Chapter 5: Indigenous Forms and External Interventions in a Somali Context

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Introduction

There have been numerous outside interventions in the Somali areas, many of them ill-timed, ill-thought through and poorly implemented. Over a period of more than twenty years, serial efforts have been made by a range of actors employing the techniques of state-building on the one hand, and military invasion on the other, to lay the foundations for a ‘national’ government. Some seventeen externally-sponsored ‘reconciliation’ conferences have been held between the collapse of the Siyaad Barre government in 1991 and the Ethiopian invasion of 2006. Perhaps in time, the Kenyan invasion which commenced in October 2011 will also be seen in that light, although it is too early to draw that conclusion yet. While the pattern is particularly clear in relation to efforts to establish a viable government for the nation-state that is presumed should follow the Republic of Somalia, much the same criticism can be leveled at development interventions more generally. International interest in intervention in the Somali context has recently been renewed with yet another major, internationally supported conference on Somalia, this time in London.

In this paper, we argue that, while much negativity is deserved, there are in fact models for engagement that should allow for effective, proactive, and socially appropriate intervention by a range of external actors.

With respect to the political realm, but applicable also more broadly, Walls and Kibble point out that:

‘Socio-political norms that emphasised the importance of negotiation and compromise have averted a number of crises in recent years. Meanwhile, cautious and fully engaged external interventions have, in marked contrast to efforts in southern Somali areas, been successful in supporting this process, building on local initiatives, resources and traditions and breaking through roadblocks where local negotiations have stalled. Somali custom explicitly creates space in which outsiders may assume constructive roles, with such activities periodically playing a decisive part in resolving significant difficulties. Indeed, it is notable that, as successful as they have been, the indigenous patterns that provided the basis for both Puntland’s and Somaliland’s achievements remain incomplete and, despite mythologies to the contrary, continue to rely on external inputs from both non-Somali and diasporic agents’ (Walls and Kibble, 2011)

This paper reviews Somali customary bases for intervention and then considers a number of specific instances of both success and failure in an attempt to posit ways in which development and political interventions might employ culturally appropriate forms.

Both in recognition of the significance of successes there and in an effort to permit some depth to the analysis, much of the focus of this paper is on Somaliland, albeit within a wider social, cultural and political context of the Somali Horn of Africa. In spite of a lack of
international recognition, Somaliland has been the recipient of an increasing flow of aid, and while the political situation has long been impressively stable, infrastructure, education, health and most other sectors remain about as poorly developed there as elsewhere in what was the Republic of Somalia. However, there are a number of telling instances in which political and development interventions have either succeeded or failed, and where the methods employed help us to understand the connections between the more theoretical discussion of custom and the exigencies of actual, contemporary circumstance.

One of the principles that Somaliland demonstrates particularly well is the way in which local and external interests have balanced each other. By and large, this has not occurred by design, but is nonetheless illustrative. In most cases, donors have not been able to ‘set the agenda’ in as dominant a fashion as elsewhere. They have nevertheless been essential partners in many significant developments in the past decade. This has most clearly been the case in the political arena, where technical and practical support has worked alongside deep involvement by outsiders over relatively long periods of time. Rather than external agents wielding such financial heft as to permit them to dictate terms on a ‘take-it-or-leave-it’ basis, donors have often been forced by the political fact of non-recognition to act as full participants, subject to the same disputes, debates, and agreements as are experienced by others. That model has underpinned an engagement which has had its problems, but which has nevertheless contributed to the political stability and democratic evolution that is rightly beginning to attract accolades.

Indeed, Somaliland has been both blessed and afflicted by the support of international aid agencies. Civil society in pre-war Somalia was a state enterprise with little room for individual maneuvering to cover necessary social issues. Inevitably, the involvement of external donors and diaspora sources of funding, a local NGO network has flourished since 1991. Currently civil society is healthy and largely free from undue government interference and control, providing a substantial service for Somaliland citizens. In tandem with international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and donor agencies, local NGOs thus provide a great many services which the government cannot afford to provide, with civil society thus constituting by far the largest employment sector. Nonetheless, all that glitters is not gold and this paper will examine some of the positive and negative aspects of aid in Somaliland.

