding their possible return home."<sup>3</sup>*

When anyone, child or adult, returns to their country of origin, they bring with them the experiences, strengths, vulnerabilities, knowledge and skills they "acquired" while abroad. They may also carry with them the psychic injuries connected with loss, violence, or persecution that occasioned their departure, and the meanings that have attached to these. The experience of exile pertains in part to the ways in which the "culture clash" has been mediated, to the ongoing process of identity formation in childhood and adolescence, and to the responses of the receiving society that encourage or inhibit integration and participation in society. The tenor of their reintegration in their home country will to some degree reflect these experiences.

## **PRE-MIGRATION**

*"Family separation or loss, however, never occurs in isolation from other factors which can increase or decrease the psychological vulnerability of unaccompanied children. On the protective end of the scale is the presence of familiar family members, other adults, peers and cultural practices. On the risk end of the scale are other kinds of trauma or deprivation – exposure to violence, persecution, hunger, uprooting from native socio-cultural settings – which can compound inherent stress of family separation and loss and lead to far greater psychological suffering."<sup>4</sup>*

The nature of a separated child's life prior to departure will contribute to their ability to adapt in exile. Positive family relations and experiences that have provided a child with a "secure base" are internalised and form part of the child's sense of self which sustains them in exile. Conversely children who have had problematic, abusive or insecure family experiences prior to leaving, are likely to be more vulnerable in their efforts to deal with the pain of separation and meeting with an alien culture. Children who are exposed to organised violence, terror, torture, witnessing the deaths of family or friends, will have to deal with their emotional consequences without those adults on whom they previously relied for protection.

It is commonly assumed that "*massive separations always entail deep mourning*" for children, and that separated children are "*particularly vulnerable to the double burden of mourning and integration of traumatic experience.*"<sup>5</sup> However, culture can affect to some degree the way in which separation is experienced and understood, which in turn can act to provide a measure of protection for separated children. A recent article<sup>6</sup> on separated Somali boys from northern Somalia concludes on the basis of a small clinical sample that:

*"For the young Somali, forced exile ... cannot be considered benign or non-traumatizing. Nevertheless, because of the special relationship it has with the traditional meaning of sending young boys off to learn about nomadic pastoral existence, exile can acquire for a lot of them positive attributes, and beyond all possible losses, can regain potential for change."*

As noted in Chapter 4, the pastoral nomadic tradition is one in which separation from parents and immediate family is a normal experience. From the age of 5 or 6, children of both sexes are given tasks caring for animals. As they grow older, they are required to spend longer periods of time in the bush tending animals.<sup>7</sup> At about the age of 12, boys go on camel drives for long periods, months at a time, sharing this arduous experience with other boys and facing considerable adversity. Although under the control of an adult, they are separated from their families. These experiences serve as part of the initiation process into manhood, and the exposure to adversity can have a "steeling effect" which may serve as protection against future stresses. Another article states that in northern Somalia:

*"Travel, regardless of its reason or purpose, is considered to be a learning process and a source of wisdom in itself. A man who has travelled, a wayo' arag, is one who knows a great deal, has seen things, has lived. The longer and more varied the travels of a person who has faced the unknown, the greater the respect and social consideration conferred upon him through the Somali language."*<sup>8</sup>

It is also not uncommon in Somali society for boys aged 6-10 years old to be sent to live with relatives in order to study. The separation from parents may last for many years. In a society based on reciprocity amongst members of clan lineages, it is not unusual for children to move between family groups. Some girls may go to live and perform domestic work in another household. Two of the children who were interviewed for this report had lived most of their lives in Somalia prior to departure with a non-parental relative. Somali children living in other families are normally treated as brothers or sisters of the "biological" children of the family. The disruptions of war also provide illustrations of the traditional collective approach to childcare: one of the parents in

Somalia has for many years been mothering a lone child she took in during an attack on her city. The mother of another interviewee is caring for many nieces and nephews while she herself is separated from her own children.

Boys are strongly identified with their peer group with whom, in the nomadic context, they share long months during the search for new pastures: *"The peer group guarantees both survival and the transmitting of experience, and becomes the favourite environment for sharing and emotional support."* Age-based groupings are very important in Somali society. They are *"called the qeyr (in Arabic) or fil (in Somali) whose members share the same social aspirations."*<sup>9</sup> Peer groups are said to share common goals and dreams, and individuals may be under pressure to associate with these goals that might entail travel and departure.

Initially boys were sent away within Somalia and to other Horn of Africa countries, but increasingly they were sent to Gulf States or Arab countries to study or earn money. The onset of armed conflict has resulted in farther-flung migrations which have tended to organise themselves in similar patterns. Adults from the lineage who are bound through reciprocal ties to the child's family will provide financial assistance and shelter, but the peer group will be the source of support and continuity.

When Somali adolescents, more particularly boys, leave Somalia, they are usually entrusted by their parents or other caring adults with a "mission" or goal, e.g. to acquire a good education or skill, to send money back to the family who is in need, to save money and succeed economically, to preserve Somali culture and religion in exile, to care for and protect younger siblings, and in the case of the eldest boy, to be an example to all the siblings. As seen from one of the young Somali adults interviewed for this report and quoted above in Chapter 3, missions can provide a sense of purpose, of meaning in exile and a goal in difficult times. Thus, according to an adult interviewee:

*"The loss and suffering caused by this rupture are associated with a future which re-establishes the link well beyond separation, since it corresponds to the shared expectations of the parents and their children. The collective meaning attached to these early separations is linked to that more generally attributed to travel in Somali society: as a source of knowledge and wisdom."*

However, not all Somali children have the same experience as the nomadic youth. Girls are not usually sent away on their own and so the "myth of travel" may be less relevant to them, nor are they usually sent with missions, although they may retain traditional caring roles with them in relation to siblings. In traditional societies, girls do not usually associate with peers in public spaces, rather their peer contacts are organised around work activities that exist on the margins of public spaces, such as going to fetch water, to buy food at the

market, or to the river to wash clothes. In Muslim societies the baths are another significant meeting place for girls and women. Children living in urban or agricultural settings will not have had the experiences described above, i.e. prolonged absence seeking pastures and water, but they may well have experienced mobility within their extended family structures.

It would be useful to evaluate some of these concepts in conjunction with separated Somali children and also to compare them with the traditions of separated children from other countries. Developing an awareness of culturally created protective mechanisms is important when considering the impact of separation on children in exile and how the child can be supported.

## **LIFE IN EXILE IN THE COUNTRY OF ASYLUM**

In this part, three inter-related themes will be explored in a provisional way in relation to the overall theme of home-country links and return: culture clash and how children might mediate between two different cultures, adolescent identity formation in the context of exile, and the approach or response of the receiving society in relation to integration/child welfare. How might children be helped to deal with the "dual identity" of the migrant who takes on aspects of the new culture? Quotations in this part, unless otherwise indicated, derive from two interviews with a Somali social worker and a child psychiatrist working with separated refugee children.

