

# The Somali *Shaqodoon* Project



Amidst the conflict and post-conflict environment in the Somali regions, there is a youth population in need of education and other services and programs that can reach them with positive results. The Somali *Shaqodoon* (“job seeker”) is one such program.

## The context

The Somali region has suffered through one of the longest and most destructive civil wars in Africa since the collapse of the state in 1991. Somalia south of Galkaayo, midway down the Indian Ocean coast, has not seen a functioning government for nearly 20 years. The various autonomous Somali states are fragile. The institutions that exist function on scant budgets. While there has been a recent upward tilt of commitment and capacity, the political landscape has had a huge turnover among the bureaucrats, and many of them have dubious credentials and commitment. The country is fractured along clan and sub-clan lines, and from them, new autonomous political areas are being carved out of larger political regions. These conditions cause security upsets where local populations may overnight begin an exodus away from perceived hotspots of conflict. In early to mid-2011, Modagishu was gripped by fighting between Al Shabaab and African Union forces, and towards the end, it shifted to be a beacon of hope as the militia influence declined. In contrast to this positive development, on the peninsula where the Gulf of Aden meets the Indian Ocean, Puntland is dealing with the socially and politically corrosive effects of piracy. Diaspora Somalis have been recruited to take many of the top positions of government but capacity remains an issue. Somaliland, on the Gulf, while enjoying a post-conflict situation of relative stability, has a government of limited capacity.<sup>1</sup>

Much of the conflict has become localized between sub-clans and sub-sub-clans as they strive to control their destinies by more firmly claiming their lands and its natural and productive resources. Weak governments struggle over control of the regions within the country. Exacerbating this is the recurrent drought that has devastated the agricultural economy.

Among the economic forces, however, there is some growth in private enterprises, particularly the IT and construction industries, and where conditions are secure enough, there are opportunities for employment and other productive work. Bossaso, in Puntland, for example, has become the commercial hub of the region and a major transit point for thousands of people looking to cross the Gulf of Aden into the Arabian Peninsula. An estimated average of 20 to 30 individuals pass through Bossaso every day, supporting the economy of the region.

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<sup>1</sup>The information in this paragraph and others below is from EDC documentation of the project.

# Unemployed youth is a destabilizing factor

While the many political and economic factors destabilizing Somalia are intertwined, one recognized strand is the large population of unemployed youth, who, unable to find productive work, are at risk for destructive employment. A 2005 analysis by the World Bank, which summarized the recent history of conflicts in Somalia and analyzed what has fed the source of conflicts, found that unemployed youth was one important driver of conflict.<sup>2</sup> The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and other international agencies include youth-employment programs in their strategies to stabilize Somalia.

In 2008, USAID funded the Somali Youth Livelihood Program, known locally as *Shaqodoon*, to reduce youth unemployment by providing them with opportunities to access training, internships, work, and self-employment. The program was based on the finding that only an estimated 15 percent of youth in Somalia were employed and that fewer than 17 percent had basic literacy and numeracy skills. “Low education levels mean that many youth tend to have very limited marketable skills and remain unemployed.”<sup>3</sup> The result was that youth unable to find productive work were tipped toward destructive employment.

In Puntland, an increasing number of youth are involved in piracy and ancillary illicit activities that are eroding the social fabric and enticing disenfranchised youth to make a “quick buck.” In the worst cases, unemployed youth are often hired by local militias to engage in violent and disruptive actions. Often a mere promise of a \$5.00 phone scratch card for a young man (or teenager) is enough of an incentive to throw a grenade into a marketplace.<sup>4</sup>

The project’s underlying logic then is that skills training and employment opportunities for targeted youth in Somalia are critical for stability and reconstruction. USAID’s consultations with civil society, business groups, and the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) led to the belief that an important way to address the rampant insecurity in Somalia is to offer youth an alternative to joining the various armed groups.

This reality of low education and low employment creates a cycle of despair which many Somali youth find it difficult to overcome. The TFG, the ARS and civil society groups have all emphasized the importance and urgency of programs to address the critical employment needs for Somali youth. The new government in Puntland has also prioritized the critical need to create employment opportunities, especially for youth.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup>World Bank (2005), Conflict in Somalia: Drivers and dynamics. Washington, DC: World Bank Economic and Sector Work group.