Lessons for development interventions

The issue of external involvement in state-building, humanitarian relief, and the promotion of development is central to debates about aid and the succession of models that have been employed by donors and civil society over the years. Competing arguments are significant in large part because of the scale of the money that is involved, coupled with the fact that development funds are required to operate in an environment quite different from that of the private sector or the nation-state. They therefore support (indeed, require) a parallel discourse that seeks ways in which aid can be effectively governed often in parallel with the institutional arrangements of the market and/or the nation-state.
The experience in Somalia and Somaliland confirms the relevance of the debate as well as offering some clues as to the types of roles ‘outsiders’ might play in the multi-faceted ‘development process’. Underlying the relevance of the Somali context, in recent months it has become something of a minor focal point for debate in the UK media on the effectiveness of aid. The Daily Mail, The Economist, and, more surprisingly, The Guardian, have all recently carried stories that contrasted southern Somali failure with Somaliland’s success in gradually building a viable representative democracy as evidence of the damage caused by aid. The reasoning is that Somaliland’s lack of international recognition has meant “ineligibility for foreign assistance” (Eubank, 2011), yet the unrecognised state has been more successful than it’s recognised and lavishly funded transitional counterpart in Mogadishu (Baobab blog, 2011; Birrell, 2011). Ergo, the argument runs, Somalis do better if left to themselves.

However, while some in the UK and Somali media might be only too keen to draw on simplistic readings in order to bolster their arguments against aid, it is simply insufficient to conclude that Somalis will succeed if and only if they are left to themselves. Reality is far more complex and nuanced than such formalistic readings allow. Somaliland has in fact long been the recipient of growing levels of aid, and in reality external intervention has, on occasion, achieved significant success in breaking through roadblocks where local negotiations have stalled. Importantly, Somali custom explicitly creates space for outsiders to assume constructive roles in these areas, with such activities periodically playing a decisive part in resolving significant difficulties.

Unfortunately, though, the pattern in which ill-conceived, if well-meaning, external engagements in Somali affairs have tended to exacerbate problems rather than resolving them, has become so sustained over the past two decades that this discussion demands considerable care. Serial failure on the part of outsiders demands fresh thinking and indicates the complexity of the issues faced and the consequences of error.

**Customary Bases for External Intervention**

The Somali experience in peace-building and state formation is particularly illustrative of the many roles that can be played by outsiders to a conflict both in resolving issues and in helping to establish agreements on how future conflict and governance issues will be resolved.

**Defining the External Actor**

We will first look briefly at the roles played from time to time by the various agents who might be considered ‘external’ to specific conflicts or negotiations: mediating ‘elders’ within a clan or sub-clan, mediatory groups from an uninvolved clan, and women. We will also consider the conditions under which both diaspora groups of Somalis and non-Somalis could also intervene.
The argument behind this paper is essentially that external parties can play either a constructive or a destructive role in interventions, and that custom provides a basis for discernment as to how the chances of success might be maximised. This presupposes that there exists some evident distinction between ‘insiders’ and external parties. The distinction is, of course, not always clear, and the descriptions that follow hint at the fluidity of those roles. Groups who are ‘external’ in one context may be seen as ‘internal’ in another.

However, it is possible to broadly define a number of actors who from time to time intervene as external agents in activities that facilitate or support peace, state-building and the like. These groups include:

- Mediators from uninvolved clans;
- Somali women;
- Members of the ‘international (diplomatic) community’, including NGOs, foreign governments and multilateral agencies; and
- The large and scattered Somali diaspora

The traditional roles described above tend to revolve around the first two categories, with the diasporic contribution cutting across (or informed by) norms pertaining to clan and gender. Outsiders have long struggled to identify and occupy a space within which constructive engagement is possible, yet the Somali case does offer some clues as to how such a role might be - indeed, has been - possible.

Before elaborating on such instances, though, it is worth briefly revisiting an important normative set which provides further support for the view that a role for outsiders has always been permitted in Somali custom. When conflict occurs, there are clearly-understood principles that govern the conduct of war (*heerka biri-ma-geyda*). These rules centre on a principle captured in the Somali name for the rules themselves: *biri-ma-geydo*, which is translated by some as ‘immune (or ‘spared’) from the spear’ (Bradbury, 2008: 18; Hoyland, 1999: 19; ICRC, 2008). The principle here is that mediators acting in good faith, religious scholars, women and those who are elderly or frail must be protected from any fighting (Bradbury, 2008: 18; Rashiid Sheikh ’Abdillaahi Gadhweyne, 2009: 57).

These principles open a customary avenue for the intervention (and protection) of those engaging in mediation efforts; a position that could conceivably be extended to non-Somalis should they be seen as respected and appropriately informed in the context of the intervention. Were a constructive redefinition of ‘conflict’ extended to the political realm, then it could be argued that the protection accorded to mediators in physical confrontation should also be available to those playing an equivalent role in political or developmental stand-offs.

Somaliland provides rich evidence of the potential for positive action by each of these agents, and we argue that the pragmatism of customary norms permits space for such actors to engage constructively, drawing on similar customary yet flexible principles.
Clan will continue to play a significant and dynamic role in the Somali context, including in Somaliland, but the relationship between customary kinship structures and individual Somalis living in a rapidly changing world are dynamic and themselves subject to pressures from many sides. While Somali mythology lauds the qualities of strength, independence, and self-reliance, there is also space for constructive external engagement with political processes in the Horn and at a number of levels.

