Workshop Report

Rapporteur: Erik Abild

Humanitarian Action in Somalia

Expanding Humanitarian Space

Refugees Studies Centre, Oxford Department of International Development
University of Oxford

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In line with the overarching objectives of the Refugee Studies Centre, this workshop aimed to bring together representatives from the communities of 'Research, Policy and Practice' for a constructive dialogue on the subject of humanitarian space in Somalia. The participants at the workshop reflected this and included academics with a wide range of specialities, policy advisors and representatives of donor governments, as well as staff from several humanitarian agencies. The workshop also included a number of representatives from the Somali diaspora community, Somali money transfer organisations and Islamic NGO's working in Somalia, thereby enabling an important exchange of ideas from a wide range of perspectives.

The specific aim of the workshop was to map out the main challenges facing humanitarian actors in Somalia, to examine the methods that such actors are using to address humanitarian needs in the country, and to consider how the humanitarian community might better expand humanitarian space through innovative approaches to both policy and practice.

This workshop report follows the format of the workshop, providing a brief overview of the main challenges faced by humanitarian agencies and of the innovative methods used by these agencies to provide humanitarian relief in Somalia. The report then provides an overview of the role played by Islamic charities and the Somali diaspora, as well as the media, before finally presenting the main outcomes of the workshop and proposing possible ways forward.

Keynote address: Expanding political space

The workshop was opened by Prof. Roland Marchal of Sciences Po, Paris, who presented a keynote lecture on the subject of "Expanding political space". Prof. Marchal highlighted 'the arrogance of ignorance' as a key concern in the Somali context, criticizing the United Nations, especially UNPOS, for not adequately analysing the Somalia context, and seeing the situation only as it suits their narrow operational interests. Prof. Marchal noted that UN agencies operational in Somalia systematically fail to recognize their own shortcomings, and fail to take seriously the fact that the UN has very little legitimacy in Somalia. He further criticised the international community of partiality, arguing that they selectively support parties to the conflict, rather than engaging with all actors in equal fashion. Prof. Marchal argued that the current situation facing humanitarian agencies was in many ways the same as it had been in the 1990s, and that the status quo is far from constructive. He suggested that agencies should seriously reconsider their role and actions, and focus more on advocacy rather than being service providers. Another important point raised by Prof. Marchal was that the economy in Somalia was very poorly understood, but that it provided important possibilities of improving the lives of ordinary Somalis. Marchal concluded by arguing that for humanitarian action to be effective in Somalia, agencies should work together to open up a new political space in which all parties are engaged, in which analysis of the situation if reflexive and responsive to change, and in which new forms of negotiation may be explored.

Humanitarian crisis in Somalia: Context and challenges

'Learning the unlearnt lessons' – provided part of the title of the first presentation by Nuradin Dirie, and was also the main theme of the session. All panellists seemed to agree that many of the challenges and lessons to be learned in Somalia were already well known, but that to transform this knowledge into practice was highly challenging. Reasons identified could be described as a set of predicaments associated with humanitarian action in Somalia: balancing humanitarian principles vs. humanitarian access, balancing long vs. short term consequences of operations, and balancing the requirements of state building vs. emergency relief. Other challenges identified, especially by Wafaa Saed representing UNICEF, included those associated with the management of operations in Somalia from Nairobi and the consequences this has had for agency knowledge of the socio-political dynamics on the ground in Somalia, and for accountability. A particular challenge identified by the Danish Refugee Council, related to the complex compromises that agencies have had to make in order to gain access in areas characterised by strong local politics and insecurity. In some areas agencies have found themselves in situations in which they have compromised or broken their humanitarian principles (eg: providing aid as directed by local authorities) in order to secure safe access to those in need of assistance.

An important dilemma that emerged was that the compromise of humanitarian principles in order to gain access often lead to more demands being made by local authorities, and that by making compromises, agencies risk becoming co-opted into the political situation. A paradox emerged in which compromises to gain humanitarian access, leading to an erosion of independence can in fact lead to further restrictions to humanitarian space as aid delivery is seen to be no longer based on

independent assessments of needs but driven by local political pressure. This politicisation of aid, discussed in Laura Hammond's presentation, was a recurrent topic throughout the workshop, especially with regard to the politicisation arising from the UN's active role in state building, and the consequences this has had for the perception of humanitarian agencies by Somalis in the field.

