‘And then one day they all moved to Leicester’: the relocation of Somalis from the Netherlands to the UK explained

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ABSTRACT

Since 2000 it is estimated that between 10,000 and 20,000 Somali immigrants have left the Netherlands for the UK. This exceptionally high level of intra-European Union (EU) mobility is in contrast with the general trend of very low levels of intra-EU mobility. Based on 33 in-depth interviews with Dutch Somalis in London and Leicester this paper tries to explain the relocation of Somalis from the Netherlands to the UK. The presence of a large Somali community in the UK, economic and educational opportunities in the UK, and differences in integration policies have influenced Dutch Somalis’ decision to relocate. It is argued, however, that the wider context in which these movements take place should be taken into account as well. Immigrants may (initially) not always be in a position to move where they want to move. As such, Somalis’ relocation from the Netherlands to the UK could also be seen as a follow-up to an earlier movement that was interrupted along the way. Dutch Somalis’ narratives about their onward move provide us with a comparison of the Netherlands and the UK as countries of settlement. At the same time, these stories also challenge the binary oppositions that have tended to inform how we think about migration in a static and often linear way.

Keywords: onward migration; secondary movement; Somalis; UK; the Netherlands

Somalis’ relocation to the UK: an independent ‘onward’ move or a ‘secondary’ move linked to a previous one?

Around the year 2000 it became clear that there was a significant trend among Somalis to relocate within the European Union (EU). Many Dutch Somalis left for the UK. Some moved to places where there was already an established Somali community such as Bristol, the East End of London, Liverpool, and Sheffield. Others moved to ‘new’ locations, particularly in the Midlands, such as Birmingham and Leicester (van den Reek and Hussein, 2003; Momatrade, 2004). Estimations of Dutch Somalis living in the UK provided by the Somali community themselves vary between 10,000 and 20,000 (van den Reek and Hussein, 2003; Moret and van Eck, 2006). How many Dutch Somalis exactly have made the move to the UK is difficult to say because this particular movement cannot be traced back in existing databases. Dutch statistics show how many Somalis have left the country (see Table 1), but they only count those who are born in Somalia and do not show where they have moved to. Some may have returned to Somalia, others may have migrated onward to other countries such as the US (Horst, 2006: 13) or to Arab countries such as Egypt (Al-Sharmani, 2006).
It is not only from the Netherlands that Somalis are relocating. It is known that there are substantial numbers of Scandinavian Somalis moving in the same direction. A Somali social advisor in Aarhus, for example, estimated that 3000–4000 Somalis with Danish citizenship moved to the UK from there between 2002 and 2004 (Bang Nielsen, 2004). Moreover, this relocation pattern from European countries to the UK is not unique for Somalis. Similar patterns are found for other ethnic groups such as Sri Lankan Tamils, Sudanese, Iraqis, Afghans, Congolese, and Ivorians (Lindley and van Hear, 2007). These high levels of intra-EU mobility for migrants with a refugee background are surprising because they manifest a propensity for mobility that is far greater than those of the general EU population. Aggregate figures for EU free movement keep saying that Europeans do not move (much) (Favell, 2008: 62). According to the European Commission less than 2% of EU citizens live in another member state (EC, 2006).

This paper explores the reasons for Somalis’ relocation from the Netherlands to the UK. First of all it looks at various economic, social-cultural, and political factors that can be identified as having pushed Somalis away from the Netherlands and/or having pulled them towards the UK. This way of explaining Somalis’ relocation treats ‘onward’ migration as an independent migration process between the Netherlands and the UK that can be explained by looking into push and pull factors at both ends. Migration patterns, however, are not always clear, predictable single movements between a sending and a receiving country (or in this case the next receiving country) and might be much more fragmented and interlinked with earlier movements and aspirations. Asylum seekers’ ‘onward’ migration is most often discussed in this latter context and linked to the asylum procedure. The term ‘secondary movement’ is often used when it comes to asylum seekers’ onward migration. This term refers to a move after the first claim to refugee status is completed (Moret et al., 2006). Secondary movements contradict expected or desired movements, from a policy point of view. They indicate that asylum seekers might be interested in something other than just safety and therefore raise suspicion. This line of reasoning does not take into account that the levels of protection offered by certain asylum seekers’ destination countries can be very low and that people may need and seek something that goes beyond safety, such as family reunion, a secure legal status, and/or education and work prospects (see also Collyer, 2002; Moret et al., 2006; Lindley and van Hear, 2007; Zimmermann, 2009a). The majority of the Somalis who have relocated from the Netherlands to the UK have

