

My journey from civil war to global health, via AuthorAID

AuthorAID support boosts mental health research in Somalia

Somalia's wars, droughts and famines are well known, but less attention is paid to how these problems undermine the nation's mental health. Aside from the damage wrought to bodies and property, many Somalian minds bear scars from a two-decade civil war that ended in 1991, and continuing economic uncertainty. This situation has been exacerbated by the disruption of healthcare services, with hospitals destroyed and doctors fleeing for safer countries. Here physician Dr Djibril I. Moussa Handuleh describes how AuthorAID has helped him overcome multiple challenges to publish 15 papers over the course of two years, in some of the world's most widely-read medical journals.

I was born and grew up in Saudi Arabia, moving to Somalia to study medicine once stability had returned. During my training, the university in Borama had no local teaching staff or exams in psychiatry, despite the fact that two of every five Somalians are estimated to suffer from mental health problems.

Somalians with psychiatric disorders are often stigmatized, abused and literally imprisoned in their homes. Mentally ill people can become a huge burden, as families don't know how to deal with severely disturbed or violent relatives. Many are therefore chained up or put into prison in order to control them.



Dr Djibril I. Moussa Handuleh (centre) and colleagues discussing cases at a mental health clinic in Borama, Somalia.

Dr Djibril I. Moussa Handuleh

Dr Djibril I. Moussa Handuleh is a physician, researcher and lecturer with Djiboutian nationality. After training as a general practitioner in Somalia, he was introduced to AuthorAID, an academic mentorship and research



Traditional healing methods can be just as repressive, with ‘patients’ heads dunked repeatedly into water almost to the point of drowning, in an attempt to force out harmful jinns (magical spirits).

Moreover, even when they receive medical help, patients are often misdiagnosed with exclusively physical rather than psychiatric conditions. Bipolar and schizophrenic Somalians are commonly presumed to have typhoid fever, and therefore mistakenly prescribed antibiotics that are both expensive and ineffective.

These challenges prompted the Somalian diaspora in Europe to collaborate with the Borama community to establish our first psychiatric unit. Central to the project was the hiring of 10 female healthcare workers, who have run individual and group therapy sessions, and encouraged local community leaders to reduce mental health stigma.

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The clinic opened in 2012 – the same year I was introduced to AuthorAID after joining the European Association of Science Editors (EASE). Following registration, AuthorAID quickly became part of my daily writing process. It was a key resource in my attempts to communicate the challenges and successes of African healthcare provision. While beginning to publish my first paper, AuthorAID helped me secure access to online literature and research funding – crucial in a country like Somalia where academic infrastructure and the internet itself is weak.

I was in dire need of a mentor for academic publication, and AuthorAID helped me start science writing from scratch. I learned how to draft and edit a paper,

submit it to a journal, and get it published. Within two years, I was able to publish over 15 articles and had papers accepted at three conferences. One of these was presented at EASE’s 2014 conference in the Croatian town of Split. Without AuthorAID, I couldn’t have produced a convincing piece of writing to be selected for this opportunity.

Thanks to hard work, commitment and AuthorAID’s online resources, I was able to publish in two journals that have a leading international reputation in mental health. The American Journal of Psychiatry published my article on psychiatry hospital practice, and The Lancet Psychiatry published my article on mental health services in Somaliland, a territory in Northern Somalia.

What is AuthorAID?

AuthorAID is a global network that provides support, mentoring, resources and training for researchers in developing countries. It is supported by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). The AuthorAID community includes over 10,000 researchers from around the world and registering is free and easy.

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Apart from psychiatry, my research has also covered e-health in fragile states, chronic diseases and conflict-health interactions, taking Somalia as a case study. I have worked with researchers from Tulane University, Oxford University, Harvard, the Karolinska Institute and King's College London. After becoming the first academic to publish from post-conflict

Somalia with the assistance of AuthorAID, I was chosen as a Research Fellow at the Centre for Global Health at King's College London, funded by the King's THET Somaliland Partnership (KTSP).



The mental health clinic in Borama Regional Hospital, which opened in May 2011 as an outpatient unit and community outreach project. Clients include school students, teachers, prison guards, Borama community members and hospital patients.

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In addition to my own research, I have used AuthorAID to educate my students and peers. In February 2013, I set up a newsletter at Amoud University's College of Health Sciences, where I lecture and practice medicine. The newsletter raises medical students' awareness of and interest in scientific writing, which helps deepen their training. AuthorAID online resources also enabled me to conduct two workshops in my faculty for colleagues, and I encouraged them to access the platform. Finally, AuthorAID mentorship is an area of great support, and I'm excited about building a lifelong academic relationship with a mentor.

Through the resources and expertise provided by other users, I increased my chances of winning a master's degree scholarship. Motivation letters became easier to write and more compelling, and I recently won admission to an MSc in International Health at Germany's Heidelberg University.

My studies will focus on public health training in low- and middle-income countries that receive aid from the German government.

Somalia has the world's highest maternal mortality in the world, and among the highest infant mortality. I hope to use the MSc as a platform for making lasting changes to these inequalities, as Heidelberg is one of the leading centres of global health research.

My plan is to become a researcher, academic and science communication mentor for my students, academics and others in Africa and the rest of the world. I want to inspire those who come from a similar socioeconomic background to myself to do more and join the scientific world.

I would like to become a leading international author, editor and editorial member, working in global editorial organizations as I have been doing with EASE. By collaborating with peers in African universities, I hope to build the continent's academic publishing capacity, fighting against academic fraud and raising our reputation in the global publication arena. AuthorAID is an essential way to develop my own potential and that of those around me.