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Reflecting on Research and Representation within the Conflict Research Programme

1 comment

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On Wednesday 10 June, the LSE and we at the Conflict Research Programme (CRP), hosted a [webinar](#) on COVID-19 related issues in Syria and Somalia. In the 24 hours leading up to the event a 'twitter storm' blew up around the subject of Somali representation at this event, where initially there was none. I received many WhatsApp messages from my Somali (and non-Somali) friends and colleagues in this period pointing out what was going on (I am not active on Twitter myself). This resulted in many further exchanges, within and outside the CRP, on the day of the event and since. These exchanges, set within the Black Lives Matter movement, have been extremely valuable and will inform further discussion and direction within the programme.

This blog post is a personal attempt to engage with the subject of representation where I (and we) are located within a particular programme, a particular department, and a large university, with its own history and heterogeneity. The twitter storm itself played out in academic and international aid and policy circles, all of which are pertinent to the CRP.

The criticism of the lack of representation on the webinar was justified and in part addressed by a change to the panel and an apology by myself during the event. Our webinar took place in the midst of some of the largest mass demonstrations the world has ever seen, which directly touch upon questions of racial justice for African-Americans and for people of African descent the world over. The death of George Floyd took place in Minneapolis, one of, if not the largest centre for the (Western) Somali diaspora, and where Ilhan Omar is a prominent elected official. Catalysed by events in the USA, the UK has also seen mass demonstrations, the removal of prominent landmarks and heated debates about its position and history.

In the US and the UK alone, in the year 2020, the continuation of discrimination and racial injustice is difficult to put into words, where its invisibility to many is as pervasive as its centrality to others. As a person of mixed heritage myself, I have experienced some discrimination but it pales into insignificance compared to that faced by others. In the bluntest of terms, I have benefitted from both racial and economic privileges that lie at the heart of the BLM movement. Furthermore, I have found myself in a position where I represent Somalis and Somali issues, based on a long history and substantial immersion, but nevertheless where Somalis themselves should have a more prominent role; this of course applies more widely in the aid and academic worlds, and upon which many of us think about but struggle to substantially change.

Academic institutions are deeply implicated in this history of discrimination. Long-standing discussions about decolonising the academy, again to the fore, remind us of how much these – my, our –

institutions struggle to change, where they have played a role both in perpetuating inequalities, as well as in revealing their dynamics. The LSE has an influential and problematic history on this subject, especially in East Africa, and its reputation and global standing is, in part, built upon this history. Notably so, in the Somali case, where the renowned anthropologist, I. M. Lewis, was based for over 20 years; his work was and remains hugely influential as well as subject to critique and revision. The LSE was a centre of anthropological 'expertise' during the years of the colonial empire. In contrast, it is also the case that the prominent African independence leader, [Jomo Kenyatta](#), studied anthropology at the LSE, as did the Nobel Peace Prize winner, [Ralph Bunche](#).

I have been involved for many years in examining the political economy of aid in Somalia, from different perspectives, revealing and advising on power dynamics and patterns of inequality perpetuated by international aid and its engagement in the country, as well as the possibilities for reform. These are also naturally or understandably emotive and problematic issues for Somalis (and others), seemingly impossible to shift, and intersect with questions of structural inequality and institutional racism.

Concerning the Wednesday webinar, the Syria and Somalia programmes had applied for separate slots in which to hold a public event on a COVID-19 theme. Under this arrangement we had initially planned to have an external Somali presence on the panel, as we did in January and February for other public events in [London](#), [Nairobi](#) and in presentations to different audiences in Mogadishu. However, the two country programmes were asked to hold a joint event, meaning there would be less time for each speaker, and it became easier to organise within CRP staffing alone; no external figures were part of the panel. With these rearrangements in mind I, frankly, misjudged the significance of the moment.

Khalif Abdirahman, who joined the webinar and myself, are the core team on the Somalia CRP and are in constant dialogue, having worked closely together since 2012. The CRP programme does collaborate with many

Somali researchers and had in fact planned a 3-day retreat, in April, for 20 or so Somali academics and researchers from different parts of the region and the diaspora, unfortunately postponed due to the COVID-19 outbreak. As a recently established programme, this was the first such event we were holding. This event was instigated as a result of similar gatherings held under the CRP South Sudan programme which has a longer lifespan. The CRP programme for the Democratic Republic of Congo has recently published a series of fascinating blogs on the [silent voices](#) in the production of knowledge, exploring positionality and representation within its research circles. Plans and discussions on deepening the Somali identity and participation in the programme had also recently started, in anticipation of the next phase of work.

We have a theme within the CRP called '[civicness](#)', which refers to practices that sustain integrity, trust, civility, inclusion and dialogue, and that run counter to the political marketplace and identity politics, two other key concepts in our work. We, including Khalif and myself, like to think we uphold these values, personally, in our work, as well as look for and analyse them through our research. Many of those within our wider networks do the same. We don't always get it right of course.

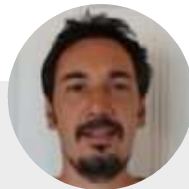
Ironically, on the day of the webinar, the members of the CRP team who were most involved in preparing for the event were all from minority backgrounds. We all very much empathised with the sentiment and anger associated with the twitter storm, having experienced different levels of discrimination ourselves, but were also distressed that we were on the receiving end of it! In an exchange with Alex de Waal, around this blog, he points out that a key lesson is that none of us in academia, and especially those of us associated with an elite institution such as the LSE, can take our credentials as anti-racists, post-colonialists, critics of empire and of power, for granted. It is furthermore the case that we all need to consider our role and responsibilities based on our power and position within our institutions to accelerate change, where we may personally feel on the right side but structurally be on the wrong side.

Finally, all of this is to say that criticism of the lack of Somali representation on the panel last week was justified and in part addressed. Similarly, it is the case that criticism of academic institutions such as the LSE is necessary. It is also to say that we, within the CRP, and myself personally, fully support the BLM movement and recognise the problematic of representation within the Somalia programme. Part of the work of our wider programme – a transnational, action-research engagement – is to learn to talk more openly and sensitively about these topics, pushing for further change within our programmes and our institutions.

I am extremely grateful to everyone who contributed to the development of this blog, from within and outside the CRP.

Note: The CRP blogs gives the views of the author, not the position of the Conflict Research Programme, the London School of Economics and Political Science, or the UK Government.

About the author



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Dr Nisar Majid manages the Somalia country programme. He has worked in and on Somalia and the Somali territories of the Horn of Africa for over twenty years, in various applied research capacities. This included his doctoral research which explored transnationalism in the Somali context.

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