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Somali population¹</th>
<th>Immigration</th>
<th>Emigration²</th>
<th>Net Migration³</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>25.842</td>
<td>1.387</td>
<td>847</td>
<td>540</td>
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<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>27.421</td>
<td>1.668</td>
<td>1.286</td>
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<td>2000</td>
<td>28.780</td>
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<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>29.631</td>
<td>1.738</td>
<td>2.457</td>
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<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>28.979</td>
<td>1.046</td>
<td>2.632</td>
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<td>2003</td>
<td>27.567</td>
<td>539</td>
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<td>2004</td>
<td>25.001</td>
<td>462</td>
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<td>2005</td>
<td>21.733</td>
<td>520</td>
<td>1.951</td>
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<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>19.893</td>
<td>773</td>
<td>1.539</td>
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<td>2007</td>
<td>18.918</td>
<td>1.457</td>
<td>940</td>
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Source: Central Bureau Statistics.
¹This is the first and second generation together.
²These numbers are based on local authorities’ registration. It has to be noted that the numbers only refer to those who were born in Somalia and to people who have deregistered when they left the Netherlands. Even though the number is adjusted for administrative errors (people who were registered as having left but were later found to be still in the country and/or people who have not deregistered themselves, but the authority later found out they were no longer living in the Netherlands) it is very plausible that not everybody is counted in these statistics.
³This is immigration minus emigration (adjusted for administrative errors).
done this as EU citizens and thus do not fit the policy label of ‘secondary’ movers. They have made the move after the asylum and citizenship procedure, and thus perfectly legally. However, it is important to remember that these people may have similar motivations to ‘secondary movers’ but have waited for the legal opportunity to make this onward move in a safe and secure way. A survey of Somalis who were leaving the Netherlands for the UK showed that there was usually very little time in between the date Somalis obtained their Dutch citizenship and the date they moved on to the UK (van den Reek and Hussein, 2003). This deliberate planning to move onward raises questions about earlier levels of satisfaction of their stay in the Netherlands and the time before Somalis had access to EU citizenship. In order to fully understand this ‘onward move’ it seems crucial to take Somalis’ earlier movements and aspirations into account as well.

A strong assumption underlying most migration theory is that migrants are free to move wherever they want to go and make choices based on preferences. The possibility to move, however, is very much based on actual migration possibilities, which may influence the migration process considerably. Zolberg et al. (1989) specifically noted how inequalities in resources and power between different countries, combined with the entry policies of potential immigration countries, put great constraints on the choices migrants (and refugees) have. Immigrants may (initially) not always be in the position to move where they want to move. The decision to migrate can thus not always be explained only by looking at economic wage differences, social forces, or cultural and political differences but must also be understood in the wider political context. This explanation at the macro level sees the ‘secondary’ movement as a vital part of the whole migration process and puts attention on the interruptions that might have taken place in an earlier phase of the process. These previous movements may be crucial for putting into context the so-called ‘second’ move. The word ‘secondary’ in secondary movements, furthermore, misses the incidence of earlier movements, as it overlooks movements prior to the moment when asylum was claimed. Very often it is the third, fourth, or even fifth movement that is taking place.

METHODOLOGY

At the core of this research are 17 in-depth interviews with ‘Dutch Somalis’ in Leicester (8 female and 9 male) and 16 in London (6 female and 10 male). London and Leicester were chosen because they are both cities known for their substantial number of Dutch Somalis living there (van den Reek and Hussein, 2003). Second, they are very different and therefore interesting to compare. London is a big city known for its cosmopolitan character and with a relatively old and established Somali community. By the 19th century Somali seamen had settled in the East End of London (Griffiths, 2002; Kleist, 2004). Leicester is a relatively small city (280,000) known for its large Muslim community and is a very recent settlement for Somalis, especially for Somalis with a European passport. It is estimated that there are between 8000 and 13,000 Dutch Somalis living in Leicester (Momatrade, 2004; Derksen, 2006: 17). According to the 2001 Census only 1478 Somalis lived in the East Midlands. This means that the number of Somalis in Leicester has been increased nearly 10-fold by the Dutch Somalis who arrived after 2001.

Somalis in Leicester live concentrated in two neighbourhoods (St. Matthews and Highfields). This, combined with the fact that most Somalis in Leicester had been in the Netherlands before they came to Leicester, made it relatively easy to locate and meet Dutch Somalis there. I tried to avoid one-sidedness in my sample by using different access points. My access points were Somali community organisations in London and Leicester. I also approached Dutch Somalis at Somali events I attended and I interviewed people at the EUROSom, a Somali Football tournament that was organised in Leicester in the summer of 2008. Moreover, I went to neighbourhoods where I knew a concentration of Somalis existed and walked into several Internet cafes and grocery stores where I chatted with people who introduced me to other Dutch Somalis. I was also introduced to Dutch Somalis in London and Leicester through Somalis I had interviewed before in the Netherlands (van Liempt, 2007). Most Dutch Somalis I met were willing to introduce me to other ‘kaaskoppen’. (Dutch Somalis are often referred to as ‘cheeseheads’ by each other.) By adopting this so-called ‘snowball’ method I always kept in mind that I needed to diversify
the interviewees according to gender and age. The sample of my 33 Dutch Somali respondents, however, is by no means representative, and their stories give only partial insights into a wider phenomenon.

