

Evaluation of Approaches to Disability and Rehabilitation  
in the context of Somali Refugees in Kenya

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This thesis is presented for the degree of  
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September, 2008

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# ABSTRACT

There is international concern over the refugee increase in many parts of the world and the international community is bearing the responsibility of assisting refugees with relief, rehabilitation, integration and possible repatriation programs. This has created unprecedented challenges for the international community since the amount of assistance has had to increase and resources have had to be diverted from development programs in countries with serious economic and social problems.

The current study addressed important issues related to refugees with disabilities living in the Dadaab Refugee Camp Complexes in Kenya. After a pilot study to investigate the feasibility of the major study, 200 individuals with a disability were interviewed, and focus group discussions were held with individuals and groups supporting people with disabilities.

The study was guided by the following research objectives:

1. To determine the prevalence of disability among Somali refugees and clarify the concept of disability as it relates to the Somali community;
2. To identify and discuss the nature and the causes of disability among the Somali refugees in Kenya;
3. To gain a picture of the basic needs, aspirations, and challenges of Somali refugees with a disability;
4. To examine and evaluate the prevailing educational and rehabilitation approaches to disability in the context of Somali refugees in Kenya; and
5. To develop a framework for a comprehensive approach to community rehabilitation relevant to refugees with a disability in Kenya.

The research found that, while war in Somalia and related factors have contributed significantly to disability amongst members of the Somali community, cultural mindsets perpetuate disability and undermine the existing efforts to alleviate the conditions that people experience. Education and rehabilitation, which would be viable means of addressing the issues associated with disability, are inadequate in the refugee camps. The study acknowledges the efforts made by international agencies to help and support people with disabilities. However, it notes that more needs to be

done if the Somali refugees with disability are to live dignified and functional human lives.

This study draws the following conclusions:

- Although war in Somalia is, reportedly, the main actual cause of disability among the Somali refugees in the Dadaab camps in Kenya, culturally, curses are considered to have led to disabilities by major sections of the Somali community.
- The concept of disability as culturally and socially constructed is inadequate. Consequently, in order to address disability effectively, these cultural constructions need to be carefully evaluated and transformed.
- The current efforts aimed at assisting refugees with disability are commendable but there is a need to improve the educational and rehabilitation approaches used to provide services to refugees with disability. The community rehabilitation approach would seem to offer the best opportunities for assisting to engage and support the empowerment and acceptance of refugees with disabilities.

# DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree, diploma, or other award in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.



Siyat Hillow Abdi

September, 2008

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This thesis emanates from an intense interest and research in the areas of disability and refugee stimulated by my life experiences and familiarity with the plight of refugees and persons with disability. The study has provided me with the opportunity to meet and work with institutions as well as people who inspired and supported me enormously.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the Ford Foundation (International Fellowship Program) for giving me a scholarship to study in Australia and for funding my research. I am also grateful to Flinders University for waiving the portion of my fees that were not covered by the Ford Foundation Grant, and for the support I received in my studies from the Department of Disability Studies and the University Disability Liaison Officer.

I would like to thank CARE International, Nairobi Country office, for granting my request to conduct research. I am also thankful to Muhammad Qazilbash, from CARE Refugee Assistance Program (RAP) Dadaab Regional Office, for spending much of his time in order to organize the logistics available at the camps.

My gratefulness also goes to all the Staff at the CDS and CBR Offices. I enormously appreciate the efforts of Mr. Mohammed Hillow (CBR Coordinator) and Mr. Idris Atosh (Special Education Coordinator) in organizing groups of interviewees and making them ready for my research and for being so thoughtful and understanding with regard to my research needs. This facilitated my stay and research activities in the Dadaab Refugee Camps. In a special way, I am equally grateful to Ms. Ann and miss Ebla Farah and the staff at the kitchen team for their politeness and caring which made me feel at home! I would also like to thank CARE drivers, Mr. Gabow, Mr. Kioko and Mr. Abdirashid for their availability and readiness to help as well as working overtime to accommodate my needs.

