

# SOMALI REFUGEES IN KENYA AND SOCIAL RESILIENCE: RESETTLEMENT IMAGININGS AND THE LONGING FOR MINNESOTA

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## ABSTRACT

Refugee camps are often perceived as unproductive places that waste people's potential. What is left unremarked in many refugee accounts, however, is the positive side of camps. Highlighting suffering alone raises academic curiosity as to what keeps camps in protracted situations going for so long. Drawing on the notion of social resilience, this article highlights the multidimensionality of camps as social worlds by showing how the attachment through kin-based networks between Somalis at Dagahaley refugee camp in Kenya and their relatives in diaspora animated collective imaginaries about better futures in Minnesota. The article contributes to migration and humanitarian debates by arguing that refugee longings for onward migration is linked to places with a potential for kin-based support as opposed to random Western destinations, as is often highlighted in the media.

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THE STRUGGLES THAT AFRICAN MIGRANTS undergo in attempting to reach overseas destinations have been widely documented. Driven by the need to escape warfare, famine, and poor economic conditions in their countries, these migrants often embark on tragic-laden journeys only to encounter closed borders at potential destinations. In recent migration literature, however, a new emphasis has been placed on demonstrating that the search for better lives does not drive refugees and other African migrants to random wealthy destinations.<sup>1</sup> Rather, many migrants target places that have substantial numbers of relatives, compatriots, or religious

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1. See for example Cawo Abdi, *Elusive jannah: The Somali diaspora and a borderless Muslim identity* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2015); Samson Bezabeh, 'Africa's unholy migrants: Mobility and migrant mobility in the age of borders', *African Affairs*, 116, 462 (2016), pp. 1–17.

associates who imbue such destinations with a sense of belonging.<sup>2</sup> For the case of refugees in particular, the closure of borders has seen resettlement emerge as one of the few legal routes to Western destinations that offer such a sense of belonging. This article focuses on resettlement aspirations of Somali refugees in Kenya whose diasporic imaginaries are driven largely by kinship networks between these refugees and their overseas compatriots. The Somali refugee situation was triggered by the 1991 breakout of civil war in Somalia that continues to drive thousands across various international borders. Based on twelve months of ethnographic research at a village that lies adjacent to Dagahaley refugee camp in northeastern Kenya, where Somali refugees and their hosts belong to the same ethnic group, I demonstrate that these diasporic imaginaries revolved around Western countries.

Somali are a patrilineal, Muslim people who are divided into clans, sub-clans, and lineages. An important aspect of Somali kinship is their practice of scattering relatives in different places to simultaneously exploit the potential offered by multiple places, including resettlement in Western countries. In turn, lineage members in different places are bound by strong reciprocal obligations.<sup>3</sup> This set-up generated kin-based networks where ideas, resources, and diasporic imaginings circulated. The dream for many of my informants, however, was resettlement in Minnesota, which some people fondly referred to as a 'Somali state' due to its considerable Somali population. At least 85,700 ethnic Somalis live in the US, with more than 25,000 staying in Minnesota.<sup>4</sup>

I argue in this article that kinship networks generated collective diasporic imaginaries that imbued refugee lives with meaning in the otherwise grim conditions and rendered life more palatable by portending a less adverse future. This, I claim, invigorated the refugee sense of being and equipped them with the resilience of coping with scarcity in the camp. The distribution of relatives in multiple places is seemingly aligned to Somali kinship organizing principles that typically entail the forming and breaking of groups.<sup>5</sup> However, unlike the segmentary lineage logic that was informed by the need for self-defence and economic survival,<sup>6</sup> current group dynamics appear to have been shaped by practical realities of

2. Abdi, 'Elusive janna'.

3. Paul Goldsmith, 'The Somali Impact on Kenya: The view from outside the camps', in Hussein Adam and Richard Ford (eds), *Mending rips in the sky: Options for Somali communities in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (The Red Sea Press, Lawrenceville, 1997), pp. 461–483.

4. 'Survey: Nearly 1 in 3 US Somalis live in Minnesota', *MPRnews*, 14 December 2010 <<http://www.mprnews.org/story/2010/12/14/american-community-survey-initial-findings>> (8 March 2013).

5. Ioan M. Lewis, *A pastoral democracy: A study of pastoralism and politics among the northern Somali of the Horn of Africa* (Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, (1961) 1999).

6. *Ibid.*

seeking better economic prospects away from the harsh camp conditions. The idea that economic considerations are at the fore of Somali dispersions has more recently been reinforced by the experiences of Somalis in diaspora. As Cawo Abdi's penetrating analysis has demonstrated, Somali longings for onward migration after arriving at formerly desired destinations is inspired by their constant pursuit of a holistic well-being in paradise-like places.<sup>7</sup> Family dispersion is a major survival strategy in the context of the on-going war in Somalia.<sup>8</sup> As I discuss below, however, current practices cannot be wholly attributed to insecurity, considering that family dispersions preceded the war.<sup>9</sup>

The Somali desire for onward migration is largely inspired by re-imaginings about kinship networks. As Abdi has shown, Somali connections enable the circulation of ideas about living conditions in different places. Her work shows that Western destinations have come to replace oil-rich Muslim countries as places that resemble an earthly paradise for many international migrants. There was a similar groundswell of desire to go for resettlement in Western countries among my informants at Dagahaley. But while Abdi examines how these re-imaginings ensued once refugees reached particular destinations, my work examines how resettlement imaginings played-out before Somali refugees arrived at such destinations. Focus is often on the desperate and helpless state of migrants and refugees without considering how these people's competences and imaginaries provide meaning in their dire circumstances.<sup>10</sup> According to the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), resettlement is the 'selection and transfer of refugees from a State in which they have sought protection to a third State which has agreed to admit them – as refugees – with permanent residence status'.<sup>11</sup> The attractiveness of resettlement at Kenya's refugee camps is often linked to poor hosting conditions.<sup>12</sup> These camps are, for example, deliberately located in remote semi-arid areas where refugee movement is circumscribed.<sup>13</sup> Conversely, resettled refugees have access to rights that nationals enjoy. According to the UNHCR, such a status not only ensures

7. Cawo M. Abdi, 'Elusive jannah'.

8. Anna Lindley, 'Protracted displacement and remittances: The view from Eastleigh, Nairobi', *New Issues in Refugee Research*, 143 (2008), pp. 1–18.

9. Abdi, 'Elusive jannah'.

10. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer: Sovereign power and bare life* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 1998); Michel Agier, *Managing the undesirables: Refugee camps and humanitarian government* (Polity, Cambridge, 2011); Miriam Ticktin 'Where ethics and politics meet: the violence of humanitarianism in France', *American Ethnologist* 33, 1 (2006), pp. 33–49.

11. UNHCR, *UNHCR resettlement handbook* (UNHCR, Geneva, 2011), p. 3.

12. Cindy Horst, *Transnational nomads: How Somalis cope with refugee life in the Dadaab camps of Kenya* (Berghahn Books, Oxford, 2006).