For some respondents my Dutch background was an incentive to participate in the research. Most interviews were conducted in Dutch as people wanted to practise their language skills and demonstrate their fluency. I remember someone’s first reaction when I asked him if he wanted to give me an interview: ‘Of course. You are one of us’. Other people referred to me as ‘a fellow Dutch sister’. During the interviews Dutch Somalis often asked for my opinion about life in the UK and wanted to share their thoughts and opinions on the differences between the two countries. When a migrant moves to a third place he or she is almost automatically making an implicit comparative social study, which may result in motives being framed differently than for the first move (see also Ossman, 2004). As a Dutch researcher it is of course important to be reflexive on how the Dutch Somalis talk to me about the Netherlands because it is very possible that they are much more positive about the Netherlands to me than they would be to others, as they may not want to offend me.

JOB AND CAREER OPPORTUNITIES IN THE UK

One important explanation as to why Somalis move onward from the Netherlands to the UK that I have come across in my interviews refers to the lack of job and career opportunities in the Netherlands and the idea that the UK has much more to offer career-wise. This explanation clearly classes the onward move as separate from the first, finding its cause in push factors in the Netherlands combined with pull factors in the UK. According to economic theories, migrants estimate the costs and benefits of moving to various locations before settling down in a place where they think they can be most productive and earn the most money (Lee, 1966; Borjas, 1989). In the case of refugees, this explanation takes into account that when Somalis first arrived in the Netherlands they may not have had economic considerations and were just looking for a ‘safe’ place, but economic considerations might have become more important later on. It is important to keep in mind that the Dutch Somali community mainly consists of highly educated and relatively well-off people (Hessels, 2000: 14), especially the ones who arrived at the end of the 1980s and in the beginning of the 1990s, as they were the elites who were in the position to leave Somalia when the country was at war. This specific background may offer a high incentive to move onward when they feel they can be more productive somewhere else.

Mohamed is a Somali man of 42 who lives in London with his wife and three children where he works for a community organisation. He was one of the early movers from the Netherlands to the UK. He arrived in the UK in 1996, two days after he had received his Dutch passport. For him the most important reason to move was that he felt held back in the Netherlands and wanted to make something of his life. During our interview he remembered an incident where he met a Dutch man who had already warned him that after a while he would not like the Netherlands anymore:

‘I remember when we were in the asylum seeker camp there was an old Dutch man who used to live in a village near our camp, we used to see him regularly. He was a very friendly person. I think he used to live abroad. At that time, it was summer, people were really nice and I thought, wow where did I come? And then he asked me what do you think about the Netherlands? And I said nice people. But the guy said “I will tell you something, you will not like the Netherlands when you stay longer”, that is what he said to me. I still remember that guy and now I realize he was right. I liked the Netherlands when I first came, the second year uh, the third year oh my god and the fourth year I simply wanted to go. What he was saying was true.’

What exactly happened that made you feel like that?

The lack of opportunities, the things that push you back. Here in the UK people are studying, they are engineers, doctors. How many people have their own business in the Netherlands? Here there are many Somalis who do very well, many, and people are much more motivated to do things whereas in the Netherlands people are not very active.

Mohamed told me that over time he realised that the Netherlands was a ‘second’ country for him
The Relocation of Somalis from the Netherlands to the UK

and not a place for him to live or to gain what he wanted. He is not alone in his feeling of being ‘pushed back’ in the Netherlands. Other Somalis I interviewed also referred to the fact that they could not find a job in the Netherlands. Moreover, those who do find a job often experience downward mobility as they cannot find a job at their level. Research shows that this is not unique to Somalis; other refugee groups in the Netherlands also often have difficulties in attaining employment that fits their education level (Hessels, 2000; Mattheijer, 2000; van den Tillaart et al., 2000; Klaver and Odé, 2003). Statistics, however, also show that Somali men are the largest immigrant group in the Netherlands without a job (SCP/WODC/CBS, 2005: 82). The same problem seems to be occurring in other countries such as Denmark (Bang Nielsen, 2004) or Norway (Fangen, 2006). This situation, on the one hand, has resulted in high welfare dependency among Somalis, but on the other is also an important explanation for why Somalis move elsewhere. A below-average employment and income level combined with high educational qualifications may be a motivation to emigrate to higher expected incomes abroad if better matches between skills and jobs are expected.

