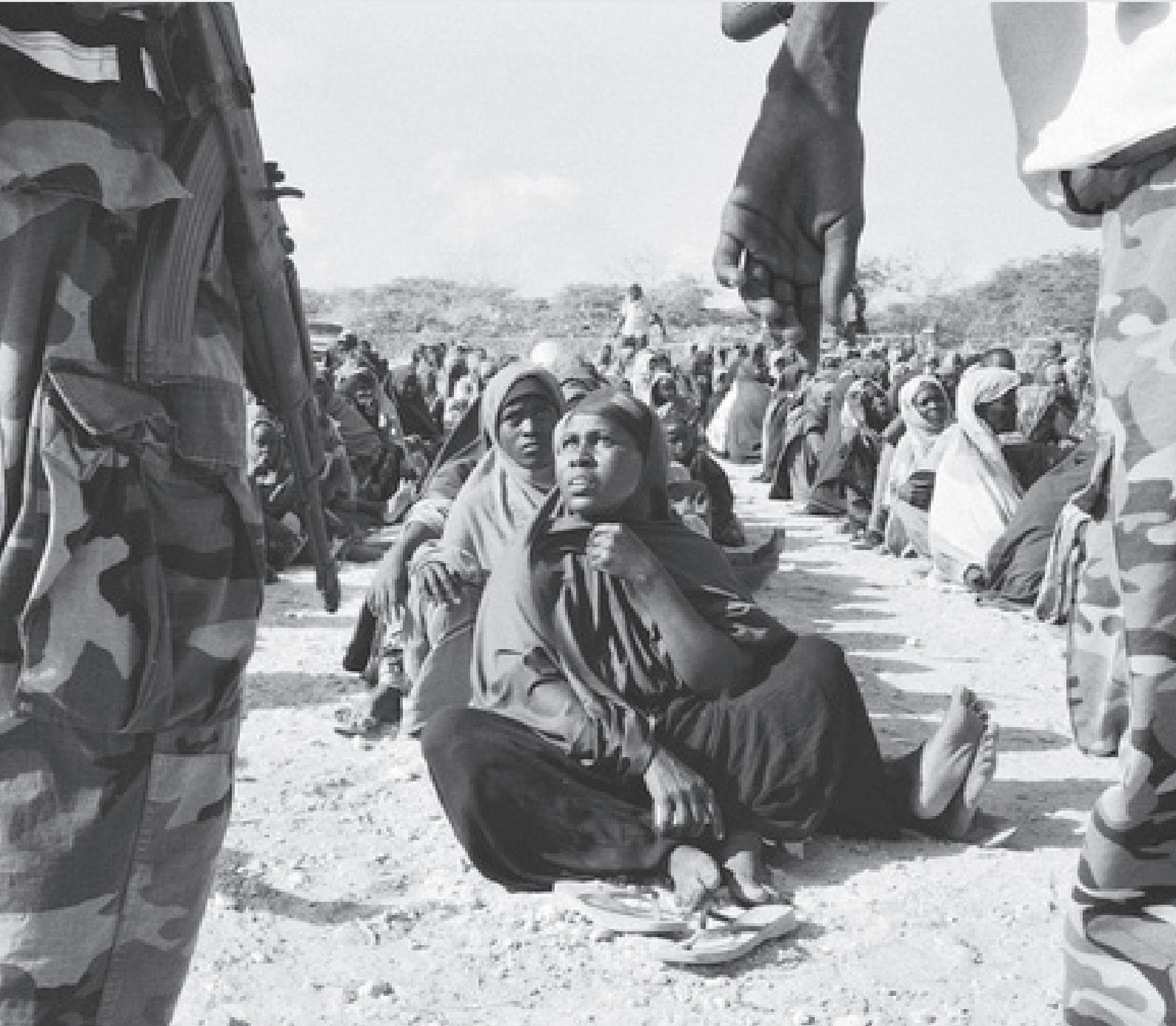


A series of discussions aiming to promote debate on some of the pressing issues facing humanitarian action



Blind aid: relief efforts inside Somalia

19 October 2011

Introduction

Jonathan Rugman is foreign affairs correspondent for Channel Four News

The Disasters and Emergency Committee (DEC), a coalition of UK-based NGOs (which does not include MSF), has raised over £70 million for the Horn of Africa. As far as I know, this is the biggest Africa appeal total ever raised in the UK. The question is: how much of that will go to Somalia? As one aid worker put it to me recently, “I hope they’re not distributing on the basis of capacity, rather than on the basis of need.”