The question of 'do no harm' was raised in the discussion that followed the presentations. It was suggested that humanitarian agencies in Somalia may be doing more harm than good, and that if this is the case, that they should be held to account robustly. A series of questions were raised regarding the use of humanitarian principles: Is it legitimate to compromise principles in favour of humanitarian access? Should there be absolute operational principles? Should the humanitarian imperative always prevail? Should humanitarian agencies stop their operations where their principles are being compromised? What would happen if all international agencies pulled out? Would anything change? Some argued that nobody really know what would happen, exactly because nobody really knows the impact and consequences of their actions.

Catherine-Lune Grayson from DRC argued that in some instances, agencies are 'operating blindly', at best by omission, at worst by convenience, and while this situation calls for a need to conduct of thorough evaluation of humanitarian work in Somalia, the constant state of emergency raised the question of whether humanitarian actors have the will or the capacity to do this.   However, as noted by the session chair Prof. Anderson, it is probably more likely that international involvement in Somalia will increase in coming years rather than decrease. He further argued that academics and analysts had limited influence on policy, and that military discourses on the situation had a much more significant impact on policy than social and political ones.

Expanding humanitarian space: Operational innovations

 'The humanitarian imperative does not allow for non-action – but the current mode of operations cannot continue either'. This point was made by Simon Springett of Oxfam GB and was a main topic in the second session which included presentations on remote control management by Duncan Bell, and innovative methodologies involving direct cash relief by Nisar Majid. Susanne Jaspars from ODI presented research on the complex challenges involved in targeting, and Edwina Thompson from World Vision presented the HISS-CAM tool aimed at facilitating a strategic balance between principles and pragmatism.

'It's Somalia…' this is often used as an explanation or excuse for inaction and poor programming by many actors, but as Adam Combs from NRC pointed out: what does this mean, and what are the actual ways of operating in Somalia? Too many myths exist about the situation in Somalia and these must be overcome. An important aspect of this relates to the use of national staff, which is often viewed as a major problem for agencies. Combs argued however that local staff should in fact be seen as the biggest and most valuable resource. This was reinforced by Duncan Bell who argued that it is imperative that agencies build the capacity of local staff, and build and improve levels of trust between

implementing staff in Somalia and managing staff in Nairobi in order to guarantee effective and informed operations.

In her presentation of targeting mechanisms used in WFP food delivery programmes, Susanne Jaspars outlined the importance of going back to basics in Somalia. In particular she highlighted the importance of participatory planning and implementation through already existing local power structures. This was reflected in Nisar Majid's presentation on a cash distribution programme implemented by Oxfam GB using almost exclusively Somali implementation mechanisms. All presenters emphasised the need for agencies not to underestimate the influence and importance of local community structures, as well as the need to build improved partnerships with private and local initiatives, such as money transfer organisations or Islamic structures, as well as the diaspora – all which were central themes for the two other panels.

The question of how to balance the pragmatic need to access politically complex, highly insecure areas with humanitarian principles was addressed by Dr Edwina Thompson, who presented a tool recently developed by Word Vision to assist operational teams in analysing complex humanitarian situations and in making judgements about whether or not certain forms of action are appropriate within a principled programming framework. The HISS-CAM tool provides a powerful, practical mechanism for empowering local teams to take programming decisions in an informed and structured way, and to communicate these decisions effectively to senior managers, and as such is particularly valuable in situations of remote management such as Somalia.