The UK is perceived by Dutch Somalis as a country where they will have less trouble finding a job at their level. Mohamed referred to the story that in the UK Somalis have good jobs like engineers and doctors. Most of my respondents explained this difference by the fact that the UK has a different and longer migration history and therefore has more role models of immigrants in higher positions than is the case in the Netherlands. For a long time the Dutch official position on immigration was that the Netherlands was no immigration country (Lucassen and Penninx, 1999). The first large immigrant wave to the Netherlands, which took place between the early 1960s and 1973, was the result of the active recruitment of labour migrants from abroad, initially from Southern European countries and later from Morocco and Turkey. Many of the supposedly ‘temporary’ migrant workers turned into permanent settlers, and soon it became clear that the guest worker system had been based on the inferiority and separation of the foreigner and that these immigrants were not integrated as equals but as economically disadvantaged and racially discriminated minorities (Castles, 2006). This specific migration history has also affected Somali asylum seekers’ attempts to get ‘inside the system’. One Somali mother explained to me:

‘In the Netherlands they always ask you “when do you go back” or “why don’t you go back?” Well because I came to the Netherlands. You really get sick of that question. I don’t think anybody ever asked me that question here in the UK. It illustrates how both societies look upon immigrants. When I saw how the life of Moroccans, Turks and Surinamese people evolved in the Netherlands I did not see anything. I did not want that to happen to my children, we want to live in a country where foreign people can become something in the future. That was the most important reason for us to come here.’

According to my respondents it is easier to get inside the system in the UK. The UK offers opportunities for setting up a business and for finding a job, not necessarily with the right certificates, but in a system that rewards experience. Paradoxically the level of unemployment among Somalis is also very high in the UK. Bloch (2002) refers to the fact that Somali refugees are worse off than any other ethnic population in the UK in terms of employment. This raises the question of whether the move to another European country is really worth it. It seems that it is the opportunities and possibilities that attract rather than the actual situation in which most Somalis in the UK find themselves. One concrete example is that almost all Dutch Somalis I interviewed, including Mohamed, referred to many Somalis in the UK having set up a business, which they could not have done in the Netherlands because of all the regulations. In the Netherlands one needs to know the language, show sufficient education, draw up a business plan, and present it to the Chamber of Commerce before being allowed to set up a business (see also Momatrade, 2004: 53). In the UK there are far fewer regulations for starting a business and the family and co-ethnic community can provide a source of inexpensive or voluntary labour (see also Theodorakopoulos and Ram, 2007). This type of labour is not always registered or considered ‘work’ and as such the unemployment data in the UK among Somalis may not necessarily reflect the real situation. In this light the move to
the UK might be more ‘worthwhile’ than it seems from the statistics alone.

Beyond employment issues Somalis also complain about the limited educational possibilities available in the Netherlands for themselves and in particular for their children. A motivating factor for Somali parents is that they do not want what happened to them to happen to their children and would do anything to give them better educational opportunities. Language may also play a role in the decision to move to the UK. Somalis, especially the older ones, are much more oriented towards the UK and are familiar with the British schooling system because of the colonial past. They would like their children to get degrees from English universities and be fluent in English. Somalis pointed out to me that it is much better in terms of recognition to have a degree from a British university, even when it is not a well-known university.

In terms of quality, however, there seems to be a difference in educational systems between the two countries. Some Somali children I spoke to did vmbo in the Netherlands, but when they arrived in the UK they performed well and some are now even attending universities in the UK.

The distinctions made between university and polytechnic or more vocational education is different to the Netherlands. Some people who told me they went to a university in the UK are actually doing vocational education, for example learning to become a nurse. Similarly to the differences in the job market, Somali people told me that in the UK people look at your assets much more than your shortcomings. One Somali man I interviewed in London, for example, tried to go to a university in the Netherlands but did not succeed because (according to him) he was not encouraged to do so and was even discouraged.

‘I remember one day I said to my Dutch language teacher, I want to do higher education and you know what she said to me? She was called Tineke, I still remember her name, I was 25 at that time. She said you have no chance to do higher education in this country, you are an adult, people who come as a child can do such things, but now that you are 25, you are an adult, you can’t do that. She disappointed me, she was my teacher, she was the one who was supposed to help me, to encourage me.’

This man now attends a university in London, and he is not alone. Quite a number of people I interviewed went to a university after they had moved to the UK at a relative late age and told me about humiliating experiences in the Netherlands where they were told not to be too ambitious and just accept lesser jobs (see also Fangen, 2006).