An examination of particular actor groups helps to refine the ways in which these and similar principles can support constructive engagement by external actors in specific contemporary situations.

**Elders as Mediators**

Formally, intervening external agents have tended to be male Somalis, representing kinship (clan) groups who have not been involved in a given conflict or dispute. Custom permits male actors in this position to attempt to mediate between conflicting groups, achieving success only if the conflictual parties are willing to recognise the legitimacy of those efforts. Intervening males may be widely acknowledged as elders (*oday*), although successful mediation can also provide a path to that status, and customary practice allows space both for those within conflictual kinship groups and those with no lineage-affiliation to a given conflict to take their chances. Either as neighbours to a conflict, or as members of a sub-clan so afflicted, the individuals or groups concerned are seen to hold a sufficient interest in peace to motivate such intervention.

Social relations in Somali society are based on a system of customary contract known as *xeer*, adjudicated by ad-hoc committees of elders, assembled as required. The fundamental contracting unit is the *mag* group, the members of which act as guarantors of the good behaviour of fellow members, on pain of having to share the burden of compensation on any member’s behalf should they be adjudged the guilty party in a dispute.

Each *mag* group is represented by one or more informal leaders or ‘*aqil’; a term which is sometimes translated as ‘chief’, but which is primarily an influencing, negotiating and chairing role, rather than one which grants the incumbent authoritative power. During the time of the Somaliland Protectorate and the Italian colony and trusteeship, both colonial administrations attempted to co-opt the role by paying a stipend to ‘*aqils* or their equivalent in return for work on behalf of the colonial administration. A similar practice had earlier been employed on a more limited basis by Egyptian administrators, and quite likely before that (Abdi Ismail Samatar, 1989: 32; Lewis, 1999: 200). It was also continued and adapted by subsequent Somali governments. This resulted in a burgeoning number of ‘*aqils’, and also the politicisation of the role. These external influences were relatively less pronounced in the north than in the south, where the Italian administration had much grander plans for the ‘modernisation’ of their colony.

There is a clear hierarchy of male traditional roles in which the ‘*aqil* is only one, but all retain an emphasis on negotiation, mediation, and facilitation. It is therefore misleading to describe Somali society, without further context, as either acephalous on the one hand or employing a formal hierarchy of power on the other. There are certainly differentiated levels of influence and respect, and these carry great weight.
Typically, the customary system is also heavily biased against individuals who assume too much direct authority in the eyes of their respective communities, while according considerable autonomy to those who act as mediators or facilitators. In hierarchical terms, a number of titled elders sit at levels above ‘aqil, and the terms used can differ slightly from clan to clan. Generally, though, garaad, ugaas, boqor and suldaan all refer to positions of greater seniority than the ‘aqil’.

Somali political institutions tend to display a “... lack of any clearly defined authority roles ...” (Laitin, 1977: 27), and even without the noted differences in colonial influence, that tendency is more pronounced in the north than in the south (Lewis, 1999: 241). Nevertheless, as Virginia Luling notes, "... the loose form of political organisation found ... in southern Somalia, though it allows a higher degree of authority to clan elders than in the north, does not generally give permanent power to any fixed hereditary office" (Luling, 1971: 357).

When disputes arise, the onus falls first on the head of the families involved if between two such units, or else on the ‘aqil of affected mag groups to attempt to negotiate a settlement. If the problem proves intractable, a mediator might step in. The identity of such an individual or the composition of a mediating group would need to command the respect of the protagonists; a task made easier if the mediator is seen as ‘independent’. Any individual or group who assumes such a mediatory role may be referred to as a guurti, a term that has more recently been institutionalised and, many would argue, politicised in the Somaliland context through its application to the upper house of the Parliament (see for example, Jhazbhay, 2009: 75-76). As already noted, the essential etymology of the term, though, refers more generally to the necessary wisdom of any person or group responsible for mediating disputes.

There is also room for additional mediation at the instigation of an even more loosely defined group of respected individuals formed with the specific purpose of mediating particularly difficult conflicts. The generic term ergo, or simply ‘delegation’ is sometimes used in this context.