There is certainly no better time to be talking about Somalia – and no worse either.

Tomorrow marks three months since the UN declared famine in southern Somalia. It is believed that tens of thousands of people have already died. The world’s biggest aid agency, the World Food Programme (WFP), is still banned from the conflict zone by Al Shabaab militants. We are speaking tonight in the very unhappy context of two MSF aid workers having been abducted from Kenya into Somalia, and nobody knows who has taken them. Work has been cut back at Dadaab, the world’s biggest refugee camp, which currently houses 509,000 refugees in Kenya. One British tourist has been abducted, her husband has been murdered and – if you haven’t heard today’s news – the French woman abducted from Kenya to Somalia has died, apparently from a shortage of medicine.

The Kenyans only last weekend invaded southern Somalia – that’s not a word they would use, they would talk about incursion – and they are talking about setting up safe havens for delivering humanitarian aid. They are clearly fed up with the way things are and their troops are currently bogged down in the rain and mud. There have been explosions in Mogadishu in the last few weeks, one today, one yesterday. In the biggest explosion up to 100 people died, with Al Shabaab apparently trying to cause mayhem.



Photograph: © Espen Rasmussen, 2004

Piracy is on the increase; the monsoon season has now ended, which means the Indian Ocean is now calmer and more attacks are taking place at sea. Two Britons have been extradited from Kenya after they were accused of trying to travel to Somalia to join Al Shabaab. You’ve also got drone attacks by American forces on Al Shabaab, and limitations on the funding of aid projects because of British and American laws which restrict the delivery of aid to terrorist groups.

That’s the context in which we are speaking, and I thought I would set that extraordinary array of things out for you, given that most of them have happened very recently indeed.

Speakers

Joe Belliveau is operations manager for MSF for Somalia and elsewhere.

Abdurahman Sharif is coordinator of the Muslim Charities Forum.

Laura Hammond, of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), is an expert on remittances in the diaspora.

Samir El Hawary, of the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), has researched the politics of aid and the effects of counter-terrorism policies on the delivery of aid.

Humanitarian access

Joe Belliveau is operations manager for Médecins Sans Frontières for Somalia

I am going to focus on the issue of humanitarian access from MSF’s perspective, and in particular on the difficulties we are facing. But before that, I’ll highlight some of the successes we’ve had in terms of access.

In the current crisis, we have had a fair amount of success in scaling up our response outside Somalia – as in the refugee camps in Ethiopia over the past three months. We have had some difficulties with the Ethiopian authorities in terms of granting access for international staff, and in terms of dealing with imports, but we can say that Ethiopia is relatively all right in terms of scale-up and access. The next big challenge in Ethiopia will be to convince the authorities that the emergency phase – and hence the need for humanitarian agencies – is likely to last for many months to come.

Scaling up has also worked in Kenya. We have had programmes there for years, and were therefore pre-positioned and able to scale up to meet the needs. However, the number of new arrivals has been overwhelming, as there have been close to 1,000 people crossing the border daily. Nevertheless, we have been able to open new space and increase our activities to respond to the needs.

However, just a few days ago, we had a major kidnapping: two of our colleagues have been taken, and we don’t know their whereabouts. This is a major setback, and indicates that insecurity in Kenya is a major issue. This, of course, is affecting our ability to meet the level of needs in Kenya. We have had to pull back and decrease the presence of international staff. Other organisations have also pulled back since the kidnapping. It is certainly a major red flag for our response inside Kenya.

Inside Somalia, we have had really good success recently in Mogadishu. Since the retreat of Al

Shabaab from Mogadishu, space has opened up for organisations and international staff to go into Mogadishu and scale up. We have done so in a very large way, as have a lot of other organisations. It is a relative success story – it has its downsides, but I will not go into them now.

Permission from Al Shabaab

Elsewhere in south central Somalia, MSF is running 13 different programmes, six of which are in Al Shabaab-controlled territories. In the non-Al Shabaab territories, we have been able to beef up our response and do more, but getting permission for scale-up in Al Shabaab territories has been very limited. These areas also happen to be, to the best of our analysis, the areas that form the heart of the current crisis – the areas that are most affected by drought, and therefore food shortages, as well as by conflict. Those areas are in Bay, Bakool, Lower Shabelle, Gedo and Lower Juba.