### **Meeting of Two Cultures**

When separated children arrive in the West, they are immediately thrust into an unfamiliar environment operating on the basis of mysterious codes, different values, and curious ways of behaviour. The language may be entirely foreign to the child, as will be almost certainly, the bureaucratic systems which he or she must negotiate. Relations between children and adults are different, as are expectations of children and youth. Somehow the child or young person must act appropriately in order to keep safe. One young interviewee said that at first it feels like a "*madhouse, a circus. You feel attacked on all sides because you don't understand anything. You want to hide away.*"

The differences between Somali and Western culture were described as "*basically the same as the differences between all traditional and modern societies.*" Some of these differences can be described as follows:

- individualism versus collectivism: in traditional societies the individual is always part of the group be it family, clan, or tribe: "*Your own life is the others' – without them you are nothing, you don't have a life.*" People are linked by complex webs of



reciprocity. In modern societies the individual is expected to live their own life and take decisions on their own, without necessarily having reference to group wishes. Independence from group pressure is a valued attribute.

- the position of the child: in traditional societies children assume responsibilities early on. They are expected to obey and treat elders in a respectful way and not to question decisions of elders. In modern society childhood is seen as a time to be relatively free of responsibilities. Increasingly, dialogue between parents and children is seen as important to family life.
- in traditional societies there is "no adolescence." Children pass from childhood to the assumption of adult responsibilities, such as work, marriage, etc. In modern societies, especially since the second World War, adolescence is increasingly prolonged and seen as a troubled period strongly marked by inter-generational conflicts. Adolescents are not expected to assume many responsibilities outside of education.
- adults in traditional societies exercise social control over "other people's children" in public places, while in modern society families are isolated and adults rarely intervene with the children of others.
- gender roles: the position of girls in traditional societies can be perceived as very constrictive when compared with modern societies. Girls may be discouraged from playing outside and expected to serve and care for male members of the household. Girls are expected to maintain family honour through limitations on freedom, by correct behaviour, and through modest dress. The education of girls is often accorded much less importance than that of boys. In traditional societies, boys have the role of protector and guide to sisters and younger siblings within a male-dominant society. They may also see themselves as fighters or warriors. In exile these masculine roles may be diluted or irrelevant. In Western societies girls are not expected to defer to their brothers and have considerably more freedom and educational opportunities.

Separated children may experience the new society as rejecting for many reasons: overt racism and xenophobia, institutionalised forms of discrimination, negative images of Africa in the media, and hostile representations of Islam. Or the feeling of rejection may ensue from misunderstandings that occur due to the differences enumerated above.

Analysis of the interviews with separated Somali children and young people found in Chapter 4, speaks to some of these cultural differences and experiences of rejection. An earlier set of interviews<sup>10</sup> conducted in Sweden in 1995 with 35 separated young Africans also describes aspects of cultural difference.

*"Interviewees complain that they have difficulties in making contact with (Swedish) people and that in Africa people care more about one another and Africans often meet one another and they always have time to exchange a few words ... Interviewees say that in their countries of origin, the parents and older men are authorities and they decide what younger people should do. Due to the lack of such authority, it seems that these young Africans in Sweden are confused. They have difficulties in understanding that someone else should have this role."*

An interesting description of some of the "different personality traits" between Somalis and Swedes is given by the researcher in that project:

- Somalis value verbal ability (a culture with a strong oral tradition – written Somali was introduced in 1972), while writing ability is essential in Sweden;
- In Somalia it is considered advantageous to be able to adapt to different social circumstances, while in Sweden it is important to maintain your principles and not to pose as someone you are not;
- Somalis are extremely polite and ask about their interlocutor's family even with strangers, while Swedes appreciate correctness, but are not very polite (this probably refers to Swedish respect for privacy).

### **Approaches by the Country of Reception**

The modes of care given to children and the approach to integration are crucial to facilitating their adjustment to the new situation. Societies which demand a speedy adaptation may place too much pressure on children without allowing them space to mourn their loss of family and cultural referents and to regroup themselves before taking on the challenge that the new culture represents. The values of the new society can be imposed too quickly on separated children:

*One example was given of a Rwandan brother and sister, the only people in their family who survived a genocide, who were placed together in foster care. The girl was "serving" and taking care of the boy in ways the foster parents did not find acceptable. They sought to empower the girl and prevent her from serving the boy. In the process the relationship between the siblings broke down. The girl's traditional role was to take care of her brother's physical needs and the boy's role was to protect his sister. These roles provided continuity with a past that had been cruelly shattered. Time was required to readjust and grieve. The girl was to some*

*extent empowered to "live her life" but at the cost of the relationship with her only surviving family member and the boy was deprived of a role that gave him value.*

It is important to establish continuity in a child's life and to do that, links with the culture of origin are important. It may be, for example, through the presence of same-culture foster carers or workers in children's Homes, or by strengthening and supporting ties between the child and other family or clan members in exile. Establishing a link with parents, where this is possible, also creates continuity. The Somali social worker in Canada explains to parents (from many different countries) how she is working with their children, asks them to transfer parental authority to her and to inform the children of this transfer. In her experience parents are relieved by this suggestion, since they fear their children will be vulnerable to "bad influences." In this way she becomes part of the child's family group and a valid authority figure for the child. In her view this is a crucial way in which she can be of assistance to young people experiencing a troubled transition.

Each culture has what was described as "loci of continuity" around which a refugee or migrant will organise life in exile. This will also vary to some extent according to the child's sub-culture i.e. social class or milieu in country of origin. Some groups have a locus around the dream of return: they may make few moves to acquire citizenship of the new country. Others locate continuity in the family: what is most important is bringing the family together rather than returning home. While most Somali children<sup>11</sup> wish to be reunited with their parents (if they are alive), for some Somalis, the locus may also be found in the shared dream of the peer group or the parental mission. One interviewee commented:

*"Being sent on a mission is a powerful tool for establishing continuity ... There can be a danger in projects of return. Organisations may be looking for "buzz" terms that will enable all separated children to maintain continuity. One term is the unity of the family. Now for a nomadic people, it is not evident that geographical proximity with the immediate family is as important as we assume. It may be true for other cultures but not necessarily for all."*

Thus an important tool in assisting separated children is the identification of these anchors or loci of continuity which can protect the child in exile, provide meaning to daily life, and a link between past, present and future: a future which may involve return or another form of link with the home country.