‘THE NETHERLANDS WAS NOT THE COUNTRY I KNEW ANYMORE’

In the same line of reasoning, the political climate in the Netherlands may have been unfamiliar to Somalis when they first came to the Netherlands but may have pushed them away from the Netherlands at a later stage. Quite a number of Somalis referred to the fact that the Netherlands changed while they were residing there and that these changes have pushed them away. Nimo, a Somali woman in her 30s who is single and lives in London told me:

‘I really felt at home in the Netherlands, but it is the political climate, the whole country has changed, they keep bothering you about your identity, it is always you, you Muslim, you Somali, they always point at you. . . . It started with September 11, then there was the famous column of Paul Scheffer, what was it called? the multicultural drama, and then it went from one thing to the other, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Pim Fortuyn, I thought my life is short and I don’t want to be involved anymore, enough is enough. The Netherlands was not the country I knew anymore.’

Those Somalis who mentioned political changes in the Netherlands as the most important reason to move onward usually came later to the UK than others. The political change into a more conservative right-wing government, however, did not, as is sometimes argued, appear completely out of the blue. Many of the outside world’s perceptions of the Dutch, their liberal values, their tolerance, and their militant progressivism have in fact always been embedded in a strictly nationalised system. Optimistic views about the Dutch as ‘tolerant’ people, however, started to be explicitly contradicted after 9/11 when the Netherlands was confronted with a surprisingly high incidence of violent attacks on mosques and an increase of aggressive behaviour against individual Muslims (Prins, 2002). When one year later the famous populist politician Pim Fortuyn was murdered the country was in deep shock.
His anti-immigration message had been very popular partly because his message was clearly embedded in the above-mentioned particular nationalistic framework. He, for example, made his career out of saying that ‘there was one thing the Dutch would not tolerate and that was intolerance’ (Favell, 2008: 221). When two years later in 2004 the critical filmmaker Theo van Gogh was also murdered, anti-Islam sentiments were fed again what added to a very tense atmosphere surrounding immigration and integration issues. Van Gogh had made a controversial film together with the Somali Ayaan Hirsi Ali, which claimed that women’s emancipation could only be achieved through rejecting Islam. Since January 2003 when Ayaan Hirsi Ali was elected as a member of parliament for the liberal party she made more controversial statements about Islam, for example calling Islam a ‘backward religion’. Her attacks on Islam gave her a huge following among conservative and liberal white Dutch but at the same time alienated her from many of the Muslim women for whom she says she claims to speak. The film was considered blasphemous by many Muslims. A Somali single mother in Leicester recalled an incident right after van Gogh was murdered that triggered her decision to leave the country:

‘One day my son was riding his skelter [go-kart] and a boy his age, a white Hollandse jongen [Dutch boy] came to us. He asked my son if he could play with the skelter and then he looked up to me and he saw my hoofddoek [headscarf] and said “oooooohhh you are the one who killed van Gogh”. I said “no, we are not; we did not kill van Gogh”. You see that little boy, the image he has is that Muslim people killed van Gogh. It is unbelievable. I said to myself I can go, I can go wherever I want, this good job, this good house, this good life is not enough, you must go where you can be proud, where you can be who you want to be.’

Some of her very close friends had left for the UK before and had been trying to convince her to come as well. But she had wanted to stay in the Netherlands as she had a good job and liked her life in the Netherlands. In 2005, however, she decided to move to Leicester too, as she could not take it anymore. She told me that she did not want her son to grow up in a country where Muslims are seen in such a negative light; she wanted him to be proud of his background and not to feel ashamed of who he is. The political murders in the Netherlands opened up a debate about immigrants’ loyalty to the Netherlands and resulted in the dismissal of multiculturalism as a model for policy (Entzinger, 2006; Penninx, 2006). Within a short period of time the Netherlands transformed itself from a country with a relatively tolerant integration policy to a nation that called for cultural assimilation, tough measures, and neo-patriotism. The ‘new’ perspective on integration puts much more emphasis on assimilation and has a compulsory nature that most immigrants experience as ‘patronising’ and ‘humiliating’ (ICMPD, 2005). Moving to the UK where life is thought to be easier and less discriminating for a black, Muslim person is a strategy to overcome this oppression, even though the same trends are starting to become noticeable in UK integration policies. And the London bombings on 7 July 2005, where two of the bombers were Somali, has made life more difficult and uncertain for Somali Muslims in the UK. It is important to stress that all my respondents who mentioned the changes in the political climate as a motive to leave the Netherlands moved relatively late to the UK, at least a couple of years after they had obtained their Dutch citizenship, which indicates that their onward move was not a direct result of earlier moves.