We have had substantial difficulties operating the way we want in Al Shabaab territories. Since they took over in 2007, and more-or-less completely took over south central Somalia by the end of 2009, we have had all kinds of difficulties in negotiations with them. They have told us that they do not want us to have international staff in those areas, and this is non-negotiable.

Flights into all but a very few airports are also off limits, so supply has been a major issue for us. Opening up new projects in areas where we did not already have a foothold has also been off limits. Finally, taxes are something that they constantly insist upon and constantly push for.

Some things are non-negotiable

We have had to grapple with all of these issues. Now, in relation to the current crisis, we have gone back to them and said that we are here, we are ready to scale up, to start up in new places. We have said that we will treat this as a short-term emergency response and we will not insist that international staff work alongside our Somali staff, as we would normally do. We have said we will not pay them anything – that has been constant throughout: we do not and we will not pay. But we will step in for a short period of time, to open new operations.

Al Shabaab have said ‘no’ to us in most places. In Bay and Bakool they said a clear ‘no’; so far in Galguduud they have said ‘no’. However, in Kismayo they have said ‘yes’, and they have said ‘yes’ to expanding outside one of our established programmes in Lower Juba Valley. So, success in reaching the people most affected by this crisis has been limited – not absent, but limited.

Reasons for suspicion

Now some reflections on the ‘why.’ One of the things we always get, when we sit across from Al Shabaab (and when I say ‘we’, it’s our senior Somali staff who negotiate directly with Al Shabaab), one of the things that constantly clouds any discussion that we have with them, on any issue, is a high degree of suspicion. ‘You are spies, you’re from the West; the people who make the decisions must have some other agenda; the agenda cannot be pure, we don’t believe that.’ And to some extent you can chalk that up to paranoia or a very hardline ideology that is simply anti-Western.

But what is also true is that, if you take a historical perspective on the West’s engagement in Somalia, it is not so hard to understand that there is a high degree of suspicion around Western intervention. Let’s go back just a few years to 2006, when the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) had taken control and had managed for a period

of several months to establish a degree of stability and a model of governance that somehow functioned. This turned out to be unacceptable to the outside world – especially to Somalia’s neighbours, and especially to the US government – and so there was an invasion and ousting of that group.

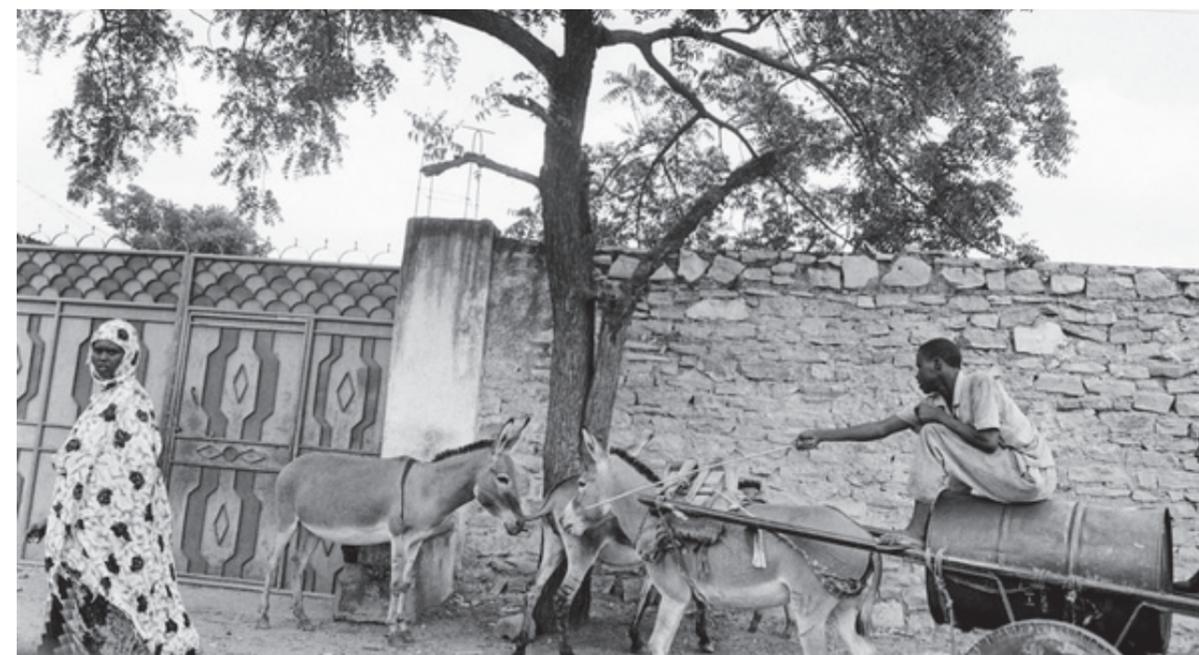
“Even the delivery of humanitarian assistance to areas under Al Shabaab control can be considered a criminal activity.”