The lessons we can draw from these comments are several. Firstly, practices differ through the Somali areas, albeit around a theme in which there is a tendency to distrust, often very strongly, any overly authoritarian exercise of power. There is nevertheless explicit room for ‘outsiders’ to act as facilitators. In addition, Somali customary law is based on sets of principles. It is not rigid, as there is explicit recognition that too great a level of specificity in law will fail to provide the flexibility necessary for dealing with the vagaries of day-to-day life. Those principles have evolved around the dual focus of protection of the rights of the individual to life, liberty and property as well as the individual’s commitment to family and clan (Notten, 2005). Also, rhetoric and oratory are prized skills, with the ability to persuade one’s people of the strength of a given position contributing directly the esteem in which the orator is held. Hyperbole forms an inevitable part of that equation, and affects the nature of negotiation.
The related processes of adjudication, mediation, negotiation, and consensus-building carried out with a commitment to transparency and in good faith are the critical mechanisms for the application of recognised principles. At first sight, such an approach accords well with donor concerns with participation, empowerment, and accountability. However, they work directly against situations in which foreign agents require clear and pre-established objectives and where lines of accountability are directed back to domestic constituencies with little direct interest in the minutiae of Somali processes and priorities.

Women as ‘External’ Agents

Women, too, play a role deriving from their perceived status as ‘outsiders’. That status arises from the perception that a woman’s allegiance is split between kinship and marriage, allowing them to serve as a communicative channel between their affiliated kinship groups if necessary, but without a presumed assumption of full loyalty to either.

One though by no means the only way of consolidating exogenous alliances is through marriage. Sometimes, this is explicitly intended as settlement of past grievances, in which case it is known as godob-reebta gabadhaha, or literally, ‘the leaving behind of a grudge through women’ (Rashiid Sheikh 'Abdillaahi Gadhweyne, 2009: 129). More generally, as in most societies, marriage offers a useful means of confirming or consolidating friendly relations between groups. Consequently, there is an informal yet pivotal role for women, who can act the as go-betweens of their clan of birth and that of marriage (Anab Omar Ileye et al., 2007; Gundel and Ahmed A. Omar Dharbaxo, 2006). In this context, women can act as agents who are sufficiently removed from a given conflict to assist with communication and with the provision of logistical support. Repeatedly, in discussing their role in Somaliland’s peace-building, women comment on the importance of their commitment to sewing police uniforms, carrying messages between opposing clan groups, and cooking and providing for peace conferences (Walls et al., 2008: 20-26, 48 & 88).

While women traditionally have had relatively little formal political influence, their intermediary status along with Somali pastoral practice more broadly, has historically accorded a great deal of influence on an informal basis. However, while that remains true in many respects, it is also true that climate change, population growth, conflict and resulting patterns such as sedentarisation and urbanisation have altered and often undermined informal gendered patterns of influence, while failing to significantly alter formal patterns in the political realm. To express that in more tangible terms, women would once have expected to influence social and political decisions through household and clan-related roles. The past decades have undermined those roles, yet women remain woefully under-represented politically. Consequently, as often as women comment on the significance of their role in peace-building, they complain that that role goes unappreciated.

The implications for development are twofold: firstly, gender programmes remain a primary focus for many social interventions and must therefore take full cognisance of the fact that gender empowerment must acknowledge and harness the potentials inherent in an institutional context in which collective and informal power structures are just as important as individually-oriented and formal ones. Secondly, the role played by women in itself provides another context in which a group that is ‘outside’ a given process is given space to use that status to intervene.
Somali Diaspora

As residents, and often citizens, of countries outside the Horn of Africa, diaspora groups must also be seen as at least partially removed from the domestic scene. However, many remain active participants, influencing the situation in diverse and not infrequently contradictory ways.

Diasporic interactions can be illustrated with reference to patterns for remitting funds. Remittances tend to flow in one of three layers. The first being the usually monthly remittances known in Somali as ‘the bill’. This refers simply to regular contribution of sufficient funds to cover necessary bills, including rent, utilities, education and so on. These ‘bill’ payments arguably constitute the bulk of funds required to keep the Somaliland economy buoyant.

The second level is known in Somali as hoo oo ku shaqayso which translates approximately as ‘money for use to create your own employment’. Somalis are renowned for their entrepreneurial skills and this level sees remittances directed at small investments to establish small businesses. Often the amount involved only permits the recipient to establish a small kiosk, or perhaps to purchase a vehicle for provision of taxi services.

The third level is ad hoc transfers to cover extraordinary costs such as weddings, emergencies, or as contributions to help the family through a time of need. This style of remittance is very likely increase in both quantity and importance in the coming years. As increasing numbers of diaspora members lose their close connections with home, regular payments are likely to be replaced by infrequent transfers. As the current generation retires and life’s natural progression takes place, young diaspora members who were either born abroad or else left the country very young will begin to lose their ties to family members in the Horn. Memories may continue to be refreshed with occasional holiday trips to meet members of the extended family, but it is unlikely that this will be sufficient to maintain current levels of financial support.