I would like to thank my research assistants. Without Francis Wokabi, Abdullahi Madowe, Abdi Khalif and Mohammed Hillow, it would have been impossible to collect the data that grounds this research. Their presence also brought matters to attention that would have otherwise escaped my own.

My thankfulness and admiration go to my interviewees who waited for long hours to be interviewed. They shared with me their most intimate sufferings and trusted me to use it professionally in my research. My deep gratitude goes out to all those people with disability who shared their stories, points-of-view, and opinions with me and my research assistants. These stories and the valuable discussions from parents and community leaders provided the data for this research, but they also transformed my worldview. In order to respect their privacy, I do not thank my respondents by name, yet it is my hope that some directly or indirectly will recognize themselves in this piece of work. Actually, I wanted this thesis to be about them. I wanted it to tell their feelings, aspirations and hopes. I wanted it to portray the life they experience in the refugee camps. I wanted it to capture the challenges they face, their resilience and optimism. It is my deep contention that this research depicts a side of the story that is rarely told, though very much in need of telling.

Last, but not least, this thesis could not be in this beautiful shape without the firm guidance and commitment of my supervisors. I will never forget the numerous meetings I had with Dr Brian Matthews, Assoc. Prof Verity Bottroff and Dr Jerry Ford. From them, I learned so much, both about scientific research and academic writing. Brian Matthews was always at my side. I deeply appreciate their expertise, professionalism, and encouragement. Together, they helped me process raw ideas and experiences into a coherent work.

## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to the refugees with disabilities in the Dadaab Refugee Complex who were willing to share their stories with me. I wanted this thesis to be about them. I wanted it to tell the world about their feelings, aspirations, challenges, and dreams and, in particular, their resilience and optimism.

## PROLOGUE

For generations and generations my great ancestors and forefathers pursued a nomadic life wandering from place to place with their livestock between the North Eastern parts of Kenya and Southern regions of Somalia. Their nomadic movement had been governed by the availability of water and pasture. Thus, in time of a prolonged drought, they would move into areas where they could obtain water and pasture, either within their locality or outside neighbouring regions.

In order to cope with the harsh climatic conditions in this part of the country during a prolonged dry season they traditionally used a herding system known as *Jilei* (the shifting system) to cope with diseases in their animals and manage extreme weather conditions. This meant that both cattle and camel owners moved away with the main stock establishing *Jil* (nomadic hamlets) and left behind the calves and milking cows with the rest of the family. Sometimes they had to be away from their families for long periods depending on the prevailing weather conditions and availability of water and pasture to graze their animals.

The Story of my birth is still fresh in the minds of the community elders. I asked my father-in-law who was then in his 101<sup>st</sup> year to explain the circumstances leading to my blindness: “I think the family was not prepared to receive a blind child at that time”. He said, “we had experienced prolonged *Xagaai* seasons (a dry and windy period from June to September) and your father had gone to look for a good place to move our livestock - centres where water was available from wells or any other watering points, to stay until the next Deer season.” However, he said, “the Deer season did not come until two months later and your father had just returned from a *Saahan* (survey trip) to determine good pastoral land for the livestock and to settle the family, when he was told the news of your birth. He was told the news that his wife had given birth to a baby boy who was not ‘normal’ and was born with red eyes.”

“Traditionally, this presented a mixed signal in the community” the old man explained. However, he continued, “your father went into the delivery hut anxiously to observe the newly born baby and was heard to say: ‘yes, this is Siyat - additional blessings in the family.’ My father-in-law said, “That night marked the beginning of the Deer season, generally known by the community as the season of plenty of water



[but] unfortunately, three months later your father died of a chest infection [most probably from chronic pneumonia].”