<sup>3</sup>USAID/East Africa, Request for Application for a Cooperative Agreement Modification for the EDC Somalia Youth Livelihood Program Extension, August 24, 2008. While this RFA is for an extension to the project, it provides the context and rationale for the project.

<sup>4</sup>Request for Application, August 24, 2009

<sup>5</sup>Request for Application, August 24, 2009

USAID also found that many youth reject traditional authority structures, and, inversely, many traditional authorities may not see the potential for youth to play a constructive role in their society. This led to a key strategy of *Shaqodoon*: to offer youth alternatives for productive livelihoods that can help their families and contribute to the communities in which they live.

## The *Shaqodoon* project

The project was designed to “contribute to the stability and development of Somalia by engaging an additional 8,700 Somali youth, ages 15–24 years old, by September 2011 in market-driven employment opportunities.”<sup>6</sup> The pilot took place between September 2008 and March 2009 with \$1.6 million of funding, and the project was extended to September 2011 with an additional \$7.7 million. The pilot was situated in Somaliland, which was the most stable region of the country; the project was then expanded to Puntland and the south central region, particularly Mogadishu. In late 2010, following USAID’s interests, the program limited its Mogadishu activities and focused on Galmudug.

USAID set targets for the number of youths to complete the programs, for a total of 8,700 youth across the three Somali regions of Somaliland, Puntland and South-Central. As a result, recruitment targets were set to account for a possible attrition rate of 25%.

Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC), was USAID’s prime implementing partner, and it adopted a variety of innovative approaches to help youth find employment. The project’s initial—and largest—activity was face-to-face training for youth in life skills and technical skills accompanied by assistance in the transition to the job market. EDC made selective grants to local training partners to provide the training. It actively engaged the business community to gear skills training to job opportunities and to commit businesses to providing on-the-job internship opportunities to youth who completed a training program. *Shaqodoon* also made increasing use of technology, both to train youth and to put them in touch with job opportunities.

### Face-to-face skills training

The project partnered with local NGOs, universities, and businesses to develop and deliver training in life skills and technical skills, assisting the partners in developing syllabi, lessons, and materials that responded to labor demand and met quality standards. These training partners were selected through an open and competitive application process. The project guided them in how to place youth who completed the course in jobs or internships. This included placement in work and jobs, career advice, socialization mentoring, and support during the transition from school to the job market.

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<sup>6</sup>USAID Request for Application

EDC helped its partners develop relationships with local businesses that agreed to provide jobs and/or internships to youth who completed their training program and earned a certificate. *Shaqodoon* worked with seven cohorts of partners, totaling 50 organizations. These were established organizations, each with an agenda that encompassed youth livelihoods, so project activities were closely integrated into the community-based activities of the training partner. Businesses that agreed to participate in the project took interns and new employees; all were local, small businesses. The training partner organizations knew the particular skills required by these businesses as they wrote syllabi and provided training. EDC supported the development of syllabi so that they became not just a list of topics but a document with helpful planning, guidance, and records of participation and achievement.

The life skills curricula included functional literacy, financial literacy, vocational training, conflict resolution, life skills, communication skills, work and job hunting skills and self-employment skills.

The technical skills training covered a wide range, as needs varied from business to business and region to region. Some skills training courses were common to a number of training partners, including computer and IT, accounting and bookkeeping, office management, auto mechanics, electrical installation, mobile phone repair, garment making, carpentry, electrical cooling systems, secretarial studies, and small business management. Other courses were offered by fewer partners, often only one. These included tailoring, plumbing, electrical installation, electrical cooling systems (air conditioning), electronic component repair, hospitality, food catering, office management/administration, project planning and management, TV production, journalism, layout design and print media, offset printing, media marketing, media management, lab technicians, henna and beauty salon, computer networking, logistics and supply chain management, sales and marketing, management skills, financial management, auto electric, small engine repair, hides and skins preservation and processing, masonry, mobile phone repair, painting and art, and brick making. The diversity of courses indicated the range of skills required in the workforces of these regions.

## **Engagement of the business community**

Through continuous engagement of local employers in project activities, EDC and its partners gleaned pertinent information about labor market deficiencies, which guided the project's financial and technical assistance to training providers and helped them develop integrated training programs that met the demands of the labor market. Project staff worked with employers to better understand the skills that they required.