13. *Ibid.*

that refugees are not forcibly returned home, but often also provides them with a path to becoming naturalized citizens of the resettled country.<sup>14</sup>

At Dagahaley, the widespread discourse on resettlement was also informed by its benefits, including remittances and other diasporic imaginaries. These resettlement longings were in contrast to UNHCR's policy guidelines that emphasize local integration and voluntary repatriation as more realistic options for solving the refugee problem. UNHCR explicitly discourages refugees from perceiving resettlement as an alternative migration route.<sup>15</sup> Few refugees ever go for resettlement. In 2014, for example, UNHCR submitted only 4,325 Somali refugees in Kenya for resettlement, representing 1 percent of the Somali refugee population in the country.<sup>16</sup> Still, the majority of my informants perceived resettlement as the most viable gateway to a brighter future and rarely discussed other migratory options that have been highlighted elsewhere.<sup>17</sup>

I argue that the massive resettlement expectations in the face of the near impossible chance of actualizing this dream is an example of how living conditions in different places were constantly rendered conscious through kinship networks. Almost everyone I knew had at some point received remittances from friends or relatives that were widely associated with good diaspora conditions. Awareness of better conditions elsewhere not only animated visualizations of a less adverse future in diaspora, it also generated something akin to what cultural sociologists refer to as 'collective' or 'social' imaginaries that provide shared definitions, experiences, and a sense of belonging.<sup>18</sup> Such imaginaries can potentially invigorate a group's sense of being, constituting 'readily available cultural options', or repertoires that enhance people's resilience to cope with difficulties.<sup>19</sup> Relatedly, the resolve to endure the harsh conditions was also strengthened by actual resources (e.g. remittances) that flowed on kinship networks.

As I show below, resilience is a highly contested concept. Critics have pointed out, for example, that its wide currency in policy circles has more to do with entrenching a neoliberal form of governmentality than

14. UNHCR, 'UNHCR resettlement handbook'.

15. *Ibid.* p. 49.

16. UNHCR, 'UNHCR refugee resettlement trends 2015' (UNHCR, Geneva, 2015), p. 15.

17. According to Horst, *Transnational Nomads*, Somali refugees also join their resettled relatives under the family re-unification criteria or through sponsored visas, and sometimes rely on illegal means to travel abroad.

18. Peter A. Hall and Michele Lamont, 'Why social relations matter for politics and successful societies', *Annual Review of Political Science* 16 (2013), pp. 49–71.

19. Michèle Lamont, 'Responses to racism, health, and social inclusion as a dimension of successful societies', in Peter A. Hall and Michele Lamont (eds), *Successful societies: How institutions and culture affect health* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009), pp. 151–168, p. 153.

highlighting the capabilities of vulnerable people.<sup>20</sup> My argument is that people's competencies are critical to debunking the taken-for-granted view that particular vulnerabilities can automatically render people powerless, voiceless, and helpless.<sup>21</sup> Much as situating camps in remote semi-arid areas of Kenya has become a governmental technology for monitoring and denying refugees their political rights and economic opportunities,<sup>22</sup> it has not rendered them helpless. Scholars increasingly have challenged the common depiction of refugees as helpless, immobile, isolated, and passive victims.<sup>23</sup> My analysis contributes to this literature by demonstrating that the capacity of powerful actors to dictate the agenda in humanitarian contexts is not without limit.

The utility of resilience as a lens for conceptualizing refugee dynamics is that it uncovers multiple camp experiences. Diasporic imaginaries united people and increased their resilience to withstand the grim camp conditions. However, the same imaginaries were also exploited by self-interested individuals who knowingly manipulated humanitarian policies in a bid to be resettled. Bureaucratic actors, therefore, largely perceived Somalis as a dishonest group, which negatively impacted the entire refugee community. Additionally, the strategies that people deployed to be resettled sometimes led to the breakdown of important ties.

I begin by outlining the study's context, followed by a discussion of how social resilience is a useful conceptual lens for understanding the camp setting. I then demonstrate how networks had become social anchors of Somali resilience by explaining how they helped in constructing collective imaginaries about Minnesota, before showing that these imaginings actually enhanced Somali refugees' social resilience in their difficult setting. In the last section, I discuss how imaginings about resettlement created a stage for innovative strategies of actualizing the resettlement dream that inadvertently also created a backdrop for social conflict.

### *The Dagahaley refugee camp*

Dagahaley camp is part of what is commonly referred to as the Dadaab Complex: a group of closely situated camps that are typically regarded as

20. Jonathan Joseph, 'Resilience as embedded neoliberalism: A governmentality approach', *Resilience* 1, 1 (2013), pp. 38–52.

21. Barbara Harrell-Bond, *Imposing aid: Emergence assistance to refugees* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1986); Agamben, *Homo sacer*; Agier, *Managing the undesirables*.

22. CASA, Consulting, 'Evaluation of the Dadaab Firewood Project' (UNHCR, Geneva, 2001).

23. Liisa Malkki, *Purity and exile: Violence, memory, and national cosmology among Hutu refugees in Tanzania* (Chicago University Press, Chicago, IL, 1995); Horst, *Transnational nomads*.

one, which also includes Ifo, Hagadera, and the recently created Ifo 2 and Kambioos camps at Dadaab in Garissa County, northeastern Kenya. These camps were originally designed to accommodate 90,000 people, but hosted over 450,000 refugees during my fieldwork who were mostly Somalian victims of civil war and droughts.<sup>24</sup> Like locals, most Somalian refugees belong to the Somali ethnic group.<sup>25</sup> Local–refugee relations were mostly unimpeded by the hostilities that seem to characterize other African refugee settings.<sup>26</sup> The two groups shared various cultural attributes, including language, religion and nomadic pastoralism. To be sure, the political boundary between Kenya and Somalia has historically been irrelevant to Somali nomads on either side of the border.<sup>27</sup> Hence, the siting of the camps only about 75 kilometres from the Kenya–Somalia border merely intensified the long-standing interactions between the two groups.

While classifying refugees as being distinct from local populations has become a standard practice of mobilizing resources in refugee contexts, it often glosses over local nuances and complexities that minimize the negative impacts of camps.<sup>28</sup> Thus, for example, the need to activate fundraising procedures necessitated the categorizing of Somali people into hosts and refugees and privileging of certain forms of vulnerability in resettlement cases.<sup>29</sup> This obscured the importance of how kinship has sustained the camps' continued existence for over two decades.<sup>30</sup> Beyond the camps, kinship similarly shaped imaginaries about alternative destinations. Abdi's work offers a glimpse into how kinship networks fuel imaginaries about other places, which leads those in difficult situations to conclude that the solution to their circumstances lies in moving on to idealized destinations.<sup>31</sup>

The potency of the resettlement discourse at Dadaab is well illustrated by the Somali notion of *buufis*, a deep-felt desire for onward migration,

24. Since the word Somali may refer to either a nationality or an ethnic group, I refer to Kenyan Somalis as locals and variously refer to refugees from Somalia as Somali refugees or Somalians.