Al Shabaab was, of course, a part of that group: it was the youth wing of the ICU. Al Shabaab went on to gain prominence and, from the very beginning (from Al Shabaab’s perspective), the outside world has not considered it a legitimate entity, and certainly not an entity worth negotiating with. Since then, Al Shabaab has been designated as a terrorist organisation by some governments. As a consequence of that designation, any assistance which is deemed to be providing ‘material support’ to Al Shabaab is illegal.

Depending on the interpretation of that phrase ‘material support,’ even the delivery of humanitarian assistance to areas under Al Shabaab control can be considered a criminal activity.



Photograph: © Jan Garup, 2000



Photograph: © Alexander Glyadyelov, 2005

This is a pertinent issue, particularly in the UK, whose government is one of those that passed this legislation. It is also an issue in the US, even though the US has currently granted a period of not applying that law.

In addition, you have got drones going out on bombing raids, you have reportedly got CIA agents operating in various places in Somalia, and so on. It is not a great stretch to understand why there is a high degree of suspicion towards any interference in areas that Al Shabaab controls.

What are our options?

So what do we do? What are the options here, considering that this is a large scale crisis? Whether or not 750,000 people are at imminent risk of starvation, I can’t say, but it is a large-scale crisis that we have not been able to respond to adequately – neither MSF nor the international humanitarian community.

There have been calls by the Kenyans, the Ethiopians and other governments too. Even the European Union has said something strong has to be done. They have made reference to a military intervention, a corridor, something of that sort. It’s a tough dilemma for us, because on the one hand we realise that what we can do to respond falls short of what is necessary.

On the other hand, if we imagine a military response to this crisis, we can envision that this could make things even worse. First of all, we think that if there is a military intervention of any kind, it should not be associated with humanitarianism in any way. We want to dissociate ourselves from any form of military engagement, and I think that the rest of the humanitarian community ought to do the same.

If there was a humanitarian corridor, for example, what would happen? It is an attractive idea, because you can carve out space for people to go into, and humanitarians can go into that space, and that can be some kind of a response. However, if that happens, it is highly likely to attract insecurity in the short term, probably in a big way. So even in the short term, managing that space and controlling that space in a safe way for the people who want to access it – as well as the humanitarians in it – will be incredibly difficult. In the long term, it will just fuel suspicion towards international actors who are operating in that space. In fact the humanitarian community at large would probably be considered even less neutral.

I would like to end on that note: that we do not have the total answer, but we do not think that a military answer, in the name of humanitarianism, is the right one.

The role of Muslim NGOs

Abdurahman Sharif is coordinator of the Muslim Charities Forum

Over the past year, I have been involved in helping the Somali diaspora actively address the social and humanitarian problems within the country and surrounding region. This year's drought and famine was a catalyst which has seen the community here in UK mobilise and work with local organisations in Somalia. My main focus today is to focus on the role of Muslim NGOs working in Somalia, but first I think it would be wise to define what a Muslim NGO is.

What is a Muslim NGO?

Our definition of a Muslim NGO is a faith-based organisation, not a religious organisation. A religious organisation has aims and objectives set out by scriptures, like the Holy Quran, but a Muslim NGO mobilises Muslims, inspired by their Islamic values, in support of the poor and destitute in order to tackle poverty and social exclusion.

This is a modern interpretation of the Muslim NGO, but it is important to know that in Islam, as a religion, charity has been enshrined in Islamic traditions for the past 1400 years. A major example is *zakat*, which is an obligatory donation to the poor – a 2.5 percent share of one's income – and *sadaqah*, which is a voluntary donation. So, today, you have the modern conception of Muslim NGOs, which are registered and organised and are becoming more prominent. These are compared to the traditional conception, where you have individuals who do charity work as part of the religious structure such as a mosque.