Diasporic remittances both support and undermine development. On the one hand, they send remittances that far outweigh any other assistance received by the country: they have built schools, hospitals and mosques; and they have provided employment opportunities through investment in infrastructure and in small and large businesses. The example provided by Somaliland’s tertiary educators, including Amoud University in Borama, the longest established of them, is illustrative of this point. Fundraising, recruitment and ongoing support have come in large part from an engaged and informed external constituency.

On the other hand, the diaspora can be seen to provide a support base that bypasses inter- and intra-governmental channels, potentially both weakening them and reducing the accountability of the state to its citizens. Investment is haphazard, and results are uncoordinated, yet they hold considerable influence over extended families, and therefore political actors. Consequently, many politicians see much of their most influential constituency as being outside Somaliland. Both ministers and opposition leaders frequently maintain homes outside the country, in some cases spending much of each year in Europe, North America or the Gulf nations. The current Silaanyo government in Somaliland boasts no fewer than fifteen diaspora ministers, with many more appointed to key official
positions. The diaspora is also a major source of funding for political parties. Kulmiye, the current ruling party, have long fostered strong diaspora connections and conducted frequent overseas fundraising tours. A similar pattern is repeated throughout Somalia, and in Puntland.

Beyond providing a flow of funds, it is notable that the Somali diaspora have played roles in promoting both conflict and peace, sometimes simultaneously. Somaliland conflicts in the early 1990s were supported predominately by diaspora communities, and that pattern is again evident in recent tensions around Khatumo state in Sool region.

Many commentators also suggest that the Somali diaspora have helped to foster a dependency culture. Rather than promoting independence, hard work and personal responsibility, they have offered free money and a culture of laziness, leaving people ill-equipped to deal with the realities of life. Diaspora members returning to the Horn are frequently viewed with a suspicious eye, with local graduates feeling that they are offered preferential treatment in employment, salaries and career promotion. Locals complain that many, especially the young, have little awareness of Somali culture or else have acquired distasteful habits from Western countries. The derogatory term dhagan bi‘is is often used to refer to young diaspora members.

This sense that some members of the Somali diaspora interfere without suffering the consequences of their actions is captured by their description as representative of “[t]he traveling sales men of Diaspora Somalis who are not personally affected by Somali chaos in anyway [and who] have caused much more harm than good to Somali society” (sic, Abdulshakur Jowhar, 2012).

Non-Somali ‘Outsiders’

Just as those from neighbouring clan groups can be seen as holding sufficient interest in supporting conflict resolution and the bases for sustainable peace, the same argument should also be available to neighbouring countries, and to those with some other distinct interest in Somali development and stability. In that respect, there must be strong cultural support for understanding the motivation for intervention. Supportive engagement aimed at assisting in state-building and socio-political cooperation is more understandable from those with an interest in those outcomes, and a sustained commitment to achieving them. Where direct military intervention is predictably seen as a hostile effort to dominate Somali society, modest and proactive engagement that seeks to understand and work with Somali socio-political institutions would be unlikely to arouse the same negative reaction. However, it is important that the motivations behind such interventions are spelled out clearly and are open to debate.

This is not a process that has been well defined in practice. A handful of international NGOs and individuals working for donors and multilateral institutions do fit the description but many of those engaged in Somali projects do not. The implication is that, for non-Somalis to establish the legitimacy for their own involvement they must demonstrate a long-term commitment and a depth of understanding of the specific context. In addition, they must demonstrate an integrity and strength of will that accords with the traits prized in Somali society. The model in which relatively well-funded projects are managed remotely from
Nairobi is particularly poorly suited to a culture in which direct, modest and long-term commitment is valued. Simply employing ethnic Somalis is often not sufficient to allay the resulting suspicions.

Security concerns associated with operating in Somali areas are frequently cited as the basis for the need to situate project teams externally. There is ample evidence that such concerns can be valid. But there is also considerable evidence to suggest that, while real, security concerns are also politicised. The judgement that Somaliland as a whole remains dangerous represents an example of this thinking. The British Foreign and Commonwealth Office continues to advise against all travel to all areas, even though western Somaliland is not demonstrably more dangerous than, for example, Nairobi. That is not to deny that al-Shabaab and other groups represent a threat in Somaliland. But the sense that there is little proportionality in security assessments is hard to escape. An examination of customary space for external involvement also suggests that, if the situation is so insecure as to prevent development activities being based locally, it may be necessary to take the tough decision to downscale or re-orient the focus of activities so that they support activities that can be locally situated. If that results in a temporary reduction in financial flows to some areas, then perhaps that is at least less damaging than perpetuation of a system that lacks legitimacy and therefore risks undermining gains in the long-term.