Taking a holistic community-based approach can reduce some of the tensions inherent in the meetings of culture. For example, any problematic symptoms or behaviours that children exhibit could be cross checked with members of that child's community so that

their meaning can be verified. What is normal in one culture can be seen as unacceptable, even deviant, in another. A correspondent in the UK described one such instance:

*"In UK schools coats are not worn inside. One day a refugee boy refused to take off his coat despite being repeatedly told to do so. His teacher finally sent him to the head of the school. Fortunately there was a refugee support teacher who was able to identify that the boy's behaviour related to a recent bereavement. In his culture one traditionally wears a blanket in the first stages of mourning and the coat stood for the blanket."*

Terminology is important. The concept of "participation" – connoting involvement of the newcomer in the society – can suggest exchanges between cultural equals with each person contributing something of value. This is distinguished from the term "integration," which has connotations of actions taken by authorities in respect of new arrivals and, although distinct from the rejected term "assimilation", can still be seen to imply the need for becoming like the receiving society. A Save the Children Sweden report noted that this approach is not without pitfalls: <sup>12</sup>

*"There are some benefits to thinking of refugees in our society in terms of participation, rather than in terms of integration. The principle question should not be 'How can these Somalis become Swedes or Norwegians?' but rather, 'What are the means that would facilitate their participation in society?' [however] It is taken for granted that the social zone constituting civil society should be free from state intervention and family ties. This is an absurd notion when you are dealing with Africans for whom participation in social life is intrinsically tied to their families. The cruel discovery made by northeast African refugees is that what is regarded as prestigious social assets back home are viewed as signs of corruption when they come to Sweden."*

## **Identity Issues**

Life in exile is mediated through one's sense of identity as it develops in relation to the new society and culture. Identity issues are very acute during adolescence when the processes of identity formation are connected to the physiological transformations of the body and accessing the status of an adult. Separated adolescents are dealing with both the external turmoil of exile and this internal transformation. Since it is very difficult to change rapidly both on the inside or outside, so it is likely that one of these processes will be interrupted: either by ignoring the outside reality and withdrawing or more commonly, by

ignoring the internal processes and concentrating on adjusting to the outside. Eventually a readjustment is needed to take account of what has been put aside.

*"Identity is very reactive, in this case reactive to the attitude of the host society. One identifies more strongly with one's national or cultural identity than you would if you were back home. Being in a foreign country makes one more conscious of one's culture of origin and one begins to define what one is in relation to that."*

Children react in different ways to meeting a new culture and this may largely depend on individual personality. Some are in revolt: they want to be back home with their families. They may also become conscious of rejection by the new society. They react by holding on tightly to their own culture and idealising their homeland. This idealisation can be seen as a defence mechanism necessary to survive the feelings of rejection: *"They refuse anything to do with the new culture and to move ahead with their lives in the host society. They become much more nationalistic and identified with home culture, than those who are in Somalia. They listen only to Somali music and poetry, only have Somali friends, etc. They make a paradise of home in their minds."* This reaction can also entail minimising the value of the society of exile: one Somali young person refused to take a course on Western civilisation, and seemed afraid to be influenced by the new society. This type of reactive identity can be perceived as "stubborn" or "resistant" and the youth may be categorised as a "typical arrogant Somali." Instead of categorisation, it is important to address and diminish the underlying fears and perceptions of rejection.

Another reaction involves suppressing or rejecting one's culture of origin and embracing the new culture. This is likely to be viewed favourably by the recipient culture since it appears that the young person is adapting and not resisting efforts to help them. One person commented that some persons in the indigenous culture perceive migrants as undeserving of assistance if they are seen to resist or be "ungrateful." These are the limits of a tolerance that reposes on the acquiescent behaviour of the recipient. Ideally, separated children will be helped to mediate between the two cultures, to see that neither one is "all good or all bad," and that it is possible to take what is best in both unless they strongly clash, which is most likely to occur between the collectivist and individualist perspectives.<sup>13</sup> This mediation can be carried out through a careful and non-judgmental reality check with the young person about both the idealised country of origin and the rejected country of exile – or the reverse. Both temperaments (resisting/embracing) can be helped to maximise their strengths and let go of defensive reactions.

Two further aspects of identity were identified. The first is one's "root" identity, of which one may be only marginally aware since it is embedded in the norms of one's culture of origin. The second is the "reconstructed" identity, which is either chosen or given to one.

In exile, for example, a "black consciousness" identity may be formed in response to perceived and actual racism in the West. Or, as is usually the case in exile, one is given a minority status identity by the dominant culture. This contrasts sharply with the Somali experience of living in a largely ethnically homogeneous society. Young people may resist this minority status by validating their culture of origin and expressing strong nationalistic feelings.

*Young people interviewed for this report touched on some of these identity issues. A few interviewees appeared to have rejected Danish society and strongly affirmed their Somali identities, preferring to associate only with other Somalis. In some cases this rejection seemed connected with feelings of helplessness and the difficulties moving ahead with studies and plans for the future. A younger interviewee said that when she visited Somalia last year she "felt like a Danish girl there and yet also a Somali girl at the same time." She was relieved to return to Denmark.*

*Another young person, who has passed more than half her life in Denmark, affirmed that she was "100 percent Somali" and at the same time, was strongly engaged in very non-traditional (for Somalis) activities as a girl. A young adult who has adapted well in Denmark observed the tensions between inner and outer reality: "Although I say my prayers, I am not acting like a Somali girl. I don't cover my head and dress like a Somali. It would be hard for me to go back and dress that way. I feel I am denying who I am, forgetting who I am, and losing my culture. I may dress like a Westerner, but I don't feel deep inside that this is me. I think in future I might dress differently." Finally another young adult who intends to return to Somaliland and seems confident in his choices, said that he would also want to return to Denmark because "Denmark is part of my life now. I don't want to lose it."*

Girls and boys are each faced with particular identity challenges in exile. It was suggested that in general, Muslim girls are doing well and are managing to navigate between two cultures.

*"Generally speaking, boys have more difficulties in exile; but when girls go astray it is more serious for the family because of the dishonour issue. The challenge for girls is how to establish what is possible without transgressing too much either their community's values or the host values and that they are able to move back and forth between the two."*

Many girls, not necessarily separated girls, continue to carry out traditional activities in the home, but also do well in school and they can thereby gain status with their families. Girls have more difficulties juggling gender roles, but on the other hand, they tend to possess the sorts of qualities required by school and work in the context of the country of reception and hence do better in school and find jobs. They may also be freed of the requirement to accomplish a family mission.

Boys can feel deprived of their traditional roles as protectors. Eldest boys especially, however, carry a heavy burden of expectation that they will be an example to their siblings and accomplish their family mission and peer group goals as well. One interviewee had seen boys who were crushed by these expectations, particularly those who have educational or other limitations that make it impossible to carry out the desired role.<sup>14</sup> Thus boys may feel devalued, their dignity may be affronted and this can be expressed in ways that are not acceptable in the host society. Their sense of identity may reflect these negative reactive elements and the ways society reacts to them.

## **HOME-COUNTRY LINKS – RETURN MIGRATION**

The return home, be it for an extended visit or with more long-term intentions, is generally accompanied by a second culture shock. An interviewee in Somalia (Chapter 4) described how young returning Somalis from Western countries – some of whom have been sent back by families without exercising any choice – congregate together on the streets in order to give each other support and to maintain some links with their shared past in the West. Several people interviewed in Somaliland observed that Somalis returning from the West are seen as different and, in the most extreme cases, as "no longer Somali." Those who have lived in the West have usually adapted to the teenage culture in these countries and this can be seen as a source of "bad behaviour" in the home country. Yet these aspects of identity have been formed in exile under difficult circumstances of which their compatriots are largely ignorant. These markers of successful adaptation in the West are rejected in the home country. Returnees may be perceived as "privileged" by those who have not experienced exile, the loneliness of modern societies, the racism and discrimination in the country of exile. None of these obstacles is insurmountable, but points to the need for assistance and support in the return process.