25. An exception is Somali minority groups that do not speak Somali language such as Somali Bantus who have a considerable presence inside the Dadaab camps.

26. Malkki, *Purity and exile*.

27. Terrence Lyons, 'Crises on multiple levels: Somalia and the Horn of Africa', in Ahmed I. Samatar (ed.), *The Somali challenge: From catastrophe to renewal?* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, CO, 1994), pp. 189–207; CASA, 'Evaluation of the Dadaab firewood project'.

28. Mariella Pandolfi, 'Laboratory of intervention: The humanitarian governance of the postcommunist Balkan territories,' in Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good, Sandra Teresa Hyde, Sarah Pinto, and Byron Good (eds), *Postcolonial disorders* (University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 2008), pp. 157–186.

29. *Ibid.*

30. Fred N. Ikanda, *Kinship, hospitality and humanitarianism: Locals and refugees in north-eastern Kenya* (University of Cambridge, unpublished PhD dissertation, 2014).

31. Abdi, *Elusive Janna*.

whose nonfulfillment can potentially result in mental disorders.<sup>32</sup> The desire for Minnesota and other Western countries was so strong that government and agency officials sometimes conducted sensitization campaigns to dissuade people from being obsessed with the resettlement dream. FilmAid International<sup>33</sup> screened films to educate refugees about the negative impacts of *buufis*, and the District Commissioner warned in several *barazas*<sup>34</sup> that it was futile to register as refugees because ‘resettlement of locals ended in 2005’. This was in reference to the Refugee Bill that was passed by the Kenyan Parliament in 2006. Until then, many people had exploited the local–refugee fluidity to register both as locals and refugees for purposes of accessing resources that accrued to the two categories. When the bill became law, this fluidity was controlled somewhat following the synchronization of UNHCR and the Kenyan registration systems. However, these campaigns only fuelled people’s obsessions. As one man remarked in a *baraza*, ‘there is nothing wrong with trying one’s luck to go abroad’.<sup>35</sup> Kinship networks constantly rendered visible diaspora conditions, making it difficult to dissuade people from harbouring resettlement dreams. Focusing on camp dynamics is, therefore, productive for showing how a difficult setting can instigate resettlement imaginaries through kinship networks. Organizing kinship through circulating family members among relatives in different places, for example, ensured that families that could potentially be resettled had at least one member not belonging to the immediate family. Because sending a family member away was a collective decision undertaken by a family and sometimes even a whole lineage, those who succeeded in going for resettlement were expected to remit remittances and assist those left behind to fulfil their diasporic dreams. In other words, spreading out family members was some sort of insurance that even increased the creditworthiness of those left behind.<sup>36</sup>

I conducted participant observation between August 2011 to August 2012 using Swahili and Somali languages. My daily routines typically revolved around three contexts: in my host village where I participated in *barazas* and other communal activities; inside the camp where I went almost daily to talk to Ahmed,<sup>37</sup> my language teacher, who would in turn take me around the camp to ‘greet’ the ten families with which I had

32. Horst, *Transnational nomads*.

33. This was one of the approximately thirty organizations that worked as UNHCR’s implementing partners at the Dadaab camps.

34. These are public meetings that are often used as platforms for disseminating government policy.

35. Interview, clan elder, Dadaab, Kenya, 12 December 2011.

36. Farah Abdulsamed, ‘Somali investment in Kenya, Briefing paper’ (The Royal Institute of International Affairs, Chatham House, London, 2011).

37. I use pseudonyms to guarantee anonymity of my informants.

established close contacts; and the police canteen where I often stopped for a drink. ‘Greeting’ people basically entailed stopping at friendly homes to have a chat. Occasionally, it also involved giving them feedback about earlier requests for assistance in obtaining travel and other documents from government and agency officials.<sup>38</sup> I would then typically retire to my host family’s home in the evenings where I could spend the better part of the night with a group of men who often chewed *miraa*<sup>39</sup> together in our compound.<sup>40</sup> These daily routines proved useful in learning the most intricate aspects of my informants’ lives, which complemented the life history narratives that I collected from them towards the end of my fieldwork.

### *Building social resilience through kinship networks*

Resilience entered social and policy circles from its ecological origins where it refers to a system’s ability to recover following shock experiences.<sup>41</sup> This logic has been embraced in analyzing the adaptive capacity of social systems in relation to externally imposed change.<sup>42</sup> In disaster studies where its application has probably been most notable, resilience describes the capacity of communities to recover from destructive events.<sup>43</sup> A particular attribute of resilience in policy and social science literature is its tendency to emphasize positive outcomes: the view that crises can constructively force us to learn and adapt accordingly, and we therefore need to focus on people’s capacities as opposed to their vulnerabilities. Such a viewpoint does not translate to a denial that hardship often accompanies crises. Rather, it is an acknowledgement that hardships cannot eliminate people’s capacity to actively cope and live well amid difficulties.<sup>44</sup> Thus, reference to resilience in most social studies is a concern with highlighting people’s active responses to hardship in particular contexts.<sup>45</sup> Foregrounding vulnerabilities at the expense of strengths – no matter the difficulty of the situation – runs the risk of producing one-sided

38. I had established some important contacts in bureaucratic circles in the course of my fieldwork.

39. This is a herb chewed as a mild stimulant, also called *khat*.

40. Chewing *miraa* in a group at night was viewed as some kind of cultural obligation.

41. Joseph, ‘Resilience as embedded neoliberalism’.

42. *Ibid.*

43. Hall and Lamont, ‘Why social relations matter’.

44. Morten Scovdal and Marguerite Daniel, ‘Resilience through participation and coping-enabling social environments: The case of HIV-affected children in sub-Saharan Africa’, *African Journal of AIDS Research* 11, 3 (2012), pp. 153–164.

45. *Ibid.* p. 157.



accounts of people's lives. Thus, resilience is a useful lens for highlighting the active responses of Somalis to their protracted circumstances.<sup>46</sup>

That said, resilience is also a deeply contested and debated concept. The suggestion that crises should be perceived as opportunities for societies to evolve in particular ways has prompted critics to question the direction of this change.<sup>47</sup> For example, the recovery envisaged in both ecological and social resilience does not necessarily return systems to their original state. This is because modifications and restructuring can result in multiple stable states.<sup>48</sup> One critic who personifies the opposition to embracing resilience in academia is Jonathan Joseph. The growing popularity of resilience in policy circles is, for him, linked to how Anglo-Saxon countries and organizations deploy catchphrases such as good governance, local empowerment and poverty eradication to promote neoliberalism in the name of resilience. It is, therefore, not a coincidence that so-called resilient measures including 'individual preparedness, making informed decisions, understanding our roles and responsibilities, and showing adaptability to our situation and being able to 'bounce back' should things go wrong'<sup>49</sup> have strong resonances with neoliberal policies that urge competitiveness, self-awareness, and responsible, vigilant individuals. The actual aim of resilience measures, then, is to grease a neoliberal form of governmentality with an ultimate aim of disciplining poor states into removing barriers to free markets.

