

Somali Refugees in Africa: patterns, challenges and way forward

Introduction:

Somalia has not had a functioning central government for twenty years. The human rights situation in the country remains dire throughout the territory with regional variations. The basic civil rights, including the right to life, are violated routinely by administrations and parties to the conflict, and this is exemplified by the virtual absence of basic services provided by the authorities. The security of person does not exist in many of the areas, and arbitrary arrests and detention are commonplace.

As a result of this complex set of factors, Somalia is one of the top three countries in the world generating displaced populations, along with Afghanistan and Iraq. Although the majority of Somali refugees are resident in Africa, significant numbers of this population have been registered in other parts of the world during 2010, for instance the Middle East (189,092), Western Europe (85,075), North America and the Caribbean (8,675), South-East Asia and the Pacific (2,594), and Central and Eastern Europe (1,769)¹.

Data Sources:

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) runs a routine data collection system on a number of demographic indicators from over 150 countries in the world hosting refugees and other displaced populations. This quarterly statistical data collection process includes strict verifications through a multitude of UNHCR country and field offices distributed across these countries, and all this is based on an electronic registration and verification system (including biometrics) of refugees, asylum seekers and other population of concern. This enables determination of the origin and location of refugees of several nationalities across the world, including their magnitude and demographic characteristics.

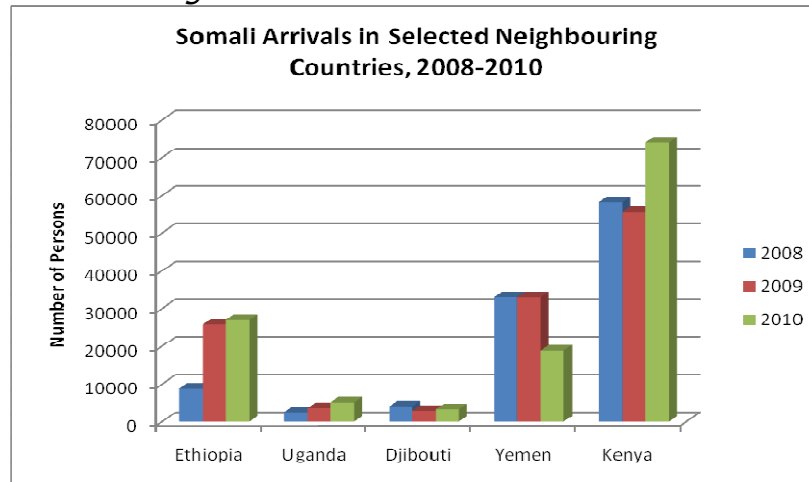
On top of this, an annual monitoring and evaluation tool is used by UNHCR offices across the world to assess a range of protection and assistance indicators in locations hosting refugees, internally displaced persons and other populations of concern to the Office. Based on this detailed information, it is easy to assess a range of aspects with regard to the refugees' quality of life, employment, access to social services, etc. and enjoyment of human rights prescribed in a number of international conventions and protocols.

Magnitude of Somali refugees in Africa:

Some 680,000 Somalis live as refugees in neighbouring countries, mainly Kenya, Yemen, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Tanzania and Uganda. About 1.5 million Somalis are internally displaced within their country. In 2010 alone, over 100,000 Somalis fled to seek refuge in neighbouring states as more violent clashes continued.