There is common agreement, however, that home visits are usually helpful experiences, enabling family ties to be reaffirmed and providing valuable information about real conditions in the homeland (young people interviewed for this report describe their experiences in Chapter 3). Reservations were voiced about the risks of sending younger children who might suffer from a repetition of separation from their parents, or sending children too soon, before they developed some security in the country of exile.

*"According to (a Norwegian psychologist<sup>15</sup>) the experiences from repatriation in other countries reveal that children are a particularly vulnerable group, as the repatriating process intervenes with the development of identity. Additionally, for many children, this is not repatriation, it is moving to something new and unknown. Furthermore, Jareg claims that children have to leave important parts of themselves in the country of exile."*

Many of the young people interviewed left Somalia at a very young age and stated they had no memories of their "homeland." Their identity as Somalis has, to a considerable degree, been constructed in exile amongst members of their community who are themselves – to some extent – reconstructing identities in reaction to exile. Their perceptions of actual life in Somalia are likely to be tenuous and distorted.

#### Story of Return

*Two Somali brothers from Somaliland fled to Ethiopia with their family in 1988. They were brought to Denmark by relatives and later placed in a SCD home in 1996 when they were aged 9 and 11. A year later SCD staff members visited the parents in Hargeisa and suggested that they take the children back to live with them. The parents had five other children, but because of the destruction of their home, were living in the home of the man's father. They were reluctant to place more burden on him by taking back two more children. Also, the father did not at first grasp why his children would be unhappy in Denmark. Subsequently, a Somali worker visited Hargeisa with his own children. He brought them to visit the boys' family and showed them how his own children could barely speak Somali. He said, "How do you think your children will manage without any family?" He then spoke with the grandfather and convinced him it was important for the boys to return to Somaliland. In Denmark, the boys were pleased to visit, but worried they might not like it there. They were suspicious and afraid to lose their friends in Denmark (they had been there five years). Finally they returned. Some months after their return, the Somali worker visited them and found them doing well, enjoying close contact with their siblings and family. They asked to visit Denmark, but this has not been possible. Subsequent visits have confirmed that they have adapted well to their return.*



The question of what young people are able to accomplish in exile – the mission – has to some extent been discussed earlier: it is an important issue, particularly for Somali boys. Interviews with young people touched on this matter in Chapter 4. The inability to fulfill the mission leads to a sense of failure that is greater than individual failure because, in the collectivist perspective, one has failed one's family and broader lineage group. A basis for self-esteem lies in the ability to fulfil these goals, for which, young people are acutely aware, their families in the home country often have sacrificed a great deal. One interviewee noted that *"it can be dangerous to send children back if the mission is not accomplished. Dignity is very important for Somalis who may lose face and could potentially be harmed by a return of 'failure'."* However, this feeling is not unique to Somalis or to those from traditional or developing societies. For instance, some people who emigrated from southern European countries to North America or northern European states, also experienced this sense of failure, which for some was an impediment to returning to their home country. It is perhaps an aspect of the whole migration process that one wishes to return somehow better or "greater" than when one left; that there has been a purpose, something to show for the adversities of exile and separation. In a sense the Somali tradition of the traveller who gains wisdom through his travels can be placed within the broader human need for "going out into the world" in order to grow and to test the self.

As has been mentioned above and in Chapter 4, some interviewees expressed reservations about the nature of the return "agenda" in Europe, to the extent that it was driven by the interests of states anxious to return those they do not wish to incorporate into the European Union. Although it has been recently acknowledged that there is a great need within the EU for inward migration to compensate for the declining working-age population, it seems that those who are already present in the EU but who are rejected asylum seekers or undocumented workers are not likely to be considered as potential migrants.<sup>16</sup> It is more probable that migrants from the CIS countries, central and eastern Europe including those who aspire to EU membership, will be looked to in order to fulfil these immigration needs. One interviewee reflected:

*"We need to ask the question – whose agenda is it? I think there is a Western agenda about sending these kids back when we don't know what to do with them and sending them back is an easy way. I think there is hypocrisy because we take a politically correct notion that it is for the good of these kids: they are separated and if we send them back to their families things will be better. But that is far from certain. The first and difficult step in this process is to see whose agenda it is, and what is really in the child's best interest – and there is not a lot of certainty about what that is. So when we have too much certainty about children's best interests we might have personal agendas around that. And then the question is, in this uncertainty, who has a voice? There are issues of power – whose voices are heard?"*

In Chapter 4 the views of young people on return are noted. There is uncertainty about the future and how things will develop in Somalia. While some wish to return, there are preconditions that need to be met before this can be contemplated such as achieving education goals and peace in Somalia. Some do not feel they will be able to have a good life in Somalia in the foreseeable future and others have set their sights on life in the West. Young Africans interviewed in the SCS study expressed thoughts about returning<sup>17</sup>:

*"The majority of Somalis plan to return when there is peace in Somalia. (The) Eritrean will return after he has completed his studies. Some of the young people said that they wanted to return but they do not know when and how it can be achieved. Two people felt sure they would stay in Sweden. One girl regards herself as having become so Swedish herself, that she does not consider that she could return to the home country; however she could move to another country."*

The question of best interests is a complex one and the least that can be said is that, while general guidelines can be drawn up to assess best interests, they must be applied to individual children whose situations and personalities are unique. The *Statement of Good Practice* referred to above, outlines the issues that need to be addressed in relation to returns and "durable" solutions.

The return to one's country of origin can carry many benefits for a refugee or migrant. One of the young people interviewed in Denmark expressed it this way: *"It was great to be walking around seeing my people"*. An excerpt from an IOM study neatly summarises the potential benefits and contradictions of return:

*"in reality the migrants' return is often accompanied by considerable ambivalence. Many studies hint at this but few analyse it explicitly. On the one hand, returned migrants are comforted by being back in their own culture: they need not worry about communicating in a foreign language or being treated as inferiors, they are happy to see old friends and they re-identify with the local way of life. Yet they also begin to realize that as people who have "been away", they are viewed differently. Certain things are expected of them."*<sup>18</sup>

These expectations might be to "behave as a migrant" by displaying success and generosity.

Most young people and adults who have been exiled, voluntarily or under duress, long to return or be reunited with parents and family. That longing is part of the burden of exile, but also a means of maintaining continuity with what has been lost, through keeping alive

the dream of return. When things are difficult in the country of exile, the hope is available that things will be better in one's homeland, that one will be happier there.

The reality of exile is that it changes one's identity, behaviour, tastes and perceptions of one's homeland. In the interim the homeland also changes, and for refugees these changes may be radical as societies are torn by conflict and persecution. There is no going back to the status quo, neither to who one was prior to exile nor to the place one left. For people in migration, identity becomes more closely tied to national or ethnic origins since one has come from "somewhere else" which, by definition, is foreign or "other." In exile one has entered into a new culture and taken on some of its attributes: one may come to cherish and appreciate many of its qualities. Because we live in a world of nation states we must all be "citizens" of one country or another, unless we have the misfortune to be stateless. But the option of dual nationality is available to many nationals, and increasing numbers of people have taken up this opportunity. This is a legal response to the reality of having "a foot in two countries," but it can also express the deeper reality of the migrant or refugee who has developed a form of "dual identity," whose different facets come to the fore depending on their geographical location. Separated children face many challenges and opportunities in living through the continuum of migration that has intruded into their lives. Where they wish to live is a decision of the deepest importance. How they can be understood, supported, assisted and sustained in making these choices is an important part of the work we do with them.