The view that such measures are targeted at states and not individuals implies that we risk entrenching a uniform agenda in all poor states by endorsing resilience.<sup>50</sup> Of particular concern is how agency is negatively perceived in neoliberal terms: the idea that inability to achieve self-transformation is a deficiency that has to be necessarily rectified through intervention, or, in Joseph's words, 'the assumption that intervention is necessary because people lack an adequate understanding to cope with freedom and autonomy'.<sup>51</sup> This logic implies that African and other poor

46. Refugees can be regarded as being in a protracted situation if they have lived in host countries for more than five years and there is still no solution for ending their plight. See Jeff Crisp, 'No solutions in sight: The problem of protracted refugee situations in Africa,' in Itaru Ohta and Yntiso Gebre (eds), *Displacement risks in Africa* (Kyoto University Press, Kyoto, 2005), pp. 17–52.

47. Joseph, 'Resilience as embedded neoliberalism'; Sarah Bradshaw and Brian Linneker, 'Gender and environmental change in the developing world' (IIED working paper, London, 2014).

48. See Peter A. Hall and Michele Lamont (eds), *Social resilience in the neo-liberal era* (Cambridge University Press, New York, 2013), pp. 1–38 for postulations on social resilience change, and Joseph, 'Resilience as embedded neoliberalism' for the nature of change associated with ecological resilience.

49. Joseph, 'Resilience as embedded neoliberalism', p. 41.

50. *Ibid.*

51. *Ibid.* p. 46.

states have limited agency because the conflicts and other crises they often endure provide a ready-made justification for stronger members of the international community to assume the responsibility of 'saving' them.<sup>52</sup>

Concerns have also been raised about the lack of certainty as to what resilience really means. This is largely due to its wide applicability across natural and social sciences as well as policy circles.<sup>53</sup> Joseph even rejects the notion that resilience can usefully be applied to advance philosophical or academic aims because doing so would incorrectly recognize and endorse its neoliberal agenda.<sup>54</sup> Joseph's deconstruction of how vulnerabilities and disasters provide a platform for powerful actors to couch development in neoliberal terms has particular resonance with humanitarianism. Mark Duffield has suggested, for example, that disasters have increasingly provided opportunities for implementing a development rather than a relief agenda that has self-management and self-sufficiency at its core.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, a typical theme that emerges from literature on humanitarianism is the idea that disasters should be harnessed to bring about 'good' change.<sup>56</sup>

The confluence of these criticisms depicts resilience as a 'new tyranny' that does not bode well for the good of poor states and their mostly vulnerable populations.<sup>57</sup> As scholars are increasingly demonstrating, however, it is imperative to highlight the positive connotations of resilience, not least in situations where people in hardship conditions are taking active measures to improve their condition. Perceived vulnerabilities have, moreover, not stopped the governments and citizens of poor states from acting in ways that safeguard their interests. Focusing on resilience is productive for showing what being agentive in contexts characterized by structural constraints might look like. It is more fruitful to frame the relationship between poor states and powerful external actors in terms of interaction as opposed to domination.<sup>58</sup>

In situating this study in social resilience, I follow scholars who highlight culturally based mechanisms that enable people to cope with and even appropriate their difficult circumstances with a degree of success. The utility of social resilience as a lens for theorizing individual or societal

52. Michael Barnett, *The international humanitarian order* (Routledge, London, 2010).

53. Skovdal and Daniel, 'Resilience through participation'.

54. Joseph, 'Resilience as embedded neoliberalism'.

55. Mark Duffield, *Global governance and the new wars: The merging of development and security* (Zed books, London, 2001).

56. Bradshaw and Linneker, 'Gender and environmental change in the developing world'.

57. *Ibid.*

58. William Brown and Sophie Harman, 'African agency in international politics', in William Brown and Sophie Harman (eds), *African agency in international politics* (Routledge, London, 2013), pp. 1–16.

active responses to challenges has been enhanced by its increasing purchase in cultural sociology,<sup>59</sup> medical anthropology,<sup>60</sup> and the broader social science spectrum.<sup>61</sup> My argument is that a focus on resilience is a good starting point for shifting focus away from how refugees are commonly essentialized in academic, media and policy circles as conforming to what has been critiqued as ‘the institutional, international expectation of a certain kind of helplessness as a refugee characteristic’.<sup>62</sup> The problem with imaging a particular kind of refugee subjectivity<sup>63</sup> is that it does not highlight the negotiations that vulnerable people make in the face of difficult conditions, which ultimately reduces complex experiences into a single narrative about helplessness. Crossing international borders often exposes refugees and other migrants to vulnerabilities that flow from their loss of political rights, but it rarely transforms them into passive victims. Many are rational, strategic actors who aspire for better futures by seeking places that offer a sense of belonging.

The productiveness of resilience, therefore, is its ability to highlight both positive and negative outcomes of adversity.<sup>64</sup> Highlighting suffering alone raises academic curiosity as to what has kept the Dadaab camps going for so long. Somalis lived in poor conditions, had few opportunities for improving their lives, lacked political rights, and had restricted mobility. They also used kinship networks to connect to the outside world, constantly improvised to manoeuvre bureaucratic prescriptions that were not aligned to their lived realities, and continuously struggled to overcome immobility conditions imposed upon them, which challenged the neoliberal view of what being agentive or resilient entails.

A richer understanding of resilience has to bring on board the dynamics of the social environment. No matter how vulnerable people might be, they often try to actively respond to their condition.<sup>65</sup> But as they do so, they interact with other actors who often dictate the agenda in humanitarian contexts.<sup>66</sup> This implies that vulnerable people are neither agentless

59. Hall and Lamont, ‘Why social relations matter’.

60. Skovdal and Daniel, ‘Resilience through participation’.

61. Emilie Combaz, *Disaster resilience: Topic guide* (University of Birmingham Press, Birmingham, 2014).

62. Liisa Malkki, ‘Speechless emissaries: Refugees, humanitarianism, and dehistoricization’, *Cultural Anthropology* 11, 3 (1996), pp. 377–404, p. 388.

63. Kristin B. Sandvik, ‘Blurring boundaries: Refugee resettlement in Kampala – between the formal, the informal, and the illegal’, *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 34, 1 (2011), pp. 11–32.

64. Hall and Lamont, ‘Why social relations matter’; Skovdal and Daniel, ‘Resilience through participation’.

65. Åsa Boholm, ‘The cultural nature of risk: Can there be an anthropology of uncertainty?’ *Ethnos* 68, 2 (2003), pp. 159–178.