After the death of my father we also lost all our animals in drought and famine that hit the region and we moved from the border of Kenya-Somalia to settle in the slums of Garissa. My two elder brothers were given an opportunity in Boys Town Boarding Primary School, Garissa - a catholic sponsored school that catered for orphans who had lost their parents in the Shifta wars of 1967-1969 or were left destitute as a result of drought and famines which hit the province. My eldest brother, unemployed and out of school, was left with my paternal uncle at the Kenya-Somalia border. My sister (13 years old) and my mother were lucky, working as casual farmers also at the catholic primary school farm. So I wondered why I was left behind and out of school.

No one could better explain to me what happened during my birth and the family history in general, than my mother who is now in her 73<sup>rd</sup> year. Therefore, it was a matter of concern for me to get the first hand memories from her as soon as possible, as to what happened to me and why I became blind in my early childhood. Thus, from my early childhood, only about seven years old, I became very inquisitive to members of the family, and especially to my mother, to know more about myself, the family and the environment. I viewed my vision impairment or disability not as a defect in my person (a sensory or medical condition) but as a complex relationship between society and people who function differently.

My questions as a child would sometimes spark anger from my mother or at times she would intentionally ignore and change the subject. But I didn't give up. I was so curious to learn and this became, and continues to be, a major aspect of my personality. At times in my youth I would sit outside our home to kill boredom, pretending to bask in the sun but actually observing the village boys and girls of my age go to school.

But when I asked my mother in one of the evenings after she returned from work at the catholic farm, why I was not in school like other boys and girls in the village, she told me that, she wanted me to “grow big” to take care of myself against harassment from the village boys and girls and then she would take me to school. Then I asked her to explain the cause of my blindness. She told me that such questions are hard to explain but that she thought I must have been “passed over” by the evil bird

(*geedkorrah*) when I was in the womb. Traditionally, our local people strongly believe that the shadow of the *geedkorrah* causes illnesses and disabilities in children less than five years old.

The following year at the age of eight years, my sister and mother were able to raise a few shillings to buy me a uniform and some stationery and took me to nearby Jaribu Primary school, some two kilometres from the village. This marked my first experience of school life. I was very happy to have started a new life and for a time felt the same as any other child in the community, but ultimately, I realised that I was being treated differently by village children on the streets and in the classroom. I became scared to walk to school because of the village children who regularly threw stones at me and there was also frequent harassment in class.

I began to ask myself questions such as: Who am I? What have I done? What do these children want and expect? Why do they treat me badly and behave that way? Why do all these things happen to me? My poor treatment by the village children constantly circulated in my mind. It was a difficult period for me as I attempted to resolve these questions and to assign meaning to the stressful and disruptive series of events which I encountered.

I guess my presence at school and the fact that I was the only child with vision impairment caused conflicts which drastically affected community interaction patterns and impacted negatively on me and my family members. This was obvious at times, especially when I travelled between home and school and there were many instances when my sister cried because she was unable to restrain me from extreme anger caused by my frustrations at school and in the community. Schooling was getting tough and being a person with vision impairment, in the context of the Somali nomadic community, was very difficult.

Ultimately, one morning I hit a young boy in the classroom who was pinching me from behind to 'test' my vision impairment. I was serious and never entertained that kind of joke which was growing more common among the Somali boys at school. The class master punished me for that matter, without proper investigation, leading to the event forcing me to drop out from school altogether.

Two weeks after that incident, I went to Garissa town one afternoon to look for my eldest brother who, after returning from the Kenya-Somalia border, was working as a porter in one of the wholesalers in the town. I went to see him to give him a message from my mother. Unfortunately, at this time, the government had its own program and operation to arrest minors loitering in the streets - the so called "street children" - and I was arrested by the police operation. My mother was subsequently taken to court and accused of negligence. I knew she was not to blame. The majority of the villagers were poor and could not afford to take their children to school and my family was no different. She explained to the court what happened and why I was not in school.