## Notes

1. *Return Migration: Journey of Hope or Despair?* Bimal Ghosh, editor, International Organisation for Migration, 2000, p. 7.
2. For example, Mozambican and Rwandan separated children.
3. *Separated Children and Voluntary Return: Ways of Surviving*, Seminar Report, Save the Children Sweden, 1998.
4. *Unaccompanied Children : Care and Protection in Wars, Natural Disasters and Refugee Movements*, Everett M. Ressler, Neil Boothby, Daniel J. Steinbock, Oxford University Press, 1988.
5. "Resilience in Unaccompanied Minors from the North of Somalia." C. Rousseau, et al., in *Psychoanalytic Review*, 85.4, August 1998.
6. Ibid.
7. The researcher was able to observe this on the recent visit to Somaliland.
8. "Between Myth and Madness: The Premigration Dream of Leaving among Young Somali Refugees," Taher M. Said et al. in *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, Vol. 22: 285-411, 1998, p. 386.
9. Said et al., 1998.
10. Päivi Sharifan Holma, 1996, pp. 13-14, 17.
11. The SCD study of the three children's Homes (Hannemann, 1997) reflects this.
12. *Working with Young Unaccompanied African Refugees*, Save the Children Sweden, 1996, p.15. Concept based on the views of social anthropologist Bernard Hellander.
13. One young adult interviewed for this study described such a situation: she had come with her

elder sister after they had traversed together many terrors and adversities. When her sister became ill, the social worker suggested that as a 15 year-old girl, she should not have to take responsibility for caring for her sister. She had been shocked and outraged and commented: “ *I would never leave my sister. I would go to hell for her. My sister is everything to me: mother, father, family.*”

14. This reflects findings from Save the Children Sweden studies and is also discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.

15. Jareg, Elizabeth: “*Foredag om “internasjonal erfaring med repatriering og barns situasjon”*” Tilbakevendingsseminar i regi av Psykososialt team for flyktninger, Tromsø. 29-30.5.1996. Quoted in *Two Countries – One Future: Young Bosnians in Exile and the Repatriation Process*, Marit C. Borchgrevink, Psychologist, Norway.

16. *Replacement Migration: Is it a solution to declining and ageing populations?*, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2000).

17. Päivi Sharifan Holma, 1996, p.19.

18. “Generalizations from the History of Return Migration,” Russell King, in Ghosh (2000), pp.19-20.

## 6

# HOME-COUNTRY LINKS – PREVIOUS EXPERIENCES

This chapter provides first a brief description of Save the Children Sweden's programme on home-country links and voluntary return for separated children and second, the lessons that have been learned from this experience. An overview<sup>1</sup> of this programme is available in a recent publication so only limited details will be provided here. SCS<sup>2</sup> is not the only agency that has organised home country visits: two Swedish municipalities have brought separated children from Somalia, Afghanistan and Iraq (Kurds) to visit families in Somalia, Syria and Pakistan. Save the Children Denmark has also organised return visits (see Chapter 3) and, as of the year 2000, the Municipality of Oslo in Norway was planning a home-country links project for separated children.

### SAVE THE CHILDREN SWEDEN – VOLUNTARY RETURN AND HOME-COUNTRY LINKS

In 1995, Save the Children Sweden (SCS) commissioned a psychologist to carry out interviews with separated African children and young people in Sweden.<sup>3</sup> Results from this survey are discussed elsewhere in this report. Young people expressed a need for family contact/reunion and support from adults. SCS concluded that it was important to *"investigate the possibilities of family reunion at an early stage whether in Sweden or abroad ... organised support must exist both in Sweden and in the home country in order to enable those children who desire to do so, to return"*. Thus SCS embarked on a programme that would enable separated Somali children to visit Somalia, re-establish links with their families and culture, and facilitate voluntary return for those who wished it.

#### First Journey

The first visit occurred in the summer of 1996, when five young Somali males aged 18 and over visited Nairobi and Addis Ababa, where they had contacts with cousins and friends.

The young people, permanent residents who had been in Sweden for 5-6 years, were involved from the outset in planning the trip. Prior to leaving they underwent psychological preparation with a psychologist and a Somali worker: "*During these three days many emotions and feelings surfaced. Guilt, loneliness, hope and expectations. The major topic of the discussions was the tremendous expectations that relatives had placed on the shoulders of these boys.*" Prior to leaving they received one month's social allowance and a small contribution from SCS for buying gifts. While on the one hand they were happy to be amongst compatriots and meet with family and friends, they were also distressed by the suffering they witnessed amongst the displaced Somalis. On visits to organisations in Nairobi, they were informed about the skills which were in demand in Somalia. Four of the boys travelled alone into Somalia to meet with their parents and/or other family members. On return to Sweden, none of them felt ready to live in Somalia at that time, but expressed a desire to return to live in the future. Their ability to concentrate on their studies improved markedly, problems such as nightmares, stomach aches, headaches, etc., disappeared, and they began to plan educational goals and look forward to the future.

## **Model**

The experiences of this trip formed the basis for SCS to develop a model to facilitate voluntary return. The model was composed of four steps:<sup>4</sup>

1. Theoretical and practical education in Sweden
2. Visit to Somalia – working as a volunteer
3. Further education in Sweden
4. Permanent residence in Sweden or Somalia

## **Second Journey**

The second trip took place over a six-week period in 1998 and involved 11 boys out of an initial group of 23 young people. Two Somali girls had been considered, but they decided not to participate. Of the eleven participants, two were Eritrean and three had participated in the first trip. As before, psychological preparation was provided including individual and group work. Each person was paid a work experience payment of 1,000 kroner per week. This journey was organised around work placements in Asmara (Eritrea), Addis Ababa, Dar-es-Salaam (Tanzania) and Nairobi, preceded by an introductory week in Nairobi, which involved study visits to aid organisations with activities in Somalia. Training in Eritrea was discontinued due to the war with Ethiopia. Overall the journey was successful and the opportunity to engage in work experience was extremely valuable, although some of the NGO placements were not suited to young people with a limited educational background. Work experience around vocational skills such as mechanics or

plumbing would have been more useful. One young Somali who had gone on both trips experienced increased self-confidence, having faced bad memories from his past in Somalia and dealt with guilt feelings surrounding his departure: *"I blamed myself at the time. If I'd stayed in Somalia perhaps my mother need not have died. I now understand that I was not alone in making the decision – there were many people involved."*<sup>5</sup>