66. Mats Utas, ‘Victimcy, girlfriending, soldiering: Tactic agency in a young woman’s social navigation of the Liberian War Zone1’, *Anthropological Quarterly* 78, 2 (2005), pp. 403–430.

victims nor ‘fully free actors’ with infinite agency.<sup>67</sup> The lack of attention to the dynamics of the social environment undermines Joseph’s otherwise excellent critique. Reducing resilience to neoliberalism is one thing. Discounting its academic worth on this basis, however, incorrectly implies that the experiences of people in difficult circumstances are similar everywhere and that there is nothing new to learn from how people respond to adversity and measures that seek to harness their vulnerability. What is needed is context-specific evidence for putting resilience’s aims in perspective, which is what I attempt to highlight here through focusing on how kinship networks animated collective imaginaries about Minnesota. This, in turn, generated the social resilience that Somalis exhibited amid the relentless exile and few resettlement opportunities. Social networks were part of Somali institutional and cultural resources that imbued them with the ability to cope with the camp setting of scarcity, while sustaining and advancing their interests in the face of challenges.<sup>68</sup>

*Constructing collective diasporic imaginings through kinship networks*

Scholars have theorized yearnings for Western and other economically attractive destinations from different viewpoints. For Africans and citizens of other poorer countries, such aspirations might be fuelled by the desire for membership in a global society,<sup>69</sup> mass media generated imaginations of better prospects elsewhere,<sup>70</sup> and the wider fascination with Western lifestyles.<sup>71</sup> On their own, however, these arguments have little analytical purchase in clarifying Somali diasporic imaginaries. As I discuss below, Somalis rarely longed for destinations merely for their economic prospects. Rather, they desired places – whether Western or non-Western – that had a considerable presence of relatives who could provide support in acquiring resources. This implies that Somalis’ desire to go for resettlement had more to do with re-imaginings about kinship networks. Their current attractions draw on earlier patterns of seeking better economic prospects in oil-rich Muslim countries through kinship networks.<sup>72</sup> For example, many families in the Dadaab camps have long-standing kin-based connections to Saudi Arabia. Minnesota and other Western countries have simply overtaken Saudi Arabia as a preferred Somali destination. Some of my

67. *Ibid.* p. 426, see also Skovdal and Daniel ‘Resilience through participation’.

68. Hall and Lamont, ‘Why social relations matter’.

69. James G. Ferguson, ‘Of mimicry and membership: Africans and the ‘new world society’’, *Cultural Anthropology* 17, 4 (2002), pp. 551–569.

70. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN, 1996).

71. Francis B. Nyamnjoh and Ben Page, ‘Whiteman kontri and the enduring allure of modernity among Cameroonian youth’, *African Affairs* 101, 405 (2002), pp. 607–634.

72. Abdi, *Elusive janna*.

informants claimed that Saudi Arabians ‘dislike’ them because Somalis refused to be their slaves. Mohammed Siad Barre, the former president had ostensibly rejected the Saudi King’s request to supply members of the royal family with Somali domestic workers. ‘My people cannot be slaves to anyone’ was a popular catchphrase attributed to Barre. This expression was repeated by four of my informants who had used kin-based networks to go to Saudi Arabia at different times between 1983 and 2011. The daring missions were facilitated by human smugglers and entailed boarding overcrowded boats to Yemen before sneaking into Saudi Arabia through nomadic routes where they were received by their relatives. Yemen was merely a corridor. As one man remarked, ‘it is a poor country with a useless currency’.<sup>73</sup> But although Saudis paid them good salaries, they disliked Somalis and often deported them because they still remembered how Barre had rebuked them, insisted my informants. All were flown back to Somalia on different occasions: one prematurely while returning from his fourth hajj,<sup>74</sup> another when he attempted to seek treatment for his terminal illness<sup>75</sup> and the remaining two after ‘getting tired’ with not being able to move around freely. One of them framed it thus:

You could not be given time to pack if you were arrested. You would then have to count on your relatives to send back your belongings. I did not want that and after accumulating some money, I decided it was time to avail myself the chance to board a plane. I just packed and walked around until I was arrested, detained for two days, and then put on a plane that was returning other Somalis to Mogadishu.<sup>76</sup>

It is reasonable to deduce that the fervour to go for resettlement has been informed by the appeal of Minnesota as a space linked to the network of friends and relatives. These kin-based networks relay important information to camp residents about the increasing closure of the Saudi border and the socio-economic value of new destinations that has resulted in the collective imaginaries about Minnesota. Return visits by resettled refugees was one of the channels for conveying Minnesota’s appeal to camp residents. The trendiness of these former camp dwellers seemed to evince the material wealth associated with Minnesota. This became apparent during fieldwork when Ahmed, my Somali language teacher introduced me to an elegantly dressed man in his early 30 s. The man said he was from Minnesota and enjoyed visiting Dadaab to see his relatives.

73. Interview, refugee leader, Dagahaley, Kenya, 6 December 2011.

74. Hajj is a once in a lifetime fulfilment for every Muslim. The informant reported having gone four times because the first three times were on behalf of his dead relatives – his mother, father, and grandmother.

75. He had been staying in Saudi with his brother until he became ill and came to Dadaab during my fieldwork to seek treatment for his cancer condition.

76. Interview, refugee leader, Dagahaley, 6 December 2011

Following the breakout of war, his family had fled to Kenya and soon afterwards relocated to Minnesota. It had not been difficult for his family to get asylum in the US because his father was then a minister for foreign affairs. On several occasions after his friend's departure, Ahmed talked about Minnesota's 'good life' in relation to his friend's smartphone, laptop, and mode of dressing. Minnesota, it seemed, imbued one with a sense of flamboyancy. As he put it on one occasion:

My friend works at the same University where he studied. He says Minnesota is just like home because of the many Somalis there. It has countless opportunities...People respect you more if you go abroad as opposed to just being here.<sup>77</sup>

To be sure, the networks that existed between the Dadaab residents and their friends and relatives resettled in Minnesota largely fuelled the fascination that people held for the state. This link was particularly enhanced by print and social media, which had increasingly connected camp dwellers to their diaspora compatriots. When fire gutted almost the entire Dagahaley town in July 2012, a Facebook page sprang up instantly to appeal for funds. This drew in large diaspora donations that enabled people to rebuild their former business enterprises. A popular camp-based newsletter entitled *The Refugee* had also emerged as a major forum for sharing experiences and buttressing links between camp residents and their diaspora brethren.<sup>78</sup> The newsletter's stories were mostly dominated by resettlement imaginaries about Minnesota as those abroad shared their success experiences with camp residents. This amplified the state's reputation and ripened the conditions that bred *buufis*, as the story below shows:

He was in a crowded refugee camp in Kenya 17 years ago, but November 2, he became the first Somali immigrant to be elected to a public office in Minnesota and perhaps in the United States. The 42-year-old founder and CEO of the African Development Centre of Minnesota, Hussein Samatar celebrated his historic election to the Minneapolis school board in Safari restaurant... Though Samatar ran for the position unopposed, his winning of the District 3 school board seat is a milestone for the nearly 70,000 Minnesota Somalis.<sup>79</sup>

A youth leader once illustrated Minnesota's importance by referencing this story during an informal discussion: 'Minnesota is a Somali state not just because of the heavy Somali presence. If you read *The Refugee*, you will see it is also because Somalis are now occupying important positions there'.<sup>80</sup>

77. Interview, Ahmed, Dagahaley, 28 December 2011.

78. *The Refugee* was published by the Refugee Youth, under the aegis of FilmAid International.