Then the Provincial Children's Officer, whose name I still remember (Sulub - well known for his active role in the Children's Department), was instructed by the court to secure a special school for me. This marked a turning point in my search for education. In the next year, January 1978 at almost the age of 11, I was admitted to the Likoni Primary School - a missionary sponsored school for the blind. Although I was advanced in age compared to other children, I started from class 3 but performed exceptionally well, and led at class until when I completed my Certificate in Primary Education and attained high points.

In 1983, I pursued my secondary Kenya Certificate of Education (KCE, ordinary level) at Thika School for the Blind - another missionary sponsored school near Nairobi. Then I took my Kenya Advanced Certificate of Education (KACE) level in my home district Garissa, in 1989, where I attained even better results than the sighted students. This was a great achievement considering that I was the only visually disadvantaged student in the entire class of 64 pupils.

Finally, in 1990, I joined Kenyatta University Nairobi for a Bachelor of Education degree and completed in 1994. I was first posted to a girl's secondary school in North Eastern Province Kenya and taught History and Islamic Religious Education for many years.

Luckily, in 1995, two months after marrying, I was awarded a government of Kenya Ministry of Education scholarship to undertake a Masters Course in Religious studies at Kenyatta University. I also received considerable financial assistance and support from the Young Muslim Association. In 1999, I graduated with an M. A. in Islamic Religious Studies at Kenyatta University and wrote my Masters Thesis on:

*The Response of the Somali Muslim Community to Modern Family Planning Practices in Garissa District*

In my later academic and even professional life, financial problems and my physical condition have been my greatest challenges. The lack of adequate educational facilities and frequent discrimination have been major hurdles for me to overcome. However, I still found life exciting. I learnt to be diligent, assertive, patient and disciplined. Consequently, these qualities have enabled me to manage and achieve my desired goals despite the odds.

I remember that I was never satisfied with the answer given by my mother explaining the cause of my blindness. I lost two of my brothers and sister in a road accident in 1992 and suffered depression and stress. I also had experienced worsening eye problems which ultimately led to my blindness.

I had to see an ophthalmologist who diagnosed that my vision loss probably resulted from congenital glaucoma caused by the improper development of the drainage channels (trabecular meshwork) in the eye. He explained that this led to a continuous production of fluid (aqueous humor) which could not be drained because of the improperly functioning drainage channels. Therefore, the amount of fluid increase inside my eyes raised intraocular pressure causing the optic nerves in the eyes to be damaged.

In 1991 when civil war was first reported and Somali refugees flowed into Kenya, I remember accompanying my late sister one afternoon from Liboi to see the situation at the Kenya-Somalia border. I was in my first year of university education by then at Kenyatta University. My sister was involved in charity activities distributing food to the displaced Somali people. I met some of the refugees who had disabilities and they told me horrible stories about life in Somalia in general, even before the civil war. These stories influenced me greatly and motivated me to start actively participating in the 'disability movement'.

These refugees told me that the educational needs of people with a disability were never catered for in Somalia, even prior to the civil war. They also told me how the civil war had resulted in many more Somali civilians losing their sight and/or suffering horrific injuries often caused by land-mines or other explosives. They

explained that they had no schools for people with a disability and no rehabilitation programs. There was also no social support or welfare system in Somalia and no work suitable for people who were blind or had other disabilities. Thus, they described a horrible situation of isolation, poverty and unemployment - a system that automatically excluded people with a disability in Somalia. Such horrible stories from fellow Somali people with disabilities influenced me to be more proactive and to identify the level of need within the Somali disabled community in the North Eastern Province, as well as to increase the awareness of the plight of Somali Refugees with a disability, hoping that this would help to improve social integration, encourage active, creative, and more educated and independent members of the community.