EDC helped to establish Business Advisory Councils (BACs) to provide livelihood opportunities and guidance to *Shaqodoon*. Seven BACs were formed across the regions, each reflecting the business-industry needs and climate of the particular area. The BACS were instrumental in getting over 400 Somali NGOs, businesses, and government agencies to list employment or work experience opportunities for *Shaqodoon*-registered youth. The BAC in Hargeisa matured to the point that it reorganized as an alliance and lobbying arm for businesses across all regions.

### **The Hargeisa Livelihood Resource Center**

Using another strategy to engage urban youth who may be in school, *Shaqodoon* established a Livelihood Resource Center in Hargeisa, the central city of Somaliland, which offered a variety of constructive extracurricular activities designed to help youth practice leadership skills and develop new ideas by leading their own projects. The center also served as a central socializing point for the *Shaqodoon* youth. Nearly 100 youth registered at the center, and about 30 of them visited each day. Each person had his or her own program, and *Shaqodoon* used a carefully designed attitude-measurement questionnaire to see what effects the program had on skills, attitudes, behaviors, and values of youth participating in center activities. The information about the effectiveness of various programs not only helped those at the center but fed into other project activities.

### **Innovative technology use**

A critical feature of Somali regional fragility is the inconsistent quality of education and training for youth and the absence of links to the job market. In a stable and vibrant economy, public and private schools and employment services manage these functions. *Shaqodoon* helped provide training and job placement through its support to local training organizations. It also helped bridge the gaps with innovative use of communications technology. EDC produced interactive audio programs on financial literacy and entrepreneurship and used cell phones and Web-based technologies to link youth to work opportunities.

### **Interactive Audio Instruction**

In February 2011, *Shaqodoon* launched *Dab iyo Dahab*, a Somali language audio instruction program on financial literacy. Using preloaded digital sound files on MP3 devices with amplified speakers, training facilitators led small listening groups through a series of 40 interactive, drama-based, and engaging lessons about finance that were designed for these youth. Ten training partners were designated to deliver the audio programs, using devices supplied by the project along with facilitator guides.

Trainees, as a group, listened to and participated in 20-minute MP3 interactive audio instruction (IAI) lessons on financial literacy. After the broadcast, a facilitator dialed into a centralized cellular server. The audio lesson then became two-way: Students listened to questions about what they had learned and inputted answers using the audio device's keypad. Correct answers were acknowledged and incorrect answers received a response that encouraged youth to try again. Calls from listening group devices were reverse charged so there was no direct cost to the training organization.

In summer 2011, *Shaqodoon* launched a second IAI program on entrepreneurship for youth. The 40 lessons were donated by members of the Hargeisa BAC, which included fisheries, hotels, magazines, and airlines, and used interviews with entrepreneurs from all regions.

## **InfoMatch**

EDC developed InfoMatch to help Somali youth link to training and work opportunities using cellular and Web-based technologies. Employers and jobseekers used cell phones and the Internet for matching business needs with skilled applicants. Youth registered with the InfoMatch system by text messaging or e-mailing and connected to the system at any time. Youth in the three regions were trained to use the system, and cell phones were distributed to particularly disadvantaged youth to enable them access to the system. The training partners selected to use the system received supplementary training manuals and posters. They helped youth create a résumé and conduct a job search using SMS.

## **Other support activities**

*Shaqodoon* increased its exposure through a continuous use of media to advertise opportunities and a series of events for special purposes. These included a conference at the University of Hargeisa on marketing and a conference in Djibouti on putting Somalia youth to work. The project also conducted an extensive program with strict reporting requirements to monitor the activities and results of training partners. It made a systematic practice of adjustments and improvements on the basis of the feedback from partners and project staff.

## Operating in a fragile environment

*Shaqodoon's* activities took place not only in a fragile environment but in an often hostile one. Reports of violence were frequent in communities served by the project. Activities sometimes had to be halted because of threats from Al-Shabab or other organizations. In addition to violence, the project faced the growing humanitarian disaster caused by drought and famine, which had reached crisis proportions by the end of the project.

The project's strengths included its design and staffing. By design, the project had numerous local partners, so that if any one of them had extraordinary difficulty, it did not upset the overall project reach. Partners were selected because of their proven capacity to operate in tough conditions. Staff of the partner organizations, as well as EDC's staff, were local people who knew the context and remained connected to informal as well as formal communications systems, which improved security responses.