As it is, non-Somali actors are frequently and widely vilified for the roles they play and the approaches they employ. INGOs, foreign states, and multi-lateral bodies are often seen as complicit in conceiving and executing interventions that have worsened the problems they were designed to address. They are considered to be distant, unwilling to invest in meaningful engagement and subject to questionable motivations. The complaint that diaspora members are often insufficiently ‘affected by Somali chaos’ can be reasonably represented as a desire for external agents more generally to be directly engaged in and ‘affected’ by local processes.

**External Intervention: Instances of Success and Failure**

We will now review a few instances that illustrate the ways in which the various external actors have played both positive and negative roles in the past.

**Intervention Gone Wrong**

While regrettable, the axiom that external intervention in Somali territories has done more harm than good draws on numerous examples that are cited in support of that position. It is worth relating a few examples, contrasting such experiences with some more constructive instances of external engagement.

An obvious starting point is the protracted series of negotiations that led to the 2004 Mbagathi agreement which eventually resulted in the creation of the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia, which continues to receive international support. The donor community made a fateful decision to abandon the ‘building blocks’ approach that had previously been mooted as a means of building a decentralised governance system and consequently fostering the support of local communities. As late as 1999, the argument was
put that “... any unitary Somali state is improbable for the indefinite future” and that a localised process of state-building might be possible “... if it can operate without external interference, and can get a degree of sympathetic and careful international support [which is] not yet apparent” (UN IRIN-CEA, 1999). However, when the Transitional National Government (TNG) was formed in 2000, it excluded the leaders of these ‘blocks’ and effectively represented a shift away from the earlier decentralised approach. By the time their mandate expired in 2003, the TNG had failed to gain support beyond the narrowest geographic confines, but the new IGAD-sponsored talks in Kenya (first in Eldoret and then Mbagathii) continued to engage militia and business leaders on the basis that they held the ‘real’ power. This therefore ignored more legitimate local power structures in favour of a ‘real-politik’ engagement with those with superficial might. The Transitional Federal Government (TFG) that resulted in 2004, supposedly a government of national unity, also consequently failed to win broad support (Bryden, 2006).

While the venality and incompetence of the individuals involved in such attempts to form a government has been a major factor in their failure, the role of external agents, and in particular donors, in supporting a process that so signally failed to build on local sources of legitimacy must also be seen as highly significant. Essentially, international support was seen as propping up individuals who were already viewed as attempting to draw too much individual authority to themselves, against more consensus-based alternatives. While the ‘building blocks’ approach may have moved more slowly than was palatable given the political cycles of donors and neighbours, it nevertheless held greater potential for success than the approach taken.

Another pertinent example was the US intervention in support of the ‘Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism’ (ARPCT). US funding of $100,000-150,000 a month was reportedly provided to ARPCT to finance militia action against the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in 2006 in the hope of shoring up support for the Transitional Federal Government (in which many ARPCT members were Ministers, MPs etc). The result of this intervention was the polar opposite. It galvanised the Somali population in opposition to an intervention against clan traditions that provided support to a hated group of authoritarian militia leaders. The ICU quickly prevailed over the Alliance, driving them from Mogadishu and introducing a period of some six months in which ICU dominance was clear, if unpopular in some of its dimensions, and relative peace prevailed (Barnes and Harun Hassan, 2007; Kagwanja, 2006; Rice et al., 2006). Powers including the Ethiopians and the US were so alarmed at this turn of events that the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia proceeded with broad, if in some cases tacit, international sanction.

There is also a danger that, in spite of their best intentions, outsiders become convenient scapegoats for domestic disputes. That situation was vividly demonstrated in Somaliland at quite a different level from the prior examples. There, the voter registration programme became mired in a welter of accusations and counter-accusations between political leaders, the National Electoral Commission, and the international NGO (and conduit for donor financing), Interpeace. For some influential commentators, it was the very involvement of Interpeace and the ‘clumsiness’ of donors that had caused the problems (Private Eye, 2009). By this reading, this was an evident case of counter-productive external intervention. That opinion was expressed vociferously and in spite of compelling and readily available evidence of widespread fraud which had itself been perpetuated by domestic political actors.
On a number of occasions, Interpeace was presented as outsiders who should have prevented domestic fraud from occurring. This set such an impossibly ambitious expectation for which Interpeace had no mandate, and in which they consequently and self-evidently ‘failed’ (for example, Ahmed Ali Ibrahim Sabeyse, 2009). Others saw outside involvement as prima facie evidence of conspiracy (a widely cited source making this claim was the dubious Panamian-registered website ‘Oilprice.com’: Defense and Foreign Affairs, 2010). The electoral commission of the day accused the most senior Interpeace staff member in Somaliland of “inciting the opposition”, and the government expelled him from the country (Somaliland Times, 2009). Our view is that Interpeace were in fact functioning effectively, albeit with a demanding remit, and simply became embroiled in a dispute not of their making. Ultimately the voter register was used in a largely successful election, and Interpeace’s role was applauded by many more sane commentators.

