

A Story of Somali Peacemaking in Diaspora

Introduction

Refugees represent a significant part of the human capital of their countries. They have expertise, knowledge and experience which their country needs in order to rebuild - whenever that moment arrives.

While abroad, they may be able to develop their skills or gain new ones, and discover how other countries operate. However, it can also be an opportunity for conversations with compatriots that perhaps could not have taken place in their home country. If such an opportunity is offered, it holds out the possibility that they may be better able to work together to rebuild their country.

How to create safe-spaces where such conversations can take place?

This is an account of a journey of healing between Somali-British refugees and white-British, and among Somalis themselves over the last 15 years, together with some reflections on how it came about.

How it all began

It started in 2004 when a senior Somali politician said to a group of mainly white British, 'I want to give the rest of my life to reconcile my people'. The politician, Osman Jama Ali, had recently resigned as Deputy Prime Minister of the Transitional National Government (TNG) of Somalia which had failed to establish its authority, and he was speaking to an Agenda for Reconciliation weekly meeting at Initiatives of Change (IofC) UK'sⁱⁱ London centre.

His country had been mired in civil war and lawlessness since 1991 when the government was brought down by rival clan militias, which then proved too divided to be able to form an alternative government. The ensuing violence caused a huge out-flow of refugees across the globe.

Osman wanted to promote reconciliation firstly among the divided diaspora in Britain as a contribution towards rebuilding his country.

But how to help him realise his vision? Before recounting that, a little of the back-story needs to be told.

The 'back-story'

In 1991, two Somali refugees in Sweden who had both been fighters in their respective clan militias, got into an argument and were helped to reconcile by a Swedish member of IofCⁱⁱⁱ.

Two years later, they attended an international peacebuilding conference at IofC's centre in Caux, Switzerland, and with others, drew up a list of personalities from different clans (including Osman Jama Ali) who, they believed, could form a core group for national reconciliation.

Discovering by chance that most of those listed were due to attend a conference on Somalia at Uppsala University the following year, IofC Sweden invited them to attend a private meeting just before the conference, hosted together with colleagues from the USA and the UK.

It was probably the first time these individuals had met since the collapse of Somalia, so the memories and hurts were very fresh. However, by the end of the meeting, there had been apologies and reconciliations and promises to work together. And over the next decade, they

used the annual conferences in Caux to check in with each other - which is how Osman Jama Ali turned to IofC when he resigned from the TNG.

The story continued

When Osman expressed his conviction about reconciling his community, it became apparent that he didn't know how to approach this task - and nor did we. But we suggested he start by identifying other like-minded Somalis who would work with him. So, at the following week's meeting, he arrived with two other prominent figures in different clans.

They continued to attend the weekly meetings for some months without saying much, until one of them suddenly said, 'We need an action plan!' They decided to invite the Somali clan leaders in the UK for a weekend workshop. The aim was to arrive at a consensus about the reasons for the collapse of the Somali state, the failure of numerous peace talks, and priorities for the future.

Around 30 turned up, and the discussion was so productive that they asked to meet again the following weekend - and again the one after. A unanimously-agreed document formulating their consensus was produced and they decided to create an organisation, 'Somali Initiative for Dialogue and Democracy' (SIDD), to carry out its recommendations.

One of their observations was that their people had lost the art of talking to each other, and that they needed to help their followers rediscover it. By chance, IofC was using a course in Dialogue Facilitation that had been developed by colleagues in the USA to address the 'race issue' and over the next few years, over a hundred leaders of the community took part in the courses. There were some tense moments as grievances were expressed, but gradually the tension began to ease, and a network began to evolve across clan lines.

Substantial delegations attended and presented at the annual 'Human Security' summer conferences in Caux. Their confidence was increased by the presence in senior roles at these conferences of two heroes of the Somalis: the late Amb. Mohamed Sahnoun, who had resigned as UN Special Representative to Somalia when he felt that his efforts to mediate between the warlords were being undermined; and Dr Cornelio Sommaruga who, when President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, had fought to enable humanitarian aid to be delivered to inaccessible areas of Somalia during a time of drought.

During one of those conferences, a senior Somali found himself sharing a room with a leading figure in a clan which his own clan had dispossessed and expelled from Somalia. Their conversations stirred him, and he made a public apology in the conference for what his clan had done, and committed himself to work for reconciliation between the two clans. This gesture so moved those of the 'victim' clan, that they invited a very senior clan leader who was a refugee in Switzerland to formally accept the apology.

In Britain, IofC facilitated opportunities for our new-found colleagues to express their views to government ministers, MPs and Lords, and diplomats, and through articles in national newspapers. Together we developed an intergenerational dialogue workshop entitled 'Peace Begins at Home' to respond to the breakdown in relationships between young people and their parents due to the differences in culture.

Outcomes in Somalia

Then in 2011, when the international community finally concluded that Somalia couldn't be neglected any longer, a fresh initiative was launched to create a provisional administration, with funding and African Union military forces to push back the Shabab extremist movement that had taken hold.