Islamic charities and humanitarian agencies

'It is the work you do that is the most important thing' – this was the concluding point of Ali Osman, representing Muslim Aid. He argued that while Islamic organisations might have an advantage in relation to access, and local understanding to some degree, they face similar constraints to other agencies working in Somalia. He highlighted that the most important issue for gaining local acceptance was the quality of humanitarian operations. Other presentations included Valeria Saggiomo who highlighted the increasing role of 'Organised Islam in a stateless Somalia.' Saggiomo outlined the main funding sources and different forms of Islamic charitable organisation, from local Islamic charities to international Western- or Arab- based Islamic organisations. However, as Makki Mohamed from Islamic Relief pointed out, there still is much that is different and not understood about Islamic humanitarian action, but that there are important aspects for cooperation between Western and Islamic humanitarian organisations, such as information and communication, as well as with regards to planning and funding. James Shaw-Hamilton from Humanitarian Forum argued that making such cooperation possible, or 'bridging the gap' as he termed it, was a challenge, and that to just talk is not enough, but that there need to be real understanding and action.

Concrete suggestions for ways forward included: Western donors should increase funding for Islamic organisations, and *vice versa,* Western based organisations should increasingly seek funding from Islamic countries, as well as building interagency cooperation in order to share skills and information.

The role of the Somali diaspora

'Funding terrorism or building peace?' These were the two extreme caricatured perceptions of the Somali diaspora's role in Somalia, presented by Dr Anna Lindley, chairing the session. The session that followed nuanced these two caricatures, although most presenters agreed that both extremes arguably held some truth. The challenge identified was to increase the positive contribution of diaspora involvement, especially in relation to remittances. Dr Saad Shire from Daahabshiil claimed that the Somali diaspora sends back as much as US$ 1 billion every year, and while he underlined that this number was very uncertain, he further suggested that as much as 80% of the money sent was in response to distress and therefore might be termed 'humanitarian'. Mohamed Gure from Somali Concern Group also pointed out that the diaspora contributes in many other important ways, not least through the political process, but also by supporting long-term economic development and by providing important support to state and non-state institutions. Michael Brophy, from Africa Education Trust, explained how their organisation saw the contribution of diaspora staff as a key factor behind a range of important success stories in Somalia, such as the implementation of a radio literacy programme and the development of the national exam system. In a comment, NRC highlighted the utility of placing diaspora staff in key managerial positions in Somalia as an important and successful part of their human resources strategy.

In the discussion that followed, participants working for aid agencies emphasised the critical role played by Somali money transfer agencies in facilitating their operations in the Somali regions through the transfer of operational finances - in fact, they said that it would be extremely difficult to operate without their assistance. In particular, it was highlighted that money transferring organisations could potentially act as an important partner in scaling up direct cash relief programmes. However, it was also emphasised that these organisations are dependent on sensitive, local structures, and that too much international involvement might lead to negative consequences. It was also noted that the generational shift in the diaspora might lead to a decrease of remittances in the near future, that the financial remittances of the Somalia diaspora may have been placing a serious strain upon the diaspora, restricting its own development and that the current financial crisis might have serious impacts upon the scale of remittances in the short to medium term.

Information, communication and the media

Drawing comparisons from the Darfur crisis, Iginio Gagliardone explored whether strategic communication can help broaden the humanitarian space in Somalia. Analysis of information flows in conflict environments show how narrative gets embedded in the media and can influence donors and humanitarian actors. While the construction of narrative has yet to be fully grasped, some participants were of the opinion that the framing of Somalia as a 'failed state' has arguably contributed to the hindrance of humanitarian access. A proposed solution to minimize the risk of information distortion would be to improve coordination between media and communication departments and policy departments within international organisations.

Nicole Stremlau focused on the local media and local information flows. Her ongoing research looks at how people pass along information, from inside the Khat houses to tea shops, mosques and the government. She emphasised the importance of, for example, the BBC Somali Service, which many of the respondents felt was too focused on Southern Somalia and not meeting the needs of Somalilanders. Respondents complained about an inherent bias which meant that only negative stories about Somaliland were being reported.

Lisa Robinson's presentation emphasised the importance of considering the population's access to information as a humanitarian need which, if fulfilled, has the capability to empower people and be a strong asset to aid delivery.