### **Third "Journey"**

The third "journey" was considerably more ambitious in terms of scope, duration, and the involvement of other agencies: funding was provided by Sida, SCS and the Swedish Immigration Board, and the Swedish enterprise Hifab International hosted the project in Africa. It was not so much a journey as a substantial project. The overall aim was to provide a group of Somali youth with skills training followed by hands-on participation in a building project in Tanzania. Ten Somali boys from different parts of Sweden came together in January 1999 at a secondary school for six months training in masonry/plastering, painting, building skills and construction drawing. They shared common living quarters during that time. According to the instructor, many had difficulties focusing on practical tasks, and as the departure date approached, many became anxious. Psychological support was offered at a late stage and in the end only four young people departed for Dar-es-Salaam. They journeyed without an adult and found the flight difficult as it brought back memories of leaving Africa. They were met by the Hifab instructor and after a brief period to meet with their families, they were brought to live in Bagamoyo (Tanzania). Here they were to work in conjunction with Tanzanian youth on a building project. However, the young people felt uncomfortable in their accommodation (a reconstructed fort that had formerly housed African slaves in transit to Arab countries) and were transferred to Dar-es-Salaam. An alternative work placement could not be found at short notice and SCS decided to discontinue the project. Several lessons were learned from this experience which are noted below. It is significant that the one person who eventually completed the training work in Tanzania was the only young person in the group who had participated in a previous journey.

## **LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE THREE JOURNEYS**

The following points summarise the main learning points arising from the three SCS-organised journeys as well as those undertaken by other agencies.<sup>6</sup>

- The **reception and care** of separated children should encompass the following:
  - family tracing and renewal of links with family as soon as possible;
  - the opportunity for children to receive counselling to deal with experiences before flight;

- the elaboration of individual action plans for every child that looks beyond age 18;
- staff working consciously to relieve children of the burden of family expectations.
- Voluntary return is a process, not an event, which can take a long time and involve several stages.
- The **participation of young people** from the beginning of a project is crucial. The planning process reinforces their self-confidence.
- The **inclusion of girls** may require a separate project structured around their specific needs.
- Reunion with family members must be given time and importance in the overall conception.
- **Age**: the SCS projects only involved young people aged 18 and over. The risks associated with journeys to their countries indicates that they must be old enough to take the decision to expose themselves to risk.<sup>7</sup> Danish experiences with younger children "*suggest there are psychological risks associated with exposing small children to a renewed separation from their parents.*"<sup>8</sup>.
- It is preferable to wait until a separated child has established some **stability and security in exile** before contemplating a journey.
- **Psychological preparation** is an essential element to enable them to prepare for the difficulties they will encounter such as feelings of guilt, shock at living conditions in their homelands, the expectations of family, flashbacks and the revival of memories related to their first departure.
- **Money issues** are very important as many young people feel shame if they cannot bring gifts and money back with them. For this reason some young people dropped out of journeys. Young people in the first journeys were paid welfare allowances before departure and also used their savings. Those on study placements were paid a weekly amount, although in some cases, given the demands on their resources, this was not enough.
- It is vital that young people be **accompanied by a familiar adult**, ideally someone who has experience in both countries. They require support to face problems such as scrutiny by immigration on arrival and renewal of feelings surrounding the initial flight from their home country.
- Before any lengthier trips are undertaken, such as those for work placements, a first "go and see" trip is strongly advised.



- **Outcomes:** For young people, the outcomes of home-country link projects vary depending on the individual: some young people are inspired to plan a future in their homeland, yet wish to retain a foothold in the country of exile in case return does not work out; others see a future involving work in both countries; and other young people decide to move towards further integration in the country of asylum. All young people benefited from the chance to see the reality of their countries for themselves, to meet family and resolve fears and feelings of guilt. In most cases they felt better about life in Scandinavia, their performance at school improved, and they were better able to plan for the future.
- **Issues for Agencies:** These projects require considerable commitment of time and financial resources. It is often difficult to acquire travel visas and to find appropriate work placements. Agencies involved in this work should form a network so that each group does not "reinvent the wheel." Journeys to children's home countries are also very valuable for staff working with separated children.

## Notes

1. *Providing a Choice for Separated Refugee Children: A Report on the Value of Renewing Home Country Links*. Helene Thornblad, Save the Children Sweden, 2000.
2. See *Separated Children and Voluntary Return: Ways of Surviving*, Seminar Report, Save the Children Sweden, 1998. A description of the ISS Italy programme is given here.
3. Päive Sharifan Holma, 1996.
4. *Seminar on Young Unaccompanied Somalian Refugees: integration, education and voluntary return*, Save the Children Sweden, 1997, pp.22-26. This text provides a description of this model.
5. *Renewing home country links – the second journey home. Model for integration and voluntary return*, Save the Children Sweden, 1998.
6. Adapted from Thornblad, 2000.
7. On one journey a young person was robbed at gunpoint and another kidnapped. His family had to pay a bribe to have him released.
8. Thornblad, 2000, p. 24

# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## CONCLUSIONS

Contemporary society is characterised by considerable mobility of populations – migrations that are both forced and voluntary. Until recently, return migration has not been the subject of much study or policy initiative and, as a result, considerably less is known about it than migration that is "outward bound." For many people, the return to their homeland is not the end of the story, but is part of a process of ongoing mobility. The return of separated children and youth must be situated within the broad context of return migration and the programmes designed to facilitate this. This study has focused on specific practice in the Nordic Countries. It is also important to analyse the suitability of national and European policies of return with respect to separated children. In particular good policy and practice must provide a strong framework based on international protection, child protection, prioritisation of the child's best interests and due consideration for the wishes and feelings of the child.

The concept of voluntary return can be "top heavy" for separated children, because it places too much emphasis on an outcome, as contrasted to a process in which a young person explores opportunities for the future in relation to their countries of origin and exile. The adoption of the expression "home-country links" by Save the Children is an acknowledgement of this process. Separated children's experiences in exile are an important element in the renewal of home-country links. How they can best be supported, included and cared for has been articulated in the SCE Programme's *Statement of Good Practice*. Individual separated children and young people need to be assisted to explore and clarify the nature of their lives in exile, their connections with their home country, and how they identify themselves. How they are able to bridge two distinct cultures is of primary importance. The changes in sense of identity, behaviour and expectations that all separated children – indeed, all migrants – undergo in exile, need to be acknowledged if they are to deal with the realities of their home country which has changed in their absence. The aim is to help young persons to plan and move forward with their lives *successfully*, regardless

of where they eventually decide to live. It is critical that children are helped to meet their country of origin with a good sense of self-esteem. Reintegration in their country of origin may be undermined if the young person carries with them a sense of failure and rejection in exile or feels shamed by the failure to achieve family expectations. A checklist of questions that can aid in this process is provided in Annex I.

Children and young people should have the same opportunities as adults to investigate their home country context. Organisations in exile are engaged in planning and networking around return projects. They could be approached to involve or support separated young people in this process. "Go and see" visits are valuable and important: they permit young people to find out about the situation in their home country, renew family links, face fears and old pains, feel part of their culture of origin, feel the relief of speaking one's mother tongue and being amongst similar looking people, etc. It allows children to experience: "*Now I know where I come from.*" It may not be advisable for younger children to visit parents as there may be psychological risks in a second separation from parents.