To this effect, in 1998, I launched my own organisation Nomadic Child Education and Environment Support Program – Kenya (NOCEESP - K) a community based Educational and Environment Welfare Society which aimed to achieve these goals. Our first mission was to conduct research in one of the suburbs in the Garissa District and we identified a number of children who were disabled and destitute, and who had no educational opportunities. Since we had limited financial resources, we managed to sponsor 30 children and came up with the idea of raising funds. Therefore, in August 2001, I walked a distance of 380 kilometres from Garissa to Nairobi in a charity walk dubbed as a “charity camel walk” which was very successful in raising funds. I was also involved in consultancy activities at the Dadaab refugee camps training special education teachers who were providing services for children with disabilities, during which time I learned much more about the plight of refugees with a disability.

It was from within the context of my involvement with people with a disability in this marginalised region, and my desire and energy to empathise with the plight of people with a disability, that the Kenyatta University employed me as a disability liaison officer at the student directorate, to assist students with a disability. However, the present study resulted from my active community based work and my scholarly interest to further study issues of social justice affecting people with a disability, especially those who were refugees and those in conflict situations.

I am greatly indebted to the Ford Foundation International Fellowships Program for providing me with a scholarship and an opportunity to study in Australia where I am

also committed as a volunteer to assist the Ogaden/Somali community settle as new arrivals in a new country – Australia, given that I am one of the very few members of the community with the ability to assist with issues such as language, community mobilisation/coordination, re-settlement and integration. My very good education and ability to speak and read other languages has given me an opportunity to negotiate with service providers for programs and services on their behalf. I am also grateful to Flinders University for waiving the portion of my fees that were not covered by the Ford Foundation Grant, and for the support I received in my studies from the Department of Disability Studies and the University Disability Liaison Officer.

As for my PhD studies, I have undertaken most of my academic work in Australia but travelled to the three major Kenyan refugee camps in Dadaab to conduct 251 interviews to gather the research data.

I am married with seven children and have a strong sense of commitment and responsibility to my family who I dearly love as they were the ultimate sense of my strength and spirit that harnessed the challenges of being a parent with a disability and a student. It is my belief, however, that the dignity of all human beings and their quality of life is important. The future of Humankind can only depend on all men and women being able to participate actively in building a rich global society without excluding anyone because of their circumstances or abilities. In a sense, there are two communities (those with disabilities and those without) who often do not understand each other and yet there is incredible value in struggling to make sense of the journey they share and the differences in perceptions that are fostered by their different life experiences. Over the years there has been a conscious effort in many parts of the world to integrate all people into community life but these changes have been very slow in underprivileged areas. My dream is to promote people with disability to actively participate and contribute as full citizens of their own communities and thus contribute their potential wealth. What is needed is a welcoming community attitude that acknowledges that all people including “differently abled” people have gifts, talents and abilities which they can use to contribute to and benefit the whole community.

Finally, in a special way, I am concerned about the number of people becoming disabled as a result of unnecessary wars in Africa and in particular, in Somalia. The

infrastructure and facilities in the African continent are neither there nor sufficiently adapted to meet the special needs of those with disabilities. Disability and the concerns of people with disabilities are usually the least prioritised and many people with a disability still grapple with basic issues of survival.

While many other factors that increase the disability toll in Africa are a matter of concern, disability caused by conflict can no longer be tolerated and must be condemned because it is preventable. The international community do hear of conflicts in Somalia but even the international media is silent about the untold suffering people with a disability in Somalia have to endure. There is little information on how many people have become disabled in the conflicts, the lives they are leading, and where they have been able to get into refugee camps, what life is like for them there and what is their future.

I have considerable energy and dedication to this research because of the experiences I have outlined. My own visual disadvantage has not prevented me from conducting this research and I think this demonstrates that a person with a disability is able, with the appropriate support and with his/her own motivation, to develop his/her talents to his/her full potential. I hope that this research will enlighten and bring greater understanding and awareness amongst the international community of the plight of Somali refugees with disabilities and of the situation of those living in the Dadaab camps in particular.

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September, 2008