79. *The Refugee Newsletter*, 'Somali immigrant elected to a public office in the U.S.', November 2010, p. 1.

80. Interview, youth refugee leader, Dagahaley, 28 February 2012.

Minnesota's allure was continuously rendered conscious by the mass media and the stories from diaspora. As Arjun Appadurai has pointed out, mass media is an important source of imaginations about other places. Such imaginations, unlike people, often transcend national and regional boundaries. Although few of these image viewers actually travel to places where such images emanate, many people are likely to have friends and relatives in other places who act as bearers of 'stories and possibilities'.<sup>81</sup> This alludes to the importance of kinship networks in reinforcing mass media images about the attractiveness of far off places. Certainly, stories in *The Refugee* often portrayed Minnesota as a natural solution to the Dadaab refugee problem. The US in general, and Minnesota in particular, was depicted as a place that was waiting to welcome Somalis and harness their resilience. It was perceived as a solution to reversing Dadaab's image of helplessness. This is clearly reflected in the views of Khalif Hassan, a former refugee:

All over North America, the people of Dadaab are making an impact... The chicken nugget smells of Hagadera, the Alaskan fish has a 'Dagahaley' feel to it and the birthday cards have an Ifo touch in them... the future of Dadaab lies not with the agencies and aid... but with the young men and women straddling the great cities of America. If they measure up to the hopes and aspirations attached to them, there might as well be a new dawn in Dadaab...<sup>82</sup>

The move by Minnesota Somalis to initiate influential camp projects was apparently also a source of collective imaginaries that drove and bound people in an otherwise hopeless situation. When things visualized in diasporic imaginaries are practically rendered visible through material things that returnees bring with them, such imaginaries potentially inspire people to look forward to better lifestyles comparable to that of influential returnees. An example is the case of Sahat, a high profile local politician who was elected the area's councillor in Kenya's 2002 general election, but resigned in 2006 to take up a resettlement opportunity in the US. During my fieldwork, he returned to establish an NGO to 'fight for locals' rights' even though his family still stayed in Minnesota as resettled refugees.

My host father once cited Sahat's case to put his family's resettlement aspirations in perspective. He had previously 'failed' a resettlement interview due to having a Kenyan identity card (ID) and had, therefore, resorted to register two of his children as refugees in the hope that they would in future be resettled like Sahat and bring back 'good things', he explained. Being 'like' Sahat in this narrative is an example of how

81. Appadurai, 'Modernity at large', p. 4.

82. *The Refugee Newsletter*, 'Dadaab: The source of America's new workforce', March 2011, p. 6.

material and symbolic resources helped in constructing diasporic imaginaries at Dadaab.

Additionally, the value of Minnesota was cemented by negative perceptions about some alternative European destinations. One woman, for example, narrated how the Swedish government forcefully put her daughter's children in a government run facility following a difficult divorce that led to her mental breakdown. Ahmed once distilled the supposedly better socio-economic prospects of Minnesota relative to other Western destinations in the following terms:

If you ask people here where they want to go, many will choose Minnesota, followed by Canada or Australia, then Europe. My cousin stays in the UK. She promised to buy me a laptop but never fulfilled her promise. People in America keep promises because they are economically better off.<sup>83</sup>

In the next section, I highlight how Minnesota and other diasporic imaginaries generated social resilience that sustained people in dire circumstances.

#### *Role of collective imaginaries in generating social resilience*

The reality of how collective imaginaries about Minnesota positively shaped the day-to-day working of the camps was vividly brought home to me in the initial phase of my fieldwork when I stopped at a friend's shop with Ahmed. While taking a soda, a man came to borrow goods on the strength that his sister who had recently gone to Minnesota would, upon finding employment, begin sending him money. To my surprise, the shopkeeper proceeded to give out the goods without requiring collateral or other assurances. He later explained to me why he did not doubt his 'distant' relative's repayment ability. The woman in Minnesota would easily get employment through the network of friends and relatives there and send remittances faster than if she had been resettled in another place. What this implied was that people's creditworthiness improved if they had relatives in diaspora; they could take goods on credit and repay at month's end from their remittance proceeds. But more than that, having a relative in Minnesota considerably amplified one's borrowing ability.

Kinship networks do not just produce collective imaginaries about particular dream destinations. They are also channels through which material resources flow to further accentuate cultural imaginings about particular destinations. Remittances play an important role in shaping refugees' and other migrants' imagination about better diasporic lifestyles.<sup>84</sup> For many Somalis, the source of these remittances personifies an earthly paradise

83. Interview, Ahmed, Dagahaley, 2 June 2012.

84. Horst, *Transnational nomads*.



that can conceivably be conquered through migration.<sup>85</sup> The diaspora remittance impact has been strongly felt in Somalia where the government estimates that \$2 billion is remitted through *hawala* every year from the 1.5 million Somalis in diaspora.<sup>86</sup> This amount represents a third of Somalia's income.<sup>87</sup> At the Dadaab camps, the remittances' value is easily discernible from the many flourishing *hawala* transfer shops, which were centres of activity, hopes and dreams. Indeed, remittances are a lifeline for many families at the camps, considering that almost every household I knew had at some point received money from former camp residents resettled abroad. Unlike aid, which many complained did not serve the needs and interests of the intended beneficiaries, remittances directly helped families to supplement the barely adequate rations and were not amenable to agency or government manipulation.

An example of someone whose attachment to close relatives in Minnesota evidently imbued him with the resilience to cope with the difficult camp conditions was 42-year old Moha. During our almost daily interaction at the police canteen over a drink, Moha commonly presented an idealized image of Minnesota that was informed by his attachment to family members who lived there. Moha's family came to Kenya in 1991 following the outbreak of civil war in Somalia. Shortly afterwards, his father, a high-ranking official in the pre-war government, sought temporary asylum in Djibouti and Italy before relocating permanently to Minnesota. Through the visa sponsorship of their father, Moha's mother and elder brother joined the family head in Minnesota in the late 1990s, leaving Moha and his younger brother and sister at Dagahaley camp. Although his attempts to join the rest of the family had proved futile for over 10 years, Moha still saw resettlement as an inevitable outcome, which led him to assert frequently that he was 'just waiting for my flight'.<sup>88</sup> He commonly referred to Minnesota as 'a Somali state', whose 'good life' was consciously symbolized by the \$300 monthly remittance he received from his father and elder brother.