The voice of the diaspora

In relation to the Somali diaspora, you have probably heard that a large number of Somalis are living here in the UK: between 100,000 and 150,000. Some claim that this number is even higher – at up to 300,000 – given that there



Photograph: © Marcus Bleasdale, 2007

“The Somali community here has founded over 200 charities in different cities around the UK. The main problem is that they are localised, meaning that the Somali voice is not heard nationally.”

are a lot of people who have recently come from countries all across Europe. If you look at cities such as Bristol, you have 20,000 Dutch Somalis living there alone. The Somali community here has founded over 200 charities in different cities around the UK. The main problem is that they are localised – working within their own community – and they do not get involved with the wider public, meaning that the Somali voice is not heard nationally. There have been initiatives over the past 15 years to encourage this – for example the efforts of Jeremy Corbyn, MP for

Islington North, to build a platform – but they have not been successful.

When you look at the relief operations during the recent Somali drought, it is important to understand that when the drought happened, it coincided with the holy month of Ramadan. Ramadan is the month when Muslims fast and donate the most, especially *zakat* donations and voluntary donations. You will generally see a mobilisation from Muslim communities around the world, which was widely reflected in governments donating a lot of funds, but also in Muslim NGOs actively supporting Somalis. In the UK there were cases of representatives of the Muslim community complaining to their mosques about not raising money for Somalia.

Muslim NGOs in Somalia

You will have heard in the news about the large presence of Muslim NGOs, specifically from Turkey, the Gulf and, to a certain extent, Iran. If I use Qatar Charity as an example, in July alone Qatar Charity had the second largest relief operation inside Somalia, according to UNHCR data.

Turkish aid reached US\$255 million, and the Turkish government was very proactive in terms of the response to the drought. Even the Turkish Prime Minister and his wife went to visit Somalia; they sent eight planes and four ships of aid. They are working through the Turkish Red Crescent and other NGOs to deliver this aid. Turkey also opened an embassy, and the ambassador who was appointed is actually a former employee of the NGO Doctors Worldwide. Other countries that have been active on the humanitarian side include Iran, the United Arab Emirates and Oman.

During that period, just before famine was announced by the UN, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and its humanitarian department established an office in Mogadishu – an office focused purely on relief and humanitarian assistance – and after three months they established a coalition which comprised 27 NGOs. According to figures of donations and relief assistance that went through them, they distributed 25 000 tons of food and established 120 mobile health clinics.

Playing a complementary role

One of the reasons for the presence of the OIC is obviously to play the complementary role that the UN has not managed to play in Mogadishu, and to give a message that presence is very important inside Somalia.

For those who don't know about the OIC, it was formed in 1969, it has 57 member states from four continents, and it is the second largest inter-governmental agency after the UN. It hosted a donor conference in August where donors pledged US\$350 million for Somalia, and they also organised a big conference in Egypt on 5 October 2011 called "Water For Life", putting the long-term focus on water, to which they invited NGOs from countries including the UK, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Sudan, Lebanon and Turkey. Outcomes from that meeting included proposals to drill 582 boreholes for wells, way over the initially proposed 218 boreholes.

“Al Shabaab has negative perceptions about any western agency working inside Somalia. Obviously we have to remember tht there is a war of terror in Somlia and hence the reasons behind this perception.”

An important aspect I would like to point out is that aid from Muslim countries is not always visible. For instance Saudi Arabia alone says that it provides US\$4 billion in development assistance a year, making it the second largest donor after the US, and this aid is mainly given through organisations of the Muslim world such as the OIC and the Islamic Development Bank. In terms of operations in Somalia, Muslim NGOs – like other NGOs around the world – work through local staff, which makes it easier to access certain areas. But they also face some of the same challenges that other western organisations have, such as the difficulty in scaling up activities or carrying out longer-term projects.

I have myself been to visit Mogadishu twice – once in August and once in September – and what I saw was that there is a lot of concentra-

tion in and around Mogadishu. Yet even in Mogadishu, we still have a lot of problems, such as: camps where food is not distributed; health issues; and – the biggest problem that I can see from a humanitarian perspective – the difficulty in coordination and working with different coordination bodies such as the OIC, the UN and local NGOs, who have no representatives in terms of the structures.