## Relating the achievements of *Shaqodoon* to the big picture

In 2011, Somalia ranked first on the list of failed states as published by *Foreign Policy* magazine and the Fund for Peace. The index shows that Somalia has extreme mounting demographic pressures, which includes the youth bulge. While there is no proven causal link between youth and instability, their correlation is well recognized in these indices and other research. Paul Collier concludes that the three main characteristics that make people more likely to engage in political violence are “being young, being uneducated, and being without dependents.”<sup>7</sup>

The *Shaqodoon* program has provided hope and opportunity to Somali youth, who now find a system in place to help them to learn skills and connect with employment or self-employment. About 9,000 youth signed up on InfoMatch to action that hope. They enlisted to be alerted to future training opportunities. Over 6,000 *Shaqodoon*-supported trained youth have registered in the system registered to look for work. The tables below provide some numbers for this achievement.

The *Shaqodoon* program has also provided a model for other local institutions. Local university staffs have told *Shaqodoon* that they are setting up career placement centers as a direct result of seeing the importance it has on youth securing work. Businesses say repeatedly that graduates of the *Shaqodoon* programs are much better prepared and willing to work than other youth.

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<sup>7</sup>Collier, P. (2007). *The bottom billion: Why the poorest countries are failing and what can be done about it*. New York, NY: Oxford.



## Getting youth into jobs

*Shaqodoon* aimed to recruit 11,600 youth in order to graduate at least three-quarters of them (8,700) from training programs. The following table shows the actual numbers.

Region	Youth recruited		Youth completing training		Youth placed in jobs/internships	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Somaliland	2,130	1,320	1,813	1,120	1,310	800
Puntland	1,794	1,443	1,631	1,281	823	616
South central region	2,140	1,507	1,980	1,376	930	562
<i>Total</i>	<i>6,064</i>	<i>4,270</i>	<i>5,424</i>	<i>3,777</i>	<i>3,063</i>	<i>1,978</i>

The project recruited about 11% less than the target (10,334) but had a higher completion rate—nearly 90%, or 9,201 youth, which is well above the completion target. Of these graduates, 6,413 were eligible to be placed in jobs or internships and 5,041 of them were successful in this final step, representing a 79% placement rate.

## Strengthening the training and job-placement environment

In the absence of government institutions to vitalize or even regulate the transition from education to work, *Shaqodoon*, among other international agencies and local NGOs, took on this function. *Shaqodoon's* support of \$4.3 million for trainers, equipment, supplies, and transportation boosted their ability to provide full scholarship training to thousands of youth. NGOs were provided technical support to ensure key training tools such as lesson plans were developed. Fiscal funds management and guidance firmed up their administrative capacity while general program reporting with feedback on their reports raised expectations for program accountability. Constant monitoring by staff to compare attendance to attendance records and scrutinizing equipment and supply purchases against budgets and proposed activities pushed sub-awardees to respond to new levels of documentation. An 80 percent placement requirement by local training organizations helped to vitalize the important role of job placement. Many organizations successfully trained and certified the youth they recruited and had low drop-out rates. These were organizations with well-structured programs that provided good mentorship, offered appropriate incentives, and had competent trainers. Other organizations were not so successful; some had high drop-out rates among trainees or even shut down because of inexperienced trainers and/or poor management. Others failed to communicate their purpose and resources, leading to false expectations among the youth who enrolled in their programs.

## **Integrating youth into communities**

Each employed and self-employed youth became part of the economic life of their community and a productive asset through the provision of a product or a service. Those who became employers by establishing small businesses helped to provide jobs for community members.

## **Approaching stabilization**

Youth with skills have currency that can be traded in their communities. *Shaqodoon* trainers told of students taking carpentry orders from family and friends while still learning. They worked on the orders in class and began to earn money from their entrepreneurial activity. Even the lives of those who were trained but had yet to be employed changed, as they “carried” their skill with them and looked for a fit into their community’s economic life that could address their own needs. Youth also saw more segments of the community organized to support them: businesses and trainers who mentored and supported them and government agents who validated their skills through certificates and participating at graduations. Their well-being had become a community affair.