Addressing Somalia's humanitarian crisis: Summing up and ways forward

The human needs in Somalia are very real, and there is an urgent humanitarian imperative to respond to them. As such, the question of *how* one should respond remains an important and valid one. The workshop successfully addressed this question in several ways, but cannot claim to have fully answered it. In the final session of the workshop, lead by the convenor Simon Addison, the participants tried to sum up the main outcomes of the workshop and to identify suggestions for ways forward. A central outcome was the realization that the problem is not that not enough lessons have been learned by humanitarian agencies in Somalia, but that these lessons have not been, and are not being acted upon. Humanitarian agencies and the UN know very well what the problems are, and even have a good idea of how to solve them. The key problem is that agencies have continued largely to do 'business as usual'.

Several participants raised the need for a much more coordinated approach to information gathering and communication, to the establishment and implementation of standard operating procedures that are in line with humanitarian principles, to establishing humanitarian access and to redressing the negative perceptions of humanitarian agencies (particularly the UN). It was also noted, however, that there already exist a number of coordination mechanisms such as the OCHA, extant agreements on the use of the 'Code of Conduct', the NGO Consortium, and IASC, but that these mechanisms do not work effectively to address the actual needs and concerns of agencies in the field.

Many participants agreed that many humanitarian agencies in Somalia have become drawn into the use of a variety of questionable operational practices. In particular, practices relating to the diversion, exploitation and poor accountability of aid were highlighted, especially the diversion of aid to powerful actors in return for humanitarian access in difficult locations. While it was noted that many agencies consider such practices unavoidable as a result of the complexity and difficulty of the operating environment, it was also acknowledged that important principles are being seriously compromised as a result, particularly that of 'Do No Harm'.

Often, these compromises are being made using the 'humanitarian imperative' as a justifying factor, but without adequate analysis to support this justification. Due to poor quality data, both in humanitarian needs assessment and programme evaluation, little useful information is available to prove that continued 'business as usual' intervention is having positive impacts, or whether it has

become a part of the problem. If the current humanitarian status quo is both causing harm and 'fuelling the conflict', as some participants suggested, then it is time for agencies to 'take a step back' and reconsider the long term consequences of their actions.

In terms of the politicisation of aid, the majority of participants highlighted the problematic role of the UN. Acting simultaneously as a humanitarian actor, military actor and key proponent of 'state-building' activities, the UN is seen to be compromised. Its prominent role as both a political and humanitarian actor in Somalia is seen as a serious complicating factor that threatens the independence and neutrality of other humanitarian agencies, especially those from the West. While it was acknowledged that the ultimate solution to Somalia's crisis lies in the achievement of a political bargain, the urgency and severity of the humanitarian crisis in the country make humanitarian action imperative. The UN and donor governments should more seriously consider the potentially damaging manner in which humanitarianism has been politicised in Somalia, and humanitarian actors must also work harder to maintain their independence, neutrality and humanitarian character by clearly separating themselves from political agendas and engaging actively with all actors in Somalia, whatever their political or religious perspective.

Although the question of agency withdrawal in the face of serious insecurity or compromised principles was seriously discussed, most participants agreed that effective operational work could be, and was being done to address humanitarian needs in Somalia. It was argued that it is important for agencies to deconstruct myths surrounding the situation in the country, to improve the production, and dissemination of accurate information on the crisis, and to focus on strategies and methodologies that actually are effective.

It was agreed that the Somali staff of international agencies, Islamic charities and humanitarian organisations and the Somali diaspora all have important, positive roles to play, but that they also present different challenges that must be managed. Remittances are already playing a major role in the lives of Somalis, but the international aid community should further explore how it can gain and learn from the capacity of the Somali diaspora, as well as further developing partnerships with local and Islamic organisations. Most importantly international agencies must be more strategically focused upon their local staff, and must be more committed to institutional capacity building within Somalia. In particular it was noted that agencies currently operating along lines of 'remote management' must reconsider their operational frameworks to prioritise local ownership of planning and decision-making, gradually moving towards a more traditional in-country management approach.