On top of that, Al Shabaab has negative perceptions about any western agency working inside Somalia, automatically perceiving it as being anti-Muslim or as acting as spies for the west. Obviously we have to remember that there is a war of terror in Somalia and hence the reasons behind this perception. The areas of easy access have been Mogadishu, Bay, Bakool, Lower Shabelle to some extent, as well as Gedo and Lower Juba.

“There are cases of local aid workers in Baidoa being arrested because they refused to agree to Al Shabaab’s demands.”

Victims of politicisation of aid

I have a strong belief that Muslim organisations are victims of the politicisation of aid alongside those that require humanitarian aid. There are cases of local aid workers in Baidoa – which is controlled by Al Shabaab – being arrested because they refused to agree to Al Shabaab's demands and let them distribute the aid. International aid workers are also at risk, with ten staff members, including three Turkish nationals, arrested by the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) on the way back from Lower Shabelle, because now the TFG has banned foreign nationals from going outside Mogadishu, claiming it is for security reasons.

There is a new challenge that all the humanitarian actors are facing, with new humanitarian models being created to deliver aid in countries like Somalia. We need to look forward to see what can be learnt from these new models and experiences and see whether our own current practices are still the best and most efficient.

The involvement of the diaspora

Laura Hammond, of London University's School of African and Oriental Studies, has 20 years' experience working in the Horn of Africa, and recently completed a study funded by the UN Development Programme on the Somali diaspora's engagement in relief, development and politics

I was asked to talk about the study on the diaspora, which I will do, but I wanted to mention a few things on my way to that main topic. One is to look at the question of how we have got to where we are now. Without going into a lot of detail, clearly there are a lot of different variables. There is a drought going on; we can't deny that that contributes to it, but I think all of us here would agree that that is not even the primary cause of the current crisis. If we look at where the conflict has been most intense over the past several years, and where the famine has been felt first and where it is spreading to, it is no mistake that the violence and the humanitarian needs closely align with each other. In addition, there have been price increases and other factors.

This connection between conflict and food insecurity is something that is centrally important. And the way that it tends to be talked about in the media is that it is very much seen as the result of the irrational actions of Al Shabaab and those who align themselves with the group; the international community throws its hands up in despair. I think that we need to recognise that the international community bears an incredibly important role in what has happened.

There has been mention of the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) regulations and the restrictions that are preventing actually engaging with Al Shabaab, and with others who are more moderate and who are working in Somalia. I think what happened when the World Food Programme was expelled from the country and when the OFAC regulations were put in place was basically that the western community looked away from southern Somalia and said,

'Al Shabaab are in control there; we don't talk to terrorists, therefore whatever happens in those areas is really not our concern'. What happened was the opening of a space in which humanitarian needs expanded and vulnerability worsened. So there is a huge responsibility that comes not just from the last few years, but from the last 20 years, of international engagement, which also feeds into why Somalia is so hostile towards western humanitarian and political action.

Two different crises

I think it has been said by those working in Somalia - UN officials in particular - that there are actually two different crises going on here. The first is of access and of coverage within south central Somalia, and particularly southern Somalia, where, in a very quiet way, NGOs like MSF have been able to keep operations going, although often not in the most comprehensive way, often not providing the kinds of services that are necessarily needed – vaccination being a particular problem in a lot of areas. But in these areas, there is a challenge of access.

In Mogadishu and in the refugee and IDP camps, by contrast, the issue is more about stabilising a situation that is really out of hand. Certainly security is an issue, as MSF has found out from its own experience in Dadaab. But the issue is different from access: it is more about stabilising heavy influxes of people, both in Mogadishu and in the camps.

Within this picture of displacement, it is worth pointing out that population displacement has been used by both sides - if there are two sides in this conflict - by the TFG and by Al Shabaab: in terms of trying to direct people's movements, when trying to prevent people from moving from one part of the country to another or moving out of the country; in terms of trying to prevent access to aid, or to divert aid from one place to another in order to try and sway the dynamics of the conflict.

At lunchtime today I was speaking at an event hosted by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, and someone from the Foreign Office said, 'It is really important that we get food aid into southern Somalia and into the Al Shabaab-controlled areas and that it be seen to

come from us, because if Al Shabaab provides the food, then people will become more sympathetic to Al Shabaab’ – which really scared me, because I think the messages that we’ve been trying to get across tonight are that there really needs to be a decoupling of politics and humanitarianism and that food aid should not be used to try to sway hearts and minds within this really complicated conflict dynamic.