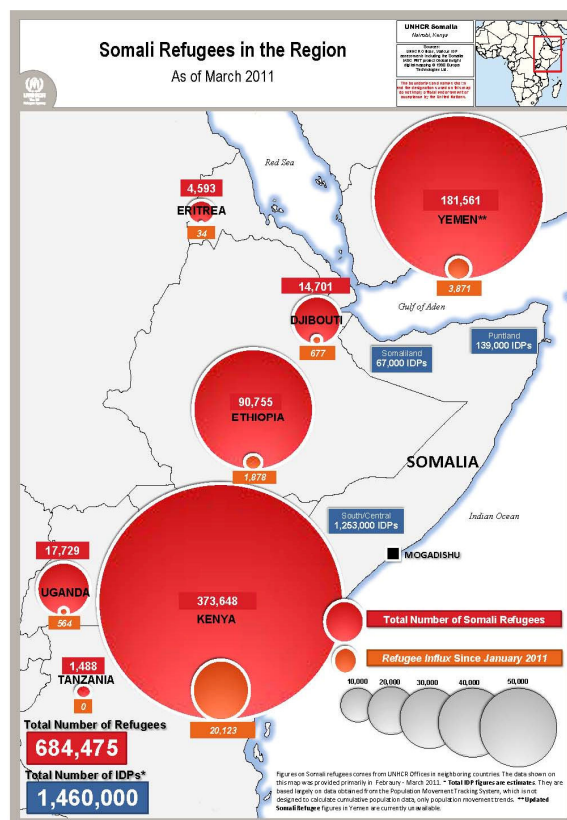
¹ Annual Statistics Reports, UNHCR 2010

Figure 1: New Arrivals from Somalia



Apart from Yemen which registered a reduction in Somali refugee arrivals in 2010 as a result of its internal problems, increases in thousands were registered in all neighbouring countries (Figure 1). Kenya is currently the biggest host of refugees from Somalia. In the Dadaab refugee camp complex in North-eastern Kenya, the Somali refugee population was 334,000 by March 2011, representing an average monthly influx of 10,000 arrivals and this figure is projected to reach 500,000 by the end of the year. Ethiopia, on the western border with Somalia, opened two refugee camps between 2009 and 2010, but these are already full, each hosting some 30,000 Somali refugees.

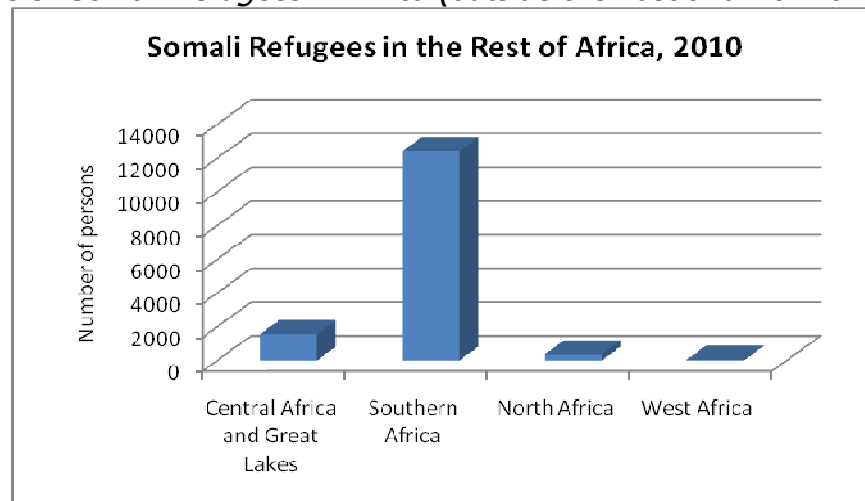
Figure 2: Distribution of Somali Refugees in the East and Horn of Africa



Somali Refugees beyond Neighbouring Countries:

Even countries as far as South Africa have registered increasing numbers of asylum seekers from Somalia in the past years. Southern Africa, especially countries like Mozambique and South Africa, currently host the second biggest number of Somali refugees in Africa (*Figure 3*). The main destination for the Somali population in this direction has been South Africa as they search for possible employment opportunities. Other Southern African countries serve as transit routes, but as accessing the intended opportunities is not a straight forward process, many end up as refugees in the neighbouring countries. The least recipient of Somali refugees has been West Africa due to distance and limited economic opportunities. Otherwise, Ghana, Nigeria and Senegal have registered Somali refugees in the past year. It should be emphasized that the statistics provided here do not take into account the probably large undocumented Somali population scattered between Somalia and South Africa. For example in Tanzania, anecdotal information points to relatively large numbers of Somalis en route to South Africa.

Figure 3: Somali Refugees in Africa (outside the East and Horn of Africa)