More generally, there was common agreement on the problematic and protracted nature of both the crisis and the humanitarian response to it. The status quo of continuous rising needs and further limitations on operations using a 'business as usual' approach should force humanitarian agencies and other actors to take a step back and focus on, at the very least, not exacerbating the crisis. While the sub-title for this workshop was 'Expanding Humanitarian Space' it might be more important for all actors to expand their understanding of humanitarian space, accepting that within the current situation no separate, exclusive 'space' for agencies to operate exists, but that by focusing upon robust

contextual analysis, and by operating in a principled fashion within the parameters of local political and social realities, that much effective programming may be implemented.

The humanitarian crisis in Somalia continues, but part of the problem might lie in the tendency to conceive of the situation in terms of *emergency*. It appears that agencies and the media that frame the situation in terms of 'emergency' construct the situation in a manner that reinforces feelings of urgency and the need for pragmatic expediency at the expense of principled, well-planned intervention. This may be a vital factor in perpetuating a situation in which agencies, in their haste to respond urgently and in a situation of 'state failure' fail to take lessons learned into account and act without thinking adequately about the context, their own role within it, and the potential long-term consequences of their actions.

In Somalia, billions have been spent on aid and relief in the past decade, but little significant impact has been registered. While it is beyond doubt that such massive levels of aid have contributed to the saving of lives, it is also beyond question that these resources and the agencies that have mobilised them also play a considerable role in the conflict. It is time for the humanitarian community to take a step back and to consider both the short- and long-term implications of their actions, while staying committed to the important mission they have taken upon themselves.

List of Sessions, Speakers and Presentations:

Keynote Address
- Prof. Roland Marchal, Sciences Po, Paris
  Expanding political space

Humanitarian crisis in Somalia: context and challenges
    Chair: Prof. David Anderson

- Nuradin Dirie, Independent expert
  It is time to learn the unlearned lessons in Somalia

- Wafaa Saeed, UNICEF
  Humanitarian challenges and responses in Somalia

- Frans Barnard & Catherine-Lune Grayson, Danish Refugee Council
  Insecurity by default

- Dr Laura Hammond, School of Oriental and African Studies
  How to lose friends and alienate people: the international community in Somalia

Expanding humanitarian space: operational innovations
    Chair: Jake McKnight

- Duncan Bell, Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine
  Remote-control programmes in complex humanitarian emergencies – a case study of MSF Switzerland in Somalia

- Adam Combs, Norwegian Refugee Council
  NRC South Central Somalia: working methodologies in a complex environment

- Dr Edwina Thompson, World Vision
  Making the tough call: decision-making in complex humanitarian environments

- Susanne Jaspars, Overseas Development Institute
  The challenges of targeting food aid in Somalia

- Nisar Majid, Bristol University
  Cash interventions in southern Somalia

- Simon Springett, (*on behalf of Hassan Noor), *Oxfam GB
  Giving aid, getting aid in the complex environment of Somalia

Islamic charitable funding and humanitarian agencies
Chair: Hashi Mohamed

- Ali Osman, Muslim Aid
  Islamic charities in Somalia: local or international charities?

- Makki Mohamed, Islamic Relief
  Role of and type of Islamic charities in Somalia and ways to work together

- Valeria Saggiomo, L'Orientale University of Naples
  Islamic charities at work: narratives from Somalia

- James Shaw-Hamilton, Humanitarian Forum
  Bridging the gulf: the role of Islamic INGOs and NGOs in Somalia

The role of the Somali diaspora
Chair: Dr Anna Lindley

- Dr Saad Shire, Daahabshiil
  From crisis management to strategic management of the humanitarian crisis in Somalia and the role of the diaspora

- Mohamud Gure, Somali Concern Group
  Diaspora's role in humanitarian relief work

- Michael Brophy, Africa Education Trust
  Education and the contribution of the diaspora

Information, communication and media
Chair: Simon Haselock

- Iginio Gagliardone, London School of Economics
  Can strategic communication help in broadening the humanitarian space?

- Dr Nicole Stremlau, University of Oxford
  The information ecology and humanitarian intervention

- Lisa Robinson, BBC World Service Trust
  Expanding humanitarian space through radio: the role of information in humanitarian action

Addressing Somalia's humanitarian crisis
Chair: Simon Addison

- *Roundtable discussion: ways forward and proposals for action*