‘...AND THEN ONE DAY THEY ALL MOVED TO LEICESTER’

Another, family-level explanation is offered for Somalis’ relocation. Immigrants often do not make their decisions in isolation. From the literature it is known that Somalis very often make decisions within the context of a larger collective livelihood strategy (Horst, 2003; Al-Sharmani, 2006, Bang Nielsen, 2004). Many Somali families live a life that spans across geographical borders because they have ended up all over the world when they fled Somalia. The Somali community in the UK is much older and larger than the one in the Netherlands. Although there are no definite figures reflecting the total size of the Somali community in the UK, the 2001 Census recorded a population of 43.515, with 78% (33,831) living in London (Harris, 2004). Somali community organisations, however, have suggested that the number of Somalis in the UK is more likely to be in the region of 90,000 (Hopkins, 2006). Somalis
in the Netherlands have contact with Somalis in the UK and in other European countries as well as with family members and friends in neighbouring countries of Somalia, the US, Canada, or even in the Middle East. Those who can afford it often travel to other countries to visit family members. My respondents told me they regularly visited family members in the UK before they decided to move there. One father of four told me it was cheaper to move to Leicester as they were visiting their family so often that it became quite expensive. Some Somalis moved to the UK because the majority of their family was already living there, because they met their future wife or husband during a visit, or simply because they were told life is better in the UK.

If being connected to other Somalis in other countries makes the decision to move (again) easier, it also makes it more likely that it will happen. Social networks may concretely facilitate or encourage further migration by providing concrete information and assistance to potential migrants (Price, 1963; Portes, 1995; Massey and Espinosa, 1997). Ayan is a 50-year-old Somali mother of 11 who lives in Leicester. For her the move to Leicester was a family reunification. She explained to me that the regrouping was something she resisted within the Netherlands but finally could not escape from when most of her Somali friends started to move to the UK.

‘Somali people, they moved within the Netherlands, from Groningen, from Amsterdam, from everywhere to Tilburg and then one day they all moved to Leicester. People were calling me a couple of years ago “we are all moving to Tilburg, come here it is much better here”. But then I stayed in Barendrecht. But now, after 12 years, I did move, to Leicester and we are all together again. Maybe I go back one day [to the Netherlands] I don’t know, but then we all have to go back.’

My Somali respondents and especially women emphasised the fact that they lived very isolated lives in the Netherlands. Initially the Somali community was spread out all over the Netherlands. This was mainly the result of an active Dutch dispersal policy (Robinson et al., 2003). After a while, however, some Somalis started to regroup in cities such as Rotterdam, Tilburg, and Den Haag (Hessels, 2000: 16). Some Somalis thus solved the problem of isolation by moving from small towns and villages to cities like Rotterdam, the Hague, or Tilburg where many other Somalis in the Netherlands lived. The move to the UK is described by some, including Ayan, as a similar kind of regrouping. Family members and friends who are already in the UK provide information about life in the UK and as such stimulate migration. Some people, Ayan included, regularly received phone calls, most of the time from Somali women, to persuade them to come to the UK. One Somali girl explained to me that the information they received from family members already in the UK was not very trustworthy and sometimes ‘stupid’:

‘They said things to my mother like you should really come here, it is much better here. They told her very strange things like in England there is very little paperwork, you don’t get bills, they even told her there are no mailboxes in the UK, but that is simply not true!’

The availability of Somali shops, halal butchers, Koranic schools, Somali mosques, etc. are also important triggers to move to the UK. For Ayan this was important because she longed for a ‘proper’ family life, with more traditional ways of raising her children and with religious education within reach. Somali parents are often afraid that their children will lose their values and religion and will become disrespectful to their parents while living in the West (see also Berns McGown, 1999: 107). For them the move to the UK, where they can live much closer together with their co-nationals, is a way to preserve their tradition. Ayan, for example, explained to me that she is no longer ashamed of how she raises her children and is very happy that she can give them a religious education, something that was very difficult for her to achieve in the Netherlands.

‘The reason why I moved was, I lived in Barendrecht, Barendrecht was good, but our religion, I could not practice it the way I wanted in Barendrecht. There were no schools where children could learn the Koran, nothing, and it is difficult for me to raise my children there and I do not want to go to a big city. I had heard some Somali people come here and they say you will find everything here in Leicester.’

For others the possibility of living as Somalis in London or Leicester is attractive because it makes the possibility of future return easier. One Somali
girl told me that her parents have a very different relation with the Netherlands or the UK because their minds are still in Somalia.

‘My mother, and my father as well, they always tell me that this is not my country. The Netherlands not, the UK not, because for them, because they have Somalia in their heart and that is why they forget about their children. Their children have built a life here but they do not care and that is why they move all the time everywhere.’