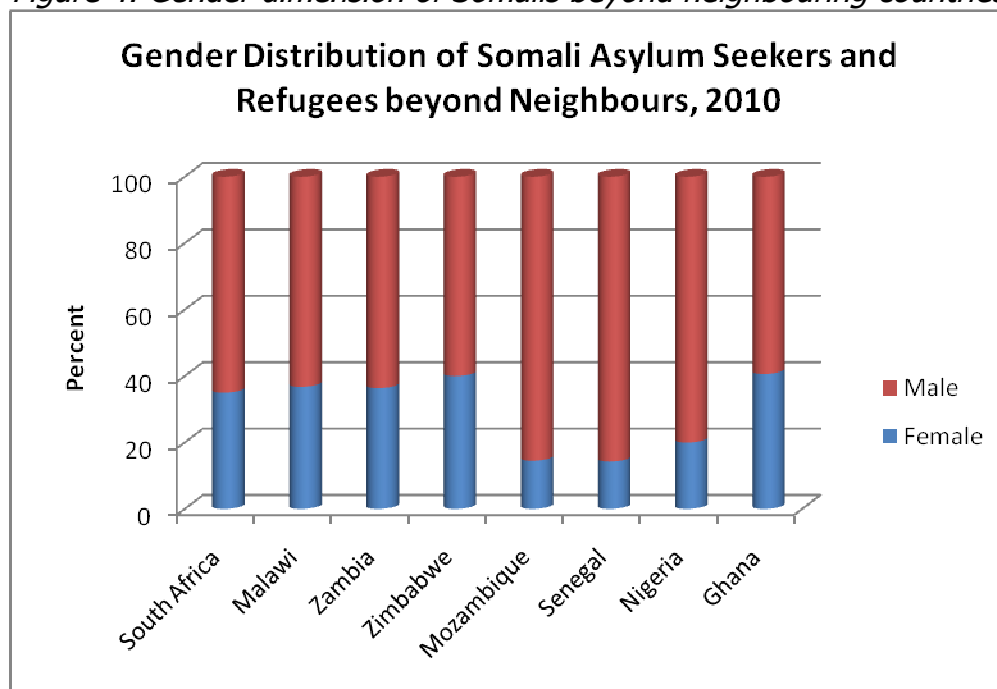


On the other hand, men are more likely to venture into far destinations beyond the countries neighbouring Somalia. *Figure 4* shows that a significant proportion of Somali asylum seekers and refugees in 2010 in all countries beyond the East and Horn of Africa were men (average: female 30%, male 70%) and these were mostly from the productive age above 18 years. On the contrary, refugees in Somalia's neighbouring countries are fairly balanced by gender and in some cases, women tend to be more in older age-groups above 25 years (*see Figure 5 for the Kenya case study*).

Impact of Somali Refugee Movement:

As the exodus in thousands continue every year, Somali refugees put a sizable impact on the neighbouring countries with regard to socio-economic, security and other development aspects. On the other hand, this migration affects the population itself and the country (Somalia) to some degree.

Figure 4: Gender dimension of Somalis beyond neighbouring countries



Impact on Somalia as a country:

A significant proportion of the fleeing population come from the productive age groups and this leaves the country with a gap in this valuable resource. Available data from the Dadaab refugee camp complex in Kenya that hosts the biggest Somali refugee population indicates that over 40% of the population are aged between 18 and 59 years, and this is equally distributed among males and females. This population would have had a positive contribution in agriculture, business and other trades to boost the Somalia economy.

On the other hand, the daring nature of the Somali population in adventuring into several new communities in search of better quality of life makes them one of the nationalities from Africa that has moved to all continents in the world. Although the key driving force is the instability in their country, their motivation could be linked to their level of courage and adaptive coping mechanisms that make them to try and explore what is best in life. These successful and adaptive coping mechanisms, which is also exemplified in their business acumen, is basically a negative impact to their country as it would contribute significantly to the development of Somalia. Somalia remains one of the poorest countries on the planet.

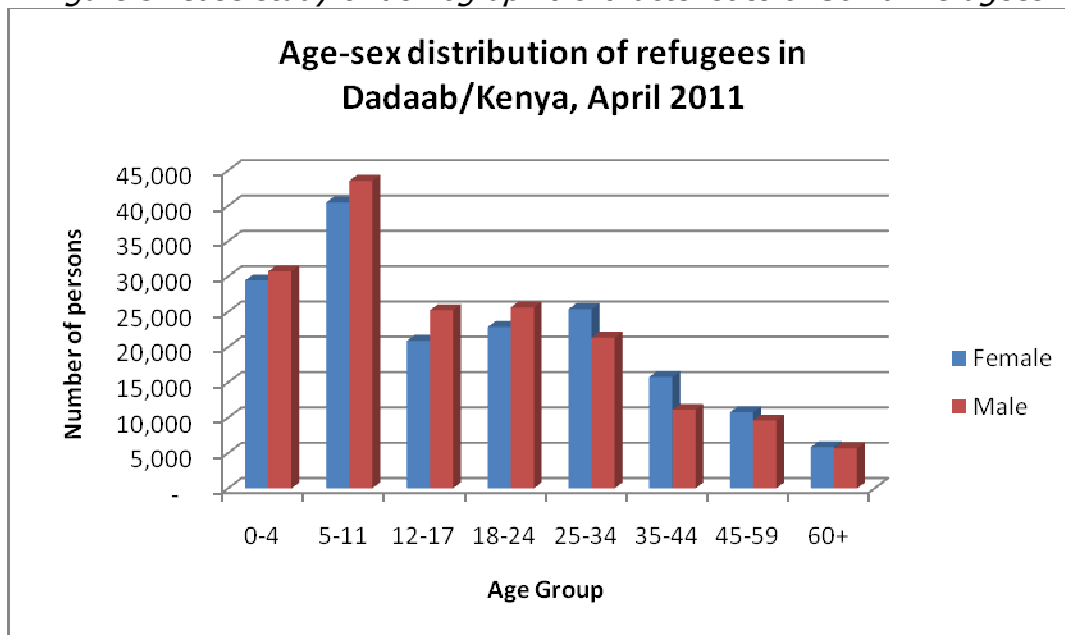
Impact on refugees themselves:

