



refugee radio

AUSTRALIAN RAFIQ COPELAND BELIEVES INFORMATION IS AID, ESPECIALLY IN THE BIGGEST REFUGEE CAMP IN THE WORLD.

Writer Dan Fox Photographer Kabir Dhanji

IN THE FLAT SCRUBBY DESERT IN NORTH-EAST KENYA, MORE THAN 400,000 REFUGEES, ALMOST ALL FROM SOMALIA, LIVE IN FIVE CAMPS HUDDLED AROUND THE TOWN OF DADAAB, WHICH WAS PREVIOUSLY BARELY A SPECK ON THE MAP. IT IS NOW KENYA'S THIRD LARGEST CITY.

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For Australian documentary filmmaker and journalist Rafiq Copeland, Dadaab has been home on and off for the past two-and-a-half years. Since 2012, Copeland has been training refugees in Dadaab as journalists and helping them set up a Somali language radio show. "The idea is that information is a fundamentally important form of aid, in the same way that food, shelter and medical care are," says Copeland, a 30 year old originally from Melbourne. "You have all these aid organisations that go in and set up field hospitals and food distribution points, but people need to know what's going on and what services are available. There's no point setting up a food distribution point if no one knows where it is."

Many of the people in Dadaab come from rural areas. Only about a quarter speak English or Swahili – Kenya's two languages – and few can read. Having fled their homes, they are vulnerable. In this environment, access to accurate, relevant and useful information is a powerful form of protection. "When people

arrive they come completely out of the desert and they've got to sign up to be a refugee to access all the services," Copeland explains. "But people don't necessarily understand what it means to be a refugee, or what services are available, or the fact that services are free."

The radio project, run by non-government organisation Internews, offers information for refugees, a voice for the camp and feedback from refugees to aid organisations. In partnership with Star FM, a Somali language radio station based in Nairobi, Internews set up a radio studio in Dadaab and train journalists who broadcast two hours a day. (The rest of the day, Star FM provides content in Somali language.) The material includes live radio, interviews, talkback and recorded packages with feature stories from around the camps. Guests from the aid community come on the show and answer questions by phone or text message.

"Our mandate is to provide humanitarian information, so all of the content is humanitarian focused, but that has quite a broad interpretation," Copeland explains. "We do stories about things like women's groups working in the camps, youth groups, and profiles of community leaders. We talk to people who are running their own businesses, and there's also some lighter stuff."

Even basic information about health and hygiene is immensely powerful in a refugee camp. During an outbreak of polio earlier

this year, the program helped dispel rumours about the vaccine and ensure that people understood they needed multiple injections over a specific period of time.

There were even more extreme examples during the famine in 2011, when up to 1400 people were arriving at Dadaab every day. Having travelled the 100 kilometres through desert from the Somalian-Kenyan border, many stopped at the edge of town, not knowing they needed to be registered as refugees to access services.

"It's no exaggeration to say that people died on the edge of the camp, having made it all the way to safety, and then not realising what to do once they got there," Copeland says.

Dadaab's three original camps were set up in 1991. Originally built to hold 90,000 people in total, each of them now holds about 100,000; two more camps were built in 2011 to accommodate the influx during the famine. Tens of thousands of babies have been born in the camps. You get a sense of how many people have lived here, and for how long, when you learn there are supposedly 8000 Dadaab grandchildren – that is, children born in the camp, whose parents were also born there.

When someone is registered as a refugee, they are given a plot of land and a tent, or materials to make a shelter. The camps sprawl all about Dadaab town.

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There are no bitumen roads and no tall buildings. In the older camps, some people have mud-brick houses with corrugated iron roofs. Some even have solar panels or diesel generators for electricity. At the heart of each of the three older camps is an enormous marketplace. “There’s a Somali expression that whenever you have two Somalis in the same place, you have a market,” Copeland says. “Everybody has some sort of business, or works for something. People make things, there are coffee houses; people will have a generator and charge you to charge your mobile phone. There’s a huge amount of stuff going on and there’s also nothing going on at the same time. Because it’s this sort of limbo thing, where people have been here for 20 years but it’s not a permanent home.”

About 15 refugee journalists work for Internews. Some have lived most of their lives at Dadaab, others are experienced journalists who fled persecution recently. “They produce the stories, they do the editing and present the program,” Copeland says. “At the beginning they had a huge amount of help from Internews and Star FM, and there’s still support. But basically, it’s their program.”

Refugee journalist Abdirashid Sheik Mohamed (Rashid), 28, says this is important. “When we started the training, the stories were all taken through checking – the facts, the ethics,” Rashid says. “But now we are capable of safeguarding the ethics of the programs and the ethics of journalism. We find the stories, conduct the interviews, prepare feature stories and send them to the production room in the studio. Then we sit down and select the stories we need to air that day, script them and we are live to air – the radio is on.”