As this quote illustrates, there are important differences between generations, and it is crucial to differentiate between those who have actively chosen to move onward and those who have had to follow their family. The same counts for a differentiation between those who have decided to live inside the geographical bounds of the (relocated) ethnic community and those who do not. A desire to move to the UK does not automatically create a desire to live in close proximity to other Somalis. Young people often told me they were constantly watched in the neighbourhoods where they moved to; girls especially complained about the strict Islamic codes of dressing and conduct, which were very different from what they were used to in the Netherlands (see also Fangen, 2007).

INTERRUPTIONS IN EARLIER MOBILITY AND THE NETHERLANDS AS A COINCIDENT

Choices regarding destinations are often limited for asylum seekers and determined not by personal choices regarding quality of life or ideals but much more by the practicalities and demands of the situation faced (see also Zimmermann, 2009b). Research among Somalis, for example, shows that the Netherlands had often not been a destination they really planned for; they just ‘ended up’ there by coincidence (see also Moret and van Eck, 2006; van Liempt, 2007). Asylum seekers in general have limited information about their destination and any ‘safe’ country in Europe is often considered fine (Doornhein and Dijkhoff, 1995; Morrison, 1998; Havinga and Böcker, 1999; Bijleveld and Taselaar, 2000; Koser and Pinkerton, 2002). Or they were not in control of their decision about the Netherlands because of the dependency on smugglers (Koser and Pinkerton, 2002; van Liempt, 2007). Some of my respondents initially wanted to go to the UK, the US, or Canada but could not get a visa or find a smuggler to go there or could not afford that destination and then ended up in the Netherlands as a second choice. The final destination often simply depends on the available options and/or economic means of the migrant (see also Van Hear, 2004). Furthermore, many things may happen along the route, such as apprehension at airports while travelling somewhere else. In case of apprehension the only option is to ask for asylum on the spot in order to avoid being sent back to the first ‘safe’ country as is laid down in the Dublin II regulation (which replaced the original Dublin Convention of 1990). This law ensures that asylum seekers can make only one application for asylum within the EU and are not allowed to ‘shop’ around (Collyer, 2002). The majority of my respondents did not know or were misinformed about the possibility of travelling within Europe. They thought they could always go to a neighbouring European country later on. It was only upon arrival in the Netherlands that they realised that one needs to ask for asylum immediately after having arrived, that asylum procedures can take years, and that one is not allowed to move anymore after having entered the system. A corollary to the Dublin Regulation is that it constrains those who want to move on to other countries to the first, where they are supposed to ask for asylum. Zhara’s family was among those who thought they could always travel to the UK later on but who ended up in the Netherlands and stayed there for years. Her parents left Somalia in 1989 with three children: her brother was two, her sister was twelve, and Zhara herself was three-and-a-half at that time. Her family travelled via Russia and was planning to go to the UK via Germany. According to Zhara it was the ‘historical thing’ that made her parents decide on the UK.10 But things worked out differently:

‘I think we were planning on going to Germany and eventually end up in Britain, but a friend, not a friend of the family, the guy who helped us, said don’t go to Germany go to Holland, if anything after that you can go to Great Britain. I think he gave the information to my parents. So we went to Holland, applied for asylum there and even then I think they just thought apply for asylum, they did not know the system that you have to wait at least for 5 years, they just thought let’s settle here and
then go to Britain. That dream never got realized. So we came to Holland applied for asylum. . . . And so it took a while, I think a year and a half before we got our asylum status and then many years later we got our Dutch passports.

Many years later, after the family received their refugee status and Dutch citizenship, they then moved to the UK. Zhara’s older sister had in the mean time already moved to the US to marry someone there. Her father was the first member of the family who came to the UK in 2003, Zhara herself came in 2004 to start university, and a couple of years later Zhara’s mother came with the younger brothers who then started secondary school in the UK. This later move can be seen as fixing the mismatch between migrants’ initial preferences and the actual outcome of the migration process. In other words, restrictive migration laws and asylum policies may indirectly have caused Somalis’ ‘secondary’ movements to the UK.

CONCLUSION

Most migration theories are based on an idea of orderly migration that consists of a point of departure, a straightforward journey to a point of arrival and then return once the purpose is met. Somalis’ migration towards and within Europe, however, show that migration is much more of a dynamic process driven by different reasons at different levels and at different moments in time. For some Somalis the move to the UK was, most of all, a career move. These Somalis expected to find better job and career opportunities for themselves or for their children in the UK and felt restricted or even ‘pushed back’ in the Netherlands. When they first came to the Netherlands they were looking for safety, but later on other considerations became important as well, so that when they realised that they could not realise these dreams in the Netherlands they decided to move somewhere else.