“There really needs to be a decoupling of politics and humanitarianism, and food aid should not be used to try to sway hearts and minds.”

Diaspora successes

Now I will talk about the diaspora work that I have been doing most recently. I was part of a team that was hired by the UNDP Somalia to consider the involvement of the Somali diaspora in relief, development and politics. We defined politics quite broadly, as both peace-building and conflict-fuelling, because sometimes it is very difficult to find the line between the two. And what we wanted to get a sense of were the ways in which assistance is falling through these untraditional channels.

We know that remittances make up between US\$1.3 billion and US\$2 billion a year going into Somalia. We made a conservative estimate that probably 10 percent of that is actually what we would call collective remittances, much of which is money that people are sending to some of the Islamic charities that have been talked about. So they may go to local NGOs that have been set up by clans, by university students, by a whole range of people. But this is money that is not directed to an individual - they’re not sending money to your mother or your brother or someone like that - it is more community-based. And there are really inspiring examples of cases all over the diasporas sites. We looked at six different diaspora sites - Nairobi, Dubai, Oslo, Minneapolis, Toronto and London - and we found fantastic examples of all the ways in which the diasporas are involved. So there is a success story wrapped up in the study that we did.

A climate of suspicion

But we also found that it is not an over-exaggeration to say that this is probably the most difficult environment that the diaspora has ever experienced in terms of being able to engage with the country of origin.

Just today, two British nationals from Cardiff were arrested on suspicion of going off to join Al Shabaab – one of them was Somali and it is important to mention that the other was of Pakistani origin. Whenever that happens - a small number of people getting picked up - it has huge implications for the rest of the community. Everyone else who wants to engage in really constructive ways - to send money to IDP camps or to scholarship funds or to actually buy a ticket and go back to Mogadishu – is under suspicion.

The community in Cardiff in particular is now under the lens. There are suspicions about what is happening there and how wide this recruitment ring is going. And that really places people in a difficult position in terms of trying to mobilise themselves for positive support. I was in Helsinki last week talking to Somalis there, and their experience is very much the same: they said that it is really hard to mobilise support right now, given the climate of suspicion that prevails.

“Everyone else who wants to engage in really constructive ways - to send money to IDP camps or to scholarship funds - is under suspicion.”

They also realise that they need to create linkages with professional NGOs like MSF, because while they have a will to help - and often they have access that western NGOs do not have - they do not have the technical expertise sometimes, and so they are interested in trying to create those linkages. So there is a huge opportunity for trying to create stronger linkages and learning from these non-western-based models of humanitarian assistance that I believe are worth further discussion.

Politicisation and the ‘humanitarian cartel’

Samir El Hawary, of the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), has been researching the politics of aid and the effects of counter-terrorism policies on the delivery of aid

When discussing issues of humanitarian space in Somalia, most aid workers emphasise the increasing ‘politicisation of aid’. I think it is quite important to unpack what politicisation actually means.

In general, NGOs and UN agencies in Nairobi will highlight three things. First, they usually mention acts by particular belligerents, for example, the actions of Al Shabaab and how they are trying to tax the delivery of aid, how they are not allowing organisations to scale up and how they are banning particular organisations from operating in the areas they control. They will also point to the actions of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and associated militias for putting up roadblocks and checkpoints from which they block aid and/or try to take a cut.

Strategic integration of UN

Second, they will point to UN integration. In Somalia, since 2008, there has been an increasing push within the UN to integrate its various components, including the humanitarian, towards the overall objective of consolidating peace in the country. This has mainly focused on integration at the strategic level rather than more structural integration, which basically means that the Humanitarian Coordinator and OCHA remain separate from the UN political mission – UNPOS. This has been designed specifically to safeguard humanitarian space, but in the last year or so there has been a push from various individuals in New York to push for greater structural integration in Somalia.

In response, NGOs have resisted and have developed a strong advocacy campaign, highlighting the negative effects this politicisation of aid could have on their access and staff security.

If structural integration goes ahead, they have threatened to disassociate themselves from UN coordination mechanisms.