Rashid came to Dadaab from Kismayo, Somalia, in 1991 when he was five or six years old. Neighbours brought him and his younger sisters there after his parents and two other siblings were killed and their home destroyed by mortar shells. He has never been back. “If I hadn’t had such good neighbours, then I would have ended up nowhere,” he says. Rashid worked as a cameraman for another media aid organisation, FilmAid, before turning to radio, which he reckons is the ideal medium for Dadaab. “Somalis are an aural community. They like listening so they like the radio a lot. Most of the population here is illiterate and they prefer listening to reading. They also like watching television, but radio is very relevant because people can afford it. There is

no electricity here, but the batteries for a radio are cheap. We believe that the stories we make positively impact the refugee living situation because there is two-way communication that is taking place between humanitarian people and the refugee community.”

The program also records local music in the camps and invites poets to read their work. “We sometimes choose poetry that is very closely related to the program we are airing that day, and when we choose maybe a proverb or other literature people seem to enjoy it a lot,” Copeland says. “People who are not used to it, like elderly people, say, ‘My friend, this gives us a sense of hope and a sense of belonging because it reminds us of back in Somalia when it was very peaceful.’”

Music and poetry in Dadaab often tries to digest the trauma of the past 20 years and express hope for a peaceful Somalia. Some songs are less grand, but practical. Copeland describes listening to a band in the camps and discovering their song was helping prevent malaria. “I was listening to this band play this amazing sort of desert blues song. It was an old guy on a drum, a younger guy with an acoustic guitar and some women doing sort of backing vocals. Everyone was incredibly emotional and involved in it. At the end I asked what it was about and they said, ‘Oh, it was about how you should use a mosquito net.’”

Another refugee reporter, Mohamed Bashir Sheik, 24, who has lived in Dadaab since he was two, says it is strange to long for a country you don’t remember. For him, his wife and his three children, Somalia is an unknown. “I have no idea about Somalia. I don’t know what’s happening in Somalia. I don’t have land in Somalia. I don’t have a friend in Somalia. So it’s a very strange issue for all refugees in Dadaab.”

The land around Dadaab is semi-arid. “It’s not like the Sahara Desert, with rolling sand dunes,” Copeland says. “There are sort of thorny acacia trees. It looks like the outback of Australia really, but with different flora and fauna.” Copeland, along with the rest of the expats, lives in a compound with high concrete walls and razor wire for safety, which he says feels a bit like a prison yard when he jogs around its 3.6 kilometre perimeter.

He visits his wife Tenaya Jamieson, who works in Nairobi, every couple of weeks. It’s a rewarding life, but not luxurious. At university, Copeland studied history and was the kind of guy who hung out at coffee shops doing the cryptic crossword with friends, playing chess or reading a newspaper – a good man to have on a

pub trivia team. He also studied documentary filmmaking at the Victorian College of the Arts.

Then, in 2009, he and Jamieson didn’t come home from a holiday in West Africa when they found work in Gambia organising funding for small start-up companies. This was followed by a stint in production for U.K. reality TV shows before Jamieson was offered an Australian Youth Ambassadorship in Kenya. Copeland went along with a vague plan to find work. After scratching together a few freelance writing jobs, he found FilmAid and “basically hassled them until they gave me a job”.

When he was first in Dadaab he could roam the camps, but it is no longer safe enough. “In the old days, we used to be able to visit people’s houses and have a lot of freedom, go to a coffee house or the market, but since then the security situation has deteriorated – there have been IEDs (improvised explosive devices), kidnappings and quite serious, regular security incidents over the past two years.”

Some attacks are political, aimed at Kenyan police and military, while others are private arguments that have turned violent. It’s not always clear which are which. The kidnappings of westerners tend to be for financial gain; they’re sold to more serious criminals who ransom them. Most of the time Dadaab is peaceful enough for people to get on with their lives and Copeland finds it disconnecting being stuck in the compound.

According to research and surveys conducted by Internews, most people living in Dadaab want to return to Somalia rather than seek resettlement in another country, but for hundreds of thousands of people returning has its risks. “The worst case scenario is that everyone heads back and in six months they are back in Kenya again,” Copeland says. “It has the potential to really destabilise Somalia if people head back in a way that is not carefully managed. It also has the potential to act as a stabilising force on the region if it is done properly.”

Whatever happens, Abdi Rashid is determined to take what he has learnt in Dadaab and carry it on in Somalia. “When I go back I want to continue my education and continue my career in journalism. So nothing will stop me from doing the job, even if it is dangerous, because I believe in helping others and in helping myself. If journalists are killed and I say I will stop working and not do my passion, then what else can I do? My only passion is journalism.