At very real risk to their lives, several of the network returned to Somalia immediately to take up positions in the Transitional Government, the civil service or NGOs, and others followed.

Osman Jama Ali became nationally-known for his stand for reconciliation and Somali unity and was made a member of the Somali Independent Constitutional Review Commission. Several hundred copies of his vision for the future of Somalia, 'Emergency Aid (Gurmad) for the Revival of the Somali State'^{iv} was widely distributed among the leadership of Somalia. He represented the global Somali diaspora at the opening of the Vision 2016^v conference on the future of Somalia in March 2013.

The person who made the apology to another clan has since devoted himself to reconciliation, going from village to village to bring estranged neighbours back together - sometimes with tears of joy at being reunited.

Twenty-one of those who were part of the network went on to play senior roles in government, diplomacy and the civil service, others began new initiatives such as a university, a school, a business or a farm.

The current situation

By all accounts, and despite the control of the Shabab of areas of the country and bombings in Mogadishu allegedly by them, Somalia seems to be edging in the direction that our Somali colleagues hoped and worked for.

Two elections - though not yet on a universal suffrage basis - have taken place since 2012, each with a smooth hand-over of power. Signs of new confidence can be seen in the rebuilding of the centre of Mogadishu, in the gradual return of the diaspora to reclaim homes that they had been expelled from in the war, and start new businesses. Relations with its neighbours are becoming normalised, helped particularly by the new Ethiopian Prime Minister's reconciliatory approach.

Although progress towards statehood is very slow and not yet irreversible, Somalis universally acknowledge that the contrast between 2011 and now is dramatic.

Regarding the SIDD network today, the urgency that diaspora Somalis felt in the early 2000s has diminished. Many of those who took part have returned to Somalia, but still check in at the AfR meetings when they visit the UK.

Reflection on the journey

Firstly, I would like to make clear that I am not writing this to claim any credit for whatever contribution IofC has made to Somalia's recovery was very small indeed. The whole framework for the recovery was created by international governments, agencies and NGOs working together, and is still underpinned by that cooperative approach. I am writing with the hope that sharing our experience may enrich the work of other reconcilers. Looking back, it is easy to construct a narrative like this. However, at the time, nothing could have been foreseen. At every decision-point, it was a matter of seeking the next right step together.

But in hindsight there were certain fundamental elements which guided us.

Firstly, there was the matter of shared values. The brief check-list for the spiritual health of individuals and nations that Frank Buchman^{vi} promoted - honesty, purity of motive, unselfishness and love - and receptiveness to divine guidance, proved again that they have the capacity to engender trust between Muslims and Christians (and those of other faiths).

Secondly, three tools from the IofC heritage were important: i) the creation of Safe Space for sharing; ii) Training - through the Dialogue Facilitation courses, and exposure to other

models of reconciliation on film or through personal testimonies; iii) Accompaniment: the longterm nurturing of relationships, and mutual assistance in practical ways.

Thirdly, an analysis by Joseph W Montville of the reconciliation process in Europe after the Second World War^{vii} provided a conceptual framework for our work. He highlighted three elements (paraphrased in my own words): i) Humanising relations between leaders; ii) Creating an environment favourable to reconciliation; and iii) Creating economic structures which enable people of conflicting backgrounds to work together.

Unpredictable was the gift of healing that took place between those of white British heritage and the Somali-British. We learnt that though we may have thought that the Somalis had a problem among them, in fact the Somalis viewed us as bearing a major responsibility for the chronic instability that had beset their country. In particular, the imperial imposition of borders, straight lines on maps drawn by colonial officers, which took no account of the trauma they would cause, dividing families and clans and disrupting ancient trade-routes.

We white British realised that there was a debt that could only be repaid by a spirit of service to those who felt they had been treated as being of less or no value by our forebears. And we experienced that genuine service can heal the wounds of the past.

As Osman Jama Ali often says, 'I grew up hating the British, but now I am British myself!'

Peter Riddell, Convenor of Agenda for Reconciliation, Initiatives of Change UK

ⁱ A more detailed account can be found in '[Ten Years of Peacemaking in Diaspora - the Story of Somali Initiative for Dialogue and Democracy](#)' compiled and edited by Dr Ahmed Sharif Abbas & Peter Riddell, privately published 10.5.2017

ⁱⁱ www.uk.iofc.org

ⁱⁱⁱ Known as Moral Rearmament (MRA) until 2001

^{iv} [Emergency Aid \(Gurmad\) for the Revival of the Somali State](#) by Osman Jama Ali, privately published in 2011, revised in 2013

^v [Video of speech](#) (in Somali) and [English text](#)

^{vi} Founder of Initiatives of Change

^{vii} [The Arrow and the Olive Branch - A Case for Two-Track Diplomacy](#), Joseph V Montville, published in The Psychodynamics of International Relationships (p163)