Third, stakeholders point to the existence of counterterrorism laws in various countries, such as the US, UK and Australia, that seek to criminalise the provision of material support to terrorist groups. The interpretation of material support has been broadened so that it could include humanitarian relief and even advice or direct advocacy on international humanitarian law. This has created a fear among many humanitarian organisations operating in areas controlled by Al Shabaab as they are a designated terrorist group.

Donors have reacted by curtailing funding when their partners cannot provide guarantees that no aid will be diverted to designated groups or individuals. In 2009, USAID withdrew US\$50 million of its funding to south central Somalia. This politicisation of aid, in which organisations are also required to provide details of their partners to donor governments, is deemed to be affecting trust with local communities and is fuelling accusations that organisations have ulterior motives and are spies.

Something that strikes me from this discourse is how most aid workers point all the problems to external factors: belligerents, UN integration and counterterrorism laws. There is very little reflection on the internal, ie what is it about the nature of the humanitarian system that might be impacting access in Somalia?

High walls and barbed wire

When we discuss the humanitarian system, it seems the word purity comes to mind. Humanitarian organisations that lack power, that operate in conflict zones against the odds, armed only with their humanity. But, in reality, the humanitarian system is an important source of power, particularly when you compare it to the weak governments that exist in conflict contexts, such as the TFG in Somalia.

In fact, you could argue that the humanitarian system is actually a form of competing sovereignty. For example, a report on UNHCR’s care and maintenance model found that the organi-

sation was often viewed as a surrogate state, with the refugee and IDP camps as their territory; the beneficiaries as their citizens; their aid projects as the provision of public services; and local ownership, community participation and gender equality as their ideologies. This sovereignty also has a physical manifestation, which increasingly looks like a fortified aid compound. Those standing outside these compounds, seeing the high walls, the barbed wire, the armed guards, may be forgiven if they feel the system is actually quite exclusive – a far cry from the principles of humanity, solidarity, volunteerism and integration with communities.

The humanitarian system has also undergone some changes that further this exclusion. It has become increasingly centralised. Despite claiming to be working on the basis of shared objectives or on universal values, there are a handful of NGOs that actually dominate. According to ALNAP's State of Humanitarian System Report, six of the largest NGOs account for approximately 60 percent of all NGO staff and 40 percent of operational expenditure worldwide.

In a roundtable discussion we organised earlier this year, this was referred to as a 'humanitarian cartel'. We have six organisations dominating the industry and, whilst they place significant emphasis on partnerships and local ownerships, in practice they tend to assimilate partners and co-opt local NGOs. In conversations with many local NGOs, it is striking how much they adopt the language and buzzwords of international organizations, rather than vice versa.

Government funds

The system has become increasingly governmentalised. The vast majority of humanitarian expenditure is provided by governments – over US\$90 billion over the last ten years – with the

ratio between private and public contributions widening. In that regard, the term non-governmental organisation becomes a bit of a misnomer, with most NGOs dependent on government funds.

The system is also westernised. The sector claims to adhere to universal values, but the largest 29 NGOs, with the exception of two, have their HQ in North America or Western Europe. Equally, the 16 largest donors, which for count for 90 percent of government humanitarian expenditure, are all western except for Japan.

In my opinion, some of the problems of politicisation stem from these trends and characteristics, linked to the way the system itself is organised and operates. Al Shabaab could perhaps be forgiven for seeing the system as an extension of western power, something they find hostile and reject. The paradox, however, is that despite the system appearing from the outside as a considerable form of sovereignty and power, internally it is actually very weak. It consists of a complex array of networks, with different players and different understandings of what humanitarian action is and which principles should guide its action. Furthermore, there is no governing or overarching authority that ensures adherence to common standards. So, whilst agreements are made in practice to ensure access – for example red lines in Somalia – adherence is patchy and weak.

The fact that Somalia is the context where humanitarian needs are most severe, but also the place where the system is finding it hardest to cope (most actors are not based in the country), is perhaps a sign of a system in decline. The implication is that alternative actors will emerge that can gain more acceptance, such as the OIC and the Turkish government in Somalia, marginalising the more formal humanitarian system.



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Most of the issues discussed in this series of publications were first explored at the discussion evenings arranged by MSF UK. They cover matters of continuing concern to the humanitarian community and prompt questions to which there are no easy answers.

All views expressed in the Dialogue series are those of the authors, and are not necessarily representative of the organisations for which they work. We have asked the authors to give their personal perspectives and thus begin a debate.

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