Renewing connections with parents and other family members is clearly an important element of home-country links. Some separated children are already in contact with one or both parents while others have lost touch or do not know where their parents are or whether they are in fact still living. And though contacts with the parents provide a child with continuity, it can also be a source of difficulty if the wishes of the parents and child are different and/or if the child feels unable to fulfil parental expectations. Many parents have made great financial sacrifices to pay for their child's travel to Europe and they don't want the child to return without some tangible signs of success that will be beneficial to the family group. Most parents, understandably, have a limited notion of their child's experience in exile. The small number of parents interviewed for this report felt it was most important that their children were safe, well-provided for and that they had the opportunity to receive an education. Staff in caring agencies in the West develops contacts with parents in countries of origin. These links are very valuable in assisting staff to carry out their work and allowing them to inform parents about their children's situation. They can also, where appropriate, facilitate an eventual family reunification. This study has only been able to provide limited information on parents' perceptions and views, and this is an area that is likely to require more investigation. It would be beneficial for agencies working in this area to share practice, specifically on how to develop relations with parents and other family members in the home country.

The three SCS-sponsored journeys for older young people revolved around the themes of renewing ties with family and country, work experience and skills training. The scope of activities envisaged within the framework of home-country links could be broadened to include: links with family; time to play and explore; sports activities; skills training; work experience with an NGO, business, or other agency; volunteering with local children; initiating small projects such as a café run by street children in Somaliland; creation of small research projects; bringing sports equipment, books and other resources lacking in

the home country. In many of these activities, children would be contributing to their country and thus, bringing a "gift." It is vitally important that young people not return with a sense of failure. The involvement of local agencies in countries of origin is important in order to anchor home-country links and their projects in the context of the actual situation. Examples of this sort of involvement of local agencies within Somaliland have been given in chapter four. In addition to staff in Europe, local staff in the home country might also be involved in preparing and accompanying young people on visits or longer stays.

It is essential to stimulate and facilitate young people's participation in this process. There may be significant cultural conflicts for girls who no longer conform to traditional behaviours expected of them in their homeland. Particular attention should be paid to the needs of girls and young women and to developing projects that respond to those needs. At the moment, separated children and young people are quite dependent on caring agencies in countries of exile to make links with their countries of origin. Save the Children Sweden experience highlighted the importance of young people being involved in planning their journeys. Participation in the development of new ideas and projects could be an antidote to some of the powerlessness felt by many separated children and youth when they consider the future. Interviewees made recommendations<sup>1</sup> some of which are found below, of ways in which young people could be empowered to achieve a measure of independence in this process.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Conditions in the country of origin must be carefully examined in order to assess their suitability for development of home-country links projects. Assessments should include the following:
  - Is the country stable and peaceful? What is the long-term political and economic outlook?
  - Are there significant violations of children's human rights? Are children at risk of persecution as per Article 1(A) of the 1951 Refugee Convention, or of threats to life or liberty?
  - What are the human development indices in terms of basic necessities?
  - Are there sufficient opportunities for children and young people in terms of education and future employment?
  - Are there many returning refugees, from neighbouring countries and the diaspora in the West? What opportunities exist to facilitate home-country links activities?
  - Are there local agencies and community supports that can help young people with reintegration? What is the role of international agencies who work in this field?
  - Are there adequate safeguards in place for the protection of the child?

- Organisations engaging in home-country links projects should have a transparent policy position on the costs and benefits for separated children of such projects and on voluntary return. The checklist provided in the Annex can assist in this process.
- Information and support should be sought from adult members of children's communities in exile who are involved in return projects.
- Psychological preparation should be provided by skilled professionals to help the children to tackle different difficulties they encounter before and when turning back.
- Specific projects for girls and young women should be developed and linked where possible with women's and youth organisations in countries of origin.
- Agencies working with separated children in Europe should exchange views about policies of home-country links and voluntary return, to share information, experiences and develop "information banks" about conditions and opportunities in countries of origin, links with government and NGO and UN agencies, security issues, visa applications, etc.
- The Separated Children in Europe Programme could sponsor a practice-sharing seminar for staff in European countries to enable them to share experiences and approaches to contacts with parents in countries of origin and to home-country visits.

### **Participation of Separated Children and Young People**

- peer-based action research among separated young people in Europe to set up youth networks and generate ideas and goals for links between countries of exile and home.
- creation of a website to allow separated youth in the West to communicate with each other through chat rooms, bulletin boards, etc. An email list could also be created to enable the circulation of new ideas and up-to-date information. The website could provide information on: needs in countries of origin in terms of materials, skills, assistance; local activities in countries of origin; skill training opportunities; links to other relevant websites.
- the development of cultural exchanges whereby young people bring their Western friends to see their home countries. These visits would educate Western youth about other cultures and the reasons behind refugee movements. They could also be helpful to separated youth trying to bridge two cultures by bringing the two together.
- separated young people could be assisted to raise funds or supplies to support projects in their country of origin.

- youth organisations in home countries which have internet access could enable children and youth in developing countries to communicate with separated young people in exile through email.

## **Notes**

1. For further recommendations, see: *Save the Children Sweden*, 1998.

# ANNEX I

## **Checklist of Issues to Consider in Relation to Home-Country Links and Voluntary Return**

This checklist provides a number of indicators and questions that arose during the research of this report and which may be relevant to consider for each separated child or young person when planning home country visits and projects that aim to develop home-country links and facilitate voluntary return migration.

### **Separated Children and Young People**

- The age at which a child has left their country affects the memories that the child retains of their parents and life there.
- In the case of a younger child – how will they deal with a repetition of separation from the parents resulting from a home-country visit?
- The age of the child on arrival in the country of asylum can affect the ease and extent of adaptation within a new culture, new language acquisition and identity formation.
- To what extent does the young person derive strength from their religion and culture? Are they connected with adult members of their community, refugee organisations and religious figures? These individuals can help a young person to find their way in exile and provide support in the face of prejudice or discrimination.
- What types of “cultural clashes” does the child experience? Is there a conflict between the individualist and collectivist ethos? What help do they receive to mediate these differences? Do they measure success in terms of the new or old culture?
- Does the young person have an appropriate adult figure whom they respect and from whom they can accept guidance?
- Does the young person have enough maturity and psychological stability to visit his/her home-country?

- How does the child or young person see him or herself? Do they feel rejected by the country of asylum and primarily identified with their culture of origin? Do they attempt to adapt to the new culture and minimise differences or reject their own culture? Does the child construct an idealised vision of the home country and devalue the culture of exile? How do they think they have changed in exile?
- Does the young person have accurate information about the current situation in their home country?
- What are the reasons for exile? Generally, when children have experienced armed conflict, exposure to violence and trauma, or direct persecution, the reasons for exile and separation are generally clear, provided the child was old enough on departure to remember them. When children are sent from situations where their immediate security was not evidently at risk (eg. from a neighbouring country) the child is more likely to resent or resist exile, feel rejected by their parents and find it difficult to find a purpose in education.