For others the differences in political climate between the Netherlands and the UK were crucial. The UK is considered to have a more welcoming climate towards foreigners. Decreasing tolerance of Dutch people towards other cultures and religions is mentioned by Dutch Somalis as a motive for leaving the Netherlands as they do not want to bring their children up in a country where Islam is seen in a negative light and where it is made very difficult to live your life the ‘Somali’ way. The UK is perceived a country with a longer migration history where more space is created for cultural differences.

Again others’ move to the UK was mainly driven by social reasons. They wanted to be close to family and friends and felt isolated in the Netherlands where the Somali community is much smaller. The move to the UK can thus also be important in terms of emotional support. The substantial growth of the Somali community in Leicester can be explained by chain migration of Somalis from the Netherlands, influenced by the drive to regroup. This particular reason for onward migration can only be understood if we examine how Somalis are an integral part of a network of transnational interlinked families and communities whose members sometimes make collective decisions about the future. As such, the level of satisfaction in the Netherlands is not limited to conditions of individual Somalis and their relations with the host country; it extends to family members in other countries.

Beyond understanding Somalis’ relocation as an independent ‘onward’ move that is shaped by different push and pull factors and embedded in transnational networks, it is important to acknowledge that all the Somalis I interviewed were EU citizens at the time I talked to them. Their migration status was crucial to this move. Intra-EU movers are often perceived as free movers who take advantage of the right to mobility as true ‘cosmopolitans’. Dutch Somalis’ substantial scale of mobility can be seen as a desirable manifestation of free movement within the EU. But it is not enough to look at this movement as an independent move only. Before Somalis could move as EU citizens they were often not in the position to move where they wanted to. I have argued that it is equally important to take these structural and more refugee-specific factors into account when exploring their ‘onward’ movement. The Netherlands was for some a coincidental destination on their route to somewhere else. They ‘ended up’ in the Netherlands because they did not have access to the legal means to travel where they wanted to go. The legal procedures of getting refugee status and Dutch citizenship took on average 10 years, and it was only after this ‘administrative limbo’ that a whole new set of opportunities became available. Mohamed, for
example, already knew after four years that the Netherlands was not the country he wanted to stay in, but he had to wait until he was granted a Dutch passport to make the move to the UK in a legal and secure way. In the literature asylum seekers’ secondary movements are often portrayed negatively because these ‘reactive’ movements contradict what was planned for by policymakers. Reality shows that migration processes not only evolve in a different way than policymakers could plan for; they are also often very unpredictable for migrants themselves.

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NOTES

(1) This is illustrated by the fact that in Highfields all nine primary schools are at least one quarter Somali (Momatrade, 2004: 30).
(2) All names used in this paper are pseudonyms to guarantee respondents’ anonymity.
(3) In 2003, for example, 38% of Somalis above 18 had income support in the city of Tilburg (Momatrade, 2004: 41).
(4) British Somaliland was a British protectorate in the north part of the Horn of Africa. The protectorate incorporated most of what is identified as Maakhir, Puntland, and Somaliland now.
(5) In the Netherlands pupils are assigned to three different levels (vmbo, havo, or vwo). The vmbo (literally, ‘preparatory middle-level vocational education’) education lasts four years, from the age of 12–16. It combines vocational training with theoretical education. It is only with vwo, the highest level, that one can go straight into university.
(6) In the UK it is possible to do an access year that gives you access to university; some people passed this test with only vmbo as a starting point.
(7) Paul Scheffer, a Social Democrat, wrote an essay in which he criticised the Dutch elite for closing their eyes to the ‘multicultural drama’. He warned for the fact that although the rates of unemployment, criminality, and school dropout among children of immigrants were extremely high the Dutch ‘naively’ hold on to their pacifying strategies.
(8) Long before 9/11 issues of integration and immigration had become the subject of public debates. In September 1991, the then leader of the Conservative Liberals (VVD) initiated what was called the ‘national minorities’ debate’ in which he argued that European civilisation is sustained by the values of rationality, humanism, and Christianity, bringing with them a number of fundamental political principles such as secularization, freedom of speech, tolerance, and the principle of non-discrimination (Prins, 2002).
(9) The Netherlands have had a compulsory integration programme for immigrants since 1998, but in 2002 the possibilities were examined for beginning the integration process already in countries of origin (de Heer, 2004). The Civic Integration Abroad Act was adopted in 2005 and came into power in 2006. It is now not only restrictiveness but also selectivity that marks the Dutch migration policies.
(10) The northern part of present-day Somalia was a British protectorate until 1960 when it was united with the former Italian Somaliland to form the independent republic of Somalia.

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