When he was invited for a resettlement interview at Dadaab in the middle of my fieldwork, his narrative of 'just waiting for my flight' gained considerable traction. However, he had still not gone for resettlement when I visited Dagahaley two years after the end of my fieldwork. He narrated

85. Abdi, *Elusive janna*.

86. Somalis use this word to designate the system of cash transfer of remittances where *hawala* operators accept abroad deposits and immediately credit recipients at the camps and in Somalia.

87. *BBC News Africa* 'Somalia fears as US Sunrise banks stop money transfers', 30 December 2011, <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-16365619>> (10 August 2012); *BBC News Business*, 'Barclays faces pressure from Somali cash transfer firms', 24 June 2013, <<http://www.bbc.com/news/business-23030943>> (10 August 2012).

88. Interview, Moha, Dagahaley, 23 February 2012.

how the then prevailing insecurity had twice delayed his resettlement process:

I underwent fingerprint and medical procedures soon after you went away but those tests expired. The results are usually deemed invalid after six months and you have to undergo a new procedure, which I undertook recently. Now I am just waiting for my flight.<sup>89</sup>

Stories of such multiple screenings circulated throughout my fieldwork, but people like Moha still clung to the dream of going to Minnesota against all the odds. This illustrates how diasporic imaginings gave people hope that kept them going amid the grim exile conditions.

Authors who deploy resilience as an analytical lens sometimes conceptualize it as a metaphor for their empirical observations.<sup>90</sup> It is, therefore, apposite to interrogate the literal connotations of Minnesota dreams in refugee narratives, considering the limited resettlement opportunities and the restrictions on immigration that pose practical problems for scattering relatives across international borders. Non-Somali Kenyans at the police canteen were openly sceptical that Moha would ever actualize his resettlement dreams. As mentioned above, people were continuously sensitized on the negative impacts of resettlement out of realization that only a tiny percentage of the refugee population would be resettled eventually. Somalis, however, seemed to perceive the possibility of going for resettlement in more concrete terms and even tried to lay the ground for sending one of their own in valued places if they had little or no connections to those places.

Consider the case of Osman, a nephew to my host father, whose family had decided to register his 17-year old brother as an unaccompanied refugee minor whose parents had 'perished' in Somalia. Following Moha's resettlement interview, Osman told me in confidence that his brother's case was being fast-tracked by the UNHCR because he had been categorized as an 'urgent' case that required a quick resettlement solution. If the brother succeeded in his resettlement quest, he might one day sponsor him to go abroad, he explained. People like Osman seemed to perceive scattering family members as some kind of insurance: if one resource dried-up, the other family members would come in handy. If a particular space failed to meet expectations, collective diasporic imaginaries could, depending on the information flowing through kinship networks, be redirected to places with greater potential. The practice of scattering relatives was an important incubator for activating collective imaginaries about dream destinations. The endless struggle to go for resettlement remained

89. Interview, Moha, Dagahaley, 6 June 2014.

90. Jo Boyden and Gillian Mann, 'Children's risk resilience, and coping in extreme situations', in M. Ungar (ed.) *Handbook for working with children and youth: Pathways to resilience across cultures and contexts* (Sage Publications, London, 2005), pp. 3–25.

undimmed it seems, not in spite of the difficulty of actualizing resettlement dreams, but because of the way this difficulty inspired people to disperse family members to form the networks that sustained their social resilience.

The interaction with returnees also helped to concretize Minnesota imaginings. An example is the case of Ibrahim Hirsi, 24, who helped to found *The Refugee*. Hirsi had returned to Dadaab to train some refugee youth in a course on journalism as part of what he described ‘giving back to my people’, which became instrumental in spurring *The Refugee*’s growth. He reflected on what he called ‘identity crisis’ as thus:

My childhood years scatter in different countries ... I struggled for an identity wherever I lived... Life as a refugee was horrible... ‘Refugee’. That was the name I was first called before they even called me by my name...<sup>91</sup>

His article was christened ‘the refugee of the month’, which reflected the privileged status of resettlement stories in the camp context. The ‘refugee of the month’ section in most of the newsletter’s issues was devoted to stories from people who had secured resettlement, perhaps as a way of encouraging those left behind that there was light at the end of the tunnel. Hirsi’s success can be read as a vindication that Somalis’ resolve to go for resettlement was not futile. Such influential returnees whose long struggle had ultimately yielded success inspired Dadaab residents to visualize better lives in Minnesota.

#### *Self-interested strategies of resettlement and communal discord*

The utility of social resilience lies in how it highlights the active responses of Somalis to their protracted refugee circumstances. Much as social imaginaries largely imbued refugee lives with meaning in their harsh setting, however, the actions that people took in seeking to actualize their resettlement dreams also had the potential to undermine communal co-existence. In particular, the practice of scattering family members, though crucial in contouring the ground for the emergence of networks and diasporic imaginaries, was fraught with an inherent risk of causing permanent separations between closely related people. In the process, it generated conflict that was most notably highlighted by the many cases of marriage breakdowns that followed the resettlement of part of the family. Thus, collective diasporic imaginaries united and drove people in grim conditions, but they also had the potential of creating ruptures in the community.

The case of 36-year old Nasri is illuminative of how investing in Minnesota imaginaries by virtue of having close relatives there can initially

91. *The Refugee Newsletter*, ‘Refugee of the month’, September 2010, p. 7.

infuse people's lives with meaning, but eventually cause ruptures when the anticipated reunions fail. Nasri's family came into exile in 2005. His wife and two children were later helped to join his wife's sister who was staying in Minnesota under the family reunification criteria. Nasri had hoped for a quick family reunion, but after staying in the camp for five years without any resettlement prospect, he decided to marry a 43-year old woman who was being considered for resettlement in Australia. This proved to be the nadir of his marriage to the first wife as he himself admitted:

When my wife heard that I had re-married she stopped the \$100 she used to send me every month... She then refused to pick my calls. I am hoping to go to Australia with my madam here then I will go to America to see my children. I hear the rights of women come first there, followed by the rights of children, then the rights of dogs and lastly the rights of men, but I will still go.<sup>92</sup>

Nasri repeatedly vowed that he would never grant his first wife her request to be divorced and throughout our interactions, he framed his current relationship as a classic marriage of convenience. He had married the woman to save her from the harassment of community members who had previously accused her of getting children out of wedlock. In return, the woman had incorporated him into her resettlement process that was then awaiting the decision of the Australian government. Sadly though, his chances of accompanying her to Australia still remained fifty-fifty because she married him when her application process was underway. This illustrates the pitfall of investing one's hope in an idealized breadbasket and underscores the fact that the importance of remittances in the camp setting of scarcity was not always enough to counterbalance long family separations.