### **Country of Origin**

- Is the country stable and peaceful? What is the long-term political and economic outlook?
- Are there significant violations of children's human rights? Are children at risk of persecution as per Article 1(A) of the 1951 Refugee Convention, or of threats to life or liberty?
- What are the human development indices in terms of basic necessities?
- Are there sufficient opportunities for children and young people in terms of education and future employment?
- Are there many returning refugees, from neighbouring countries and the diaspora in the West? What opportunities exist to facilitate home-country links activities?
- Are there local agencies and community supports that can help young people with reintegration? What is the role of international agencies who work in this field?

### **Country of Exile**

- What is the nature of their country of exile? Does this country have a long experience of immigrants and refugees? What kinds of attitudes are prevalent in institutions with



respect to the assimilation-integration-participation continuum? Is there an appreciation of different cultures and the particular needs of "minority" children? Is this reflected in the provision of care, services and education?

- Has the young person encountered structural discrimination or racism that impedes their progress in the country? Are there educational and work barriers? What kinds of images of refugees and migrants are projected in the media? Are there laws that prohibit discrimination on the basis of race or ethnicity?
- Does staff working with separated children receive appropriate training? Do they feel confident to help children in exile? Has a bi-cultural approach been taken? Are children required to adapt quickly to the new society? Are they allowed space and opportunity for "cultural bereavement?"
- What assistance is available to the young person to visit their country of origin and, if desired, to re-establish themselves?

### **Parents, Family and Culture of Origin**

- What is the nature of the child's family ties in: the country of asylum, other Western countries, the country of origin and other countries in the region. Can family ties in countries of asylum be strengthened in order to support the child or is the child truly isolated from other family members?
- How does the child's culture of origin conceptualise separations between parents and children and migration/exile? Does the culture contain protective mechanisms for children?
- What links, if any, exist between the young person and her/his parents in terms of frequency and quality of contact? How does the family explain things to the child?
- How are staff in child welfare agencies connected with the parents? Do they feel clear and confident in carrying out this role?
- Have the parents and family made considerable sacrifices in order to send the child to safety in the west? What are their current living conditions? Do they depend on the young person and other family members in exile for remittances?
- Have the parents given the child a goal or family mission? What is this and how realistic is it? Does this place a heavy or impossible burden on the child? In what ways can staff and others such as relatives or community members convey to parents the reality of the child's life in exile?

- How does the child see her family story developing: by return to the country of origin or family unity elsewhere? Has family reunification in the West been attempted or is it in process?

### **Role Models**

- What kinds of "role models in migration" does a child have? Have older siblings/cousins migrated to Western countries and established a settled life there? Do they know other separated young people who have been successful or not in exile?
- Do young people know of others who have successfully returned to their home country?

# ANNEX II

## GLOSSARY

CIS Commonwealth of Independent States  
EU European Union  
FGM Female Genital Mutilation  
GAVO A youth organisation in Berbera with funding from SCD and Havayoco  
IMF International Monetary Fund  
IOM International Organisation for Migration  
ISS International Social Service  
NGO Non-Government Organisation  
SCD Save the Children Denmark  
SCEP Separated Children in Europe Programme  
SCS Save the Children Sweden  
SNM Somali National Movement  
UNHCR United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees  
UNICEF United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund.  
USC United Somali Congress

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# SEPARATED REFUGEE CHILDREN

## Selected publications

1. ***Documentation of the European Conference “Children First and Foremost – Policies towards Separated Children in Europe.*** Save the Children Sweden, 2000.  
This report consists of all speeches and recommendations from the first joint Save the Children and UNHCR conference on separated children, September 21-22, 2000. The objective of the conference was to explore and make recommendations on the best practices for asylum procedures for separated children in the EU - Member States and elsewhere in Europe.
2. ***Interviews with young unaccompanied African refugees.*** By Päivi Sharifan Holma, 1996.  
This is the result of a project to survey the situation for separated refugee children. A total of 35 children, average age 15, from Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ghana and Somalia were interviewed. The objective of the survey was to obtain these young people’s background, their arrival in Sweden, their current situation and their future aspirations.
3. ***Providing a Choice for Separated Refugee Children – A report on the value of renewing home country links.*** By Helene Thornblad, 2001.  
Between the years 1996 and 1999, three journeys to renew links with young separated refugees were made with the support of Save the Children Sweden. The majority of these children were Somali. This report describes the three journeys, what went well and what went wrong, and it makes conclusions that will help for future and similar projects. It also summarises the experiences from journeys to renew home country links in two Swedish municipalities and from two foster homes in Denmark.
4. ***Renewing home-country links.*** By Annacarin Leufstedt, 1997.  
This book documents five Somali boys’ experiences on their return to the horn of Africa and provides a model for work with young separated refugees in Sweden and Europe. It demonstrates the importance of re-establishing links with refugee’s home-country as a means of facilitating development.
5. ***Renewing home-country links – The Second Journey Home.*** By Ann-Sofie Olsson, 1998.  
This report describes the journey of nine young Somalis. Save the Children Sweden developed a model for integration and voluntary return of separated Somali refugee children. This report presents in detail how this model was used for this trip.
6. ***Separated children and voluntary return.*** By David Wright, 1998.  
This is the report from the seminar that took place in 1998 on separated children and voluntary return. The specific purpose of the seminar was to explore the issues and make recommendations for the best practice for the voluntary return of separated children. This report contains a comprehensive record of the presentations and findings of the seminar. It concludes with recommendations for action.

7. ***Separated Children Coming to Western Europe – Why they travel and how they arrive.***  
By Wendy Ayotte, 2000.  
This report is based on interviews with separated children in Western Europe and professionals working in the field, plus documentary research. It explores the issues that lead children to flee from their home-country, persecution, armed conflict, poverty, family issues, etc. and looks at the situation they face on arrival to Western Europe
8. ***Separated Children in Europe Programme – The situation of Separated Children in Central Europe and the Baltic States.*** By, William Spindler, 2001.  
This report compares and analyses the main findings of the Country Assessments of eleven countries in Central Europe and the Baltic States. It represents a continuation of the work initiated in “Separated Children Seeking Asylum in Europe: A Programme for Action” and aims to complement it by providing an overview of the situation of separated children in these countries. Ideally, both reports should be read in conjunction as the earlier report contains general considerations on policy and practice which are also relevant to the countries in Central Europe and the Baltic States, as well as proposals and recommendations for addressing issues raised by the situation of separated children throughout Europe.
9. ***Separated children in Europe Programme - Statement of Good Practice,*** 1999.  
The Separated Children in Europe Programme (SCEP) is a joint initiative of some European members of the International Save the Children Alliance and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The programme aims to realise the rights and best interests of separated children and young people who have come to or across Europe by establishing a shared policy and commitment to best practice at national and European levels. This Statement of Good Practice sets out the policy and best practice basis for the programme’s work.
10. ***Separated children seeking asylum in Europe – A programme for action.*** By, Sandy Ruxton, 2000.  
This report sets out a European programme for action for separated children, building on comprehensive assessments of law, policy and practice in 16 Western European countries carried out during 1999. Among other things, this report aims to develop recommendations for the development of law, policy and practice at European and national levels and develop recommendations for the establishment of data on the number and situation of separated children on an ongoing basis.

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