While the intervention was seen by many as another externally-sponsored failure, perhaps it would be more accurate to present it as a difficult success that fits within the customary context described previously. Interpeace’s primary apparent fault was to allow themselves to become embroiled in a domestic political dispute. However, if the principles of successful external engagement are to be deeply and locally involved in a manner in which the external agent is ‘personally affected’, then that is precisely what Interpeace did. In our opinion, it would be accurate to suggest that the ultimately successful 2010 presidential election was testament to exactly that engagement as Interpeace remained integrally involved in preparation for and management of the election in spite of their earlier difficulties.

External Successes

There have certainly been significant successes in external intervention in all the manners outlined previously. For development interventions funded by external donors, the Somaliland education sector has been the recipient of a significant flow of aid since 1991. The national curriculum was developed by supporting agencies in partnership with the Ministry of Education, teacher training is funded largely by developmental agencies, as was school construction and the provision of school supplies. The non-formal education sector in Somaliland has also been heavily supported by local and international NGOs alike.

As with any success, there are also critics, with education investment criticised as inadequate. More importantly, work in the education sector has largely been carried out by the development agencies themselves, with insufficient attention to building the capacity of the Ministry to successfully manage Somaliland education. This is in part a legacy of the refusal by donors to channel funds through a government they do not recognise. Whatever the intricacies of arguments over sovereign recognition, the cost has been high. By bypassing government institutions, the Ministry of Education has effectively been crippled, and now lacks the capacity to manage, train or support teachers. Many schools, most especially in rural areas, are semi-autonomous units with more connection to the external funding agency that supported construction than to the Ministry. Similarly, the Ministry was barely involved in much curriculum development, and now lacks the capacity to update or develop it.

In the political sphere also, there is a mixed record on external engagement, with notable successes and failures. From time to time, though, the interventions of external agents,
drawing on the traditions and norms described, have played an important role in state consolidation since the fall of the Siyaad Barre regime in early 1991. We’ll consider a few instances, including the engagement of different external groups in Borama Conference.

The declared purpose of the conference was to determine the ‘destiny’ of Somaliland, and it agreed a peace charter which dealt with immediate issues relating to the most recent conflict, and a ‘national charter’ to serve as an interim national constitution. These impressive achievements were enabled by a combination of external but clan-based facilitation and logistical support with additional low-key (and minimal) support from non-Somali sources. UNDP supplied air transport for delegates travelling from the eastern regions of Sool and Sanaag (though no cash), while a number of foreign governments, NGOs and faith groups, including the Mennonites, Community Aid Abroad, and the Norwegian, French and US embassies gave sums of cash for conference organisation (Walls et al., 2008: 50). By channeling this support through existing channels and in a manner that avoided its ‘ politicisation’, the engagement was constructive and non-disruptive, but still vital.

The role played by women at a national meeting in the town of Sheikh which served to establish the ground for the Borama conference is instructive in a different way. Again, acting as agents external to the immediate negotiations - a political process from which women are traditionally excluded in Somali custom - a group of female activists gathered outside the venue, demanding that delegates make meaningful decisions. The women went to the length of barricading the exit from the venue, preventing delegates from leaving the meeting until they had addressed key points, including agreement on reconstruction of water facilities, a decision that UNOSOM involvement in Somaliland be rejected, and the creation of a police force. Their intervention, although formally external to the decision-making process, was constructive and won concessions (Walls et al., 2008: 48-49). The point here is not so much the gender role (although that in itself was important and pointed to future trajectories), but that parties who were evidently external to the process of political decision-making but who retained an interest in the outcomes were once again able to intervene in a manner that contributed to agreement on key issues. The international diplomatic community sometimes has the potential to play a role similar to Somali women in this instance: intervening through a combination of logistical or technical support and also as sometimes vociferous advocates of given positions.