Paradoxically, the potency of diasporic imaginaries was not just reflected by how they inspired people, but also how they pushed them to devise self-centred resettlement strategies that could potentially undermine communal interests.

A common perception among government and UNHCR officials was that Somalis were generally dishonest. These perceptions were particularly reinforced by the actions of people like Sahat and Osman's brother who knowingly inhabited refugee identities for the purpose of being considered for resettlement. The ever-present sense that Somalis were dishonest was often rhetorically illustrated in the day-to-day bureaucratic working. On one occasion, for example, the District Commissioner harshly reprimanded a local gathering during a *baraza* for registering their children as refugees while also expecting them to be granted local privileges. 'You

92. Interview, Nasri, refugee leader, Dagahaley, 14 February 2012.

can't expect Kenyan IDs from us while also planning on going to America as refugees!', he asserted angrily.<sup>93</sup>

The sentiment that Somalis were dishonest was so widespread that for many agency officials, complaints about rape, harassment, and general insecurity were reported solely because victims wanted to be considered for resettlement. The surest way of testing the veracity of these claims, as I came to learn, was to ask victims to relocate to Kakuma camp where locals did not share ethnic affinities with refugees.<sup>94</sup> If they refused the proposal, then they were just conning officials into believing they were vulnerable. One day, for example, I visited a woman who claimed that someone she knew had raped her daughter. She told me she was unwilling to relocate to Kakuma as advised by UNHCR because she did not know anybody there. On seeking assistance for her from Save the Children (a United Kingdom organization charged with safeguarding children's rights at the camps), a senior official told me such cases were many: 'I am sorry but I can't help her. If her life is in danger here, she should be happy for UNHCR to take her to any safe place. For many people here, it is either Dadaab or resettlement in America',<sup>95</sup> he explained. On another occasion, the District Children's Officer informed me, in response to my earlier request, that he could not assist one of my informants to find an alternative accommodation because of similar concerns. The woman had complained to me that her children had stopped going to school because their 'minority' status was exposing them to constant harassment. As it turned out, the agencies were already aware of the case: 'I raised the matter at our meeting with agency officials who told me that the woman had presented her case to them before. She refused to relocate to Kakuma and the UNHCR is convinced that she is making the allegations to be granted resettlement', he explained.<sup>96</sup> What it meant to be a genuine suffering refugee seemed to depend on being removed from the proximity of Somalia. Those refusing to relocate to Kakuma could not be deemed as having genuine concerns and were perhaps by extension not authentic refugees. There was a drawn-out feeling among bureaucratic officials that Dadaab had given Somalis a chance to be dishonest, which evidently diminished the community's ability to make successful claims.

93. Public holiday address, District Commissioner, Dadaab, 1 June 2012.

94. Kakuma camp is located in Turkana County near the Kenya-Sudan border. The majority of refugees there are Sudanese who have no ethnic similarities with the local Turkana people.

95. Interview, George, manager, Save the Children, Dagahaley, 7 March 2012.

96. Interview, Ahmed, district children officer, Dadaab 4 April 2012.

### *Conclusion*

Theorizing on social resilience has enabled me to give a multidimensional account of the camp's dynamics by showing that kinship networks animated collective diasporic imaginaries that made refugee life more bearable, but also undermined the moral standing of the refugee community. As sources of symbolic and material resources, social imaginaries and remittances seemingly infused refugees with the hope of realizing better futures similar to those of their relatives in Minnesota. This made life more palatable in a difficult setting of scarcity. However, cases of permanent family separations also underscore the fact that although Somalis have historically organized themselves through forming and breaking up of groups, current international restrictions on immigration have increasingly prevented the process of reuniting groups that formerly broke up for purposes of resettlement.

The claim that social imaginaries about Minnesota helped refugees to cope with difficult circumstances might seem unrealistic in the context of the few resettlement prospects. This brings into question the realistic connotations of diasporic aspirations and raises the possibility that Minnesota figured only as a metaphor in the narratives. The article has shown, however, that what apparently turned Minnesota into a 'Somali state' was not a simple fascination with a random attractive destination, but the sense of belonging that was informed by the considerable Somali presence in that particular state. Through kinship networks, this sense of belonging was rendered visible, which in turn strengthened the refugee desire to join those who had already been resettled. In this sense, Somali attraction to Minnesota mirrors common practices of resettling refugees in places that promise easier cultural integration<sup>97</sup> and those of African migrants who generally prefer overseas destinations where they can get support from members of their ethnic communities.<sup>98</sup> Unlike many African migrants, the Somali movements are unique in the way they are inspired by re-imaginings about kinship networks that are informed by their practice of breaking and forming of groups.

One can argue that the lack of economic opportunities and political rights largely inspired refugee imaginaries about a less adverse future in Minnesota. It strengthens their conviction that getting out of the grim conditions is the ultimate solution to their dire situation. As a source of resilience, diasporic imaginaries will seemingly continue to drive and unite Somalis at Dadaab, even if Minnesota ceases to be a dream destination as implied by the current rhetoric of banning Muslim refugees from entering the US. This is because of the wide Somali connections and the fact that

97. UNHCR, 'UNHCR resettlement handbook'.

98. Bezabeh, 'Africa's unholy migrants'.

the desire for onward migration is mostly fuelled by the imagined rewards in other places. Because conceptions about an earth-like paradise are now associated with other destinations, unlike the 1970s and 1980s when such imaginings were linked to oil-rich Muslim countries, new places can potentially become the dream destination for the next generation of Somalis if conditions in current preferred destinations change.

There is evidence that resilience is increasingly catching on in academic literature. Indeed, there is now a journal, *Resilience: International policies, practices and discourses*, that is devoted to furthering analysis of the concept beyond applied and policy matters. With close to three million people staying in protracted refugee situations on the African continent alone,<sup>99</sup> it is imperative for studies to deploy frameworks that give multidimensional dynamics of camps, as this article has attempted to do with the concept of social resilience. The limitation with studying camp experiences through the lens of resilience, however, is that refugees are often not a homogenous group with similar capabilities. Evidently, minority Somali groups had fewer connections beyond the camps.<sup>100</sup>

Refugee camps in Africa are grim places that few people would choose to call home. This is perhaps the reason why studies on refugees have tended to foreground helplessness as a refugee characteristic. However, camps are also spaces where kinship and other important ties are enacted. This article advances our understanding of camp dynamics by highlighting the measures that vulnerable people take to positively transform their lives. Family dispersion is an example of how refugees might take active measures to shape their future. Given the protracted nature of the Dadaab camps and the large refugee numbers, however, it might not be realistic to consider spreading family members as a viable remedy for the relentless exile. More research is needed to unpack this link, particularly because visualizations of Minnesota as a Somali state and the multiple state-making being currently witnessed in Somalia appears to draw on this premise.

99. Crisp, 'No solutions in sight'.

100. Ikanda, 'Kinship, hospitality, and humanitarianism'.