On the other hand, the limited education and employment opportunities in host countries leaves a whole generation of Somalis disadvantaged and out of key aspects of personal and professional development. In most of the countries in the region (Ethiopia, Kenya, etc.) which host Somali refugees, engagement in gainful employment or agricultural production is prohibited for asylum seekers and refugees. In the refugee camps, only about 53% and 17% of the eligible population can access primary and secondary school education respectively provided by UNHCR, the host governments and other partners². Figure 5 demonstrates that the

² Annual Standards and Indicators Reports, UNHCR 2010

majority of the refugee population are children and the youth who are most likely to miss out on education and employment opportunities in the refugee camps.

Figure 5: Case study of demographic characteristics of Somali refugees



The accommodation facilities, food donations, health facilities and related services available in refugee camps are usually at the basic minimum level, resulting in disease outbreaks, malnutrition and related consequences which contribute to higher mortality, especially among children and the elderly. For instance, during 2010, levels of malnutrition in children aged 6 to 59 months in all refugee camps hosting Somali refugees in Kenya, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti were recorded above the expected standards (more than 5%), in some cases reaching as high as 28%³. Without noting other poorly performing health and sanitation indicators, malnutrition has remarkable effects on the growth and well-being of this population and because resources are not usually available to cope with the ever growing influx, the situation remains dire.

Socio-economic impact on the host countries:

A number of studies have shown both positive and negative socio-economic impacts of refugees in the host countries. A recent impact assessment⁴ in the Dadaab refugee camp complex in North-Eastern Kenya, which hosts the biggest Somali refugee population in the world, showed that the total annual direct and indirect benefits of the camp operation reached a magnitude of US\$ 100 million in 2010. Part of these resources benefits the host communities through investments like upgrading of infrastructure (roads, health facilities, etc.). Additionally, trading opportunities in communities bordering refugee camps have been boosted by the presence of refugees who receive remittances from relatives in the diaspora, and not only set up petty business ventures but also purchase locally available products like livestock and food.

³ Annual Standards and Indicators Report for UNHCR Eritrea, 2010

⁴ World Development Report 2011 – Background Note: July 2010

On the other hand, given the existing socio-economic challenges in African countries, the impact of refugees on the environment, social services and other aspects is profound. In many of the countries in the region, refugees are encamped in gazetted areas, usually not far from the border areas. However, as they search for pasture for their animals, firewood for their energy needs and other related basic services, they compete for natural resources with host communities thereby contributing to their depletion. This has, for instance, caused some tensions in the Dadaab localities in North-Eastern Kenya among the host population, politicians and the refugee camp management.

The Role of the International Community:

In order to address the plight of the population displaced across the Somalia borders, the United Nations System led by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) provides for their protection and assistance in collaboration with the host Governments. The host Governments provide the enabling security environment and the crucial resource of land where refugee camps are located, and UNHCR with its range of partners facilitates the protection regime, including assistance on basic services (shelter, education, water, etc.). On top of this, UNHCR and the partners provide assistance inside Somalia to the ever-growing internally displaced population (IDPs) and this would probably curtail the outflow of the population.

On the other hand, peace initiatives led by the African Union (including the peace-keeping force-AMISOM), the European Union and other bilateral donors have been supported over the years. However, this is yet to generate lasting solutions due to the complex nature of the Somalia conflict.

Conclusions:

Somalia's problems are rooted in internal conflicts that resulted from the demise of a functioning Government in 1991 and this has led to a continuing exodus of the population to neighbouring countries and beyond. The impact of this displaced population, both inside and outside Somalia, contributes to the ongoing development challenges in Africa. With the increasing outflow of the Somali population, mostly to African destinations, it warrants additional donor support and investment in African countries to enable them cope with the effects of hosting refugees.

It should also be noted that refugees are only a small portion of migratory populations. They sometimes get mixed with other migrant populations and there may be a general push against them resulting in denying them adequate international protection. This calls for better scrutiny and analysis of migrants by the authorities across the world to ascertain genuine asylum seekers in order to provide them with the expected protection and assistance according to international protocols.

On the whole, more efforts should be put in place to address the root causes of the Somalia conflict. This would reduce the pressure of hosting Somali refugees in African countries and facilitate Somalia's development through retention and utilisation of its productive population. Efforts by development partners are in the right direction and should be strengthened.