An additional and more recent example of this dual role lies in the late 2009 agreement on a six-point memorandum which defused a situation that had already led to violent protest and the deaths of demonstrators. Here the donor group fulfilled a function outlined in brief some months before (see ISG, 2009). They simultaneously maintained a strong position on a number of prerequisites for their renewed support for elections while also engaging in supportive diplomacy with UK representatives in particular working through the Ethiopian Deputy Foreign Minister. Using this combination of muscular and supportive diplomacy - not dissimilar if on a different scale to the approach of the women in Sheikh - these external representatives were able to draft a ‘non-paper’ which subsequently reappeared as the draft for a six-point memorandum signed by the key Somaliland stakeholders (Kibble and Walls, 2009; Walls, 2009).
The common thread here is that, in contrast to the unsuccessful interventions cited above, the successful ones are smaller in scale and build actively on local initiatives. In each case, external funding did not disproportionally dominate, and outsiders did not establish frameworks and deadlines beyond the immediate release of funds. Critical decisions were made by local actors who then had to face their own constituents, or by deeply engaged external actors who were ‘personally affected’ in often tangible ways by the outcomes. External actors did not escape criticism by any means: they were seen as active participants in a contentious process and therefore, for many observers, complicit in bad decisions and deserving of condemnation. However, by not dominating proceedings as hosts, primary funders, or the deliverers of state-building frameworks, outsiders were able to adjust their positions as events unfolded, ultimately remaining engaged.

Conclusion

The perception that outsiders are simply making the Somali situation worse continues to hold sway (Kibble, 2007). Certainly, outside involvement with the US military intervention in 1992 under the title Operation Restore Hope through to the 2006 Ethiopian invasion have failed manifestly to address the problems they set out to tackle. The UN-sponsored Djibouti Peace Process that resulted in a June 2008 agreement between the Transitional Federal Government and the Alliance for the Reliberation of Somalia (TFG/ARS/UN, 2008) was seen as establishing an effective process, but it too failed to win the broad support needed to achieve real change. Continued international support for the Transitional Federal Government has also been seen as evidence that external involvement in Somalia is counter-productive, and that Somalis should be left to do things themselves (although such arguments ignore the massive human rights abuses that have tended to ensue). More recently, we have begun to see the pendulum swing back in the other direction: increasing disillusion with the lack of success of recent interventionist policies is leading to renewed calls for disengagement. In some instances the message is nuanced (for example, Bruton, 2010), but the danger is that once again the nuance is lost to the attraction of polarised position-taking.

The argument that ‘outsiders’ should withdraw altogether from engagement springs from sources both Somali and non-Somali, and is employed in a variety of instances. We argue in contradiction that active and informed engagement from outsiders is essential if past advances are to be built upon.

For those who blame external intervention, the easy corollary is that Somaliland succeeded in the period following 1991 precisely because outsiders were not involved, while Somalia has serially failed because of external engagement. While there is undoubtedly some truth in these observations, they represent a significant and dangerous oversimplification. Indeed, while it is superficially easy to support calls for international disentanglement in the Somali areas, the reality is that both Somaliland as soon as possible and Somalia in the long term will need to be reintegrated into global political, financial, and logistical networks if the Horn of Africa is to move beyond the current state of failure, or at best marginal success.

In fact, we argue that there is a basis for external intervention in Somali tradition and that such engagement can be constructive if based on a deep understanding of the context in which it must operate and a realistic awareness of the areas in which outsiders can indeed
play a constructive role. Importantly, an effort to identify and build constructive modes of engagement, drawing on a full but pragmatic understanding of tradition and context is essential if Somalis living in the Horn of Africa are to escape the cycle of violence, crisis, blatant corruption and geopolitical manipulation that has come to typify a large part of the area. In so doing, examples of success such as the state-building project in Somaliland, however much they might be incomplete and to some degree inconclusive, must be examined and understood not as models for replication, but as valuable lessons in how appropriate solutions can be found if the circumstances are created in which they can emerge.

It is also important that Somalis are able to draw on all sections of society if a stable and reasonably just polity is to be built on the successes that already exist. Women in particular are playing an increasing role in business and social life in general. It is critical that they are also accorded more say in political processes, and there is room to build on the pragmatism that is central to Somali socio-political systems to expand that space. A gendered perspective also offers insight through consideration of women’s past contributions as a possible framework for wider external engagement. Just as women have historically provided logistical support and influenced policy positions from outside, donors and similar international actors have the potential to exert similar influence. There may also be room in the future for outsiders to play a role as mediators or facilitators. This is a more difficult proposition, and the potential ill-effect can be seen in the Kenyan conferences. If ‘facilitation’ is taken to mean hosting and funding conferences or meetings, then the potential looms large for that to become a junket for delegates with the incentive to achieve meaningful agreement on complex matters removed by generous arms-length funding. Part of the answer is to ensure that external funding for such processes remains proportionate, and also that it is tagged to very specific outputs. Equally important, though, is the facilitative role that can be played by individuals and small groups who have a long-term commitment to Somali affairs and sufficient capacity to adjust their commitment - in terms of both time and approach - to accommodate shifts in local context. Above all, external engagement of whatever type needs to be long-term, patient, fully engaged and open to the flexibility required to permit real local ‘leadership’.

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