

Access Challenges and Impediments to Aid Delivery in Somalia

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Background

Somalia has been a recipient of humanitarian aid ever since the World Food Program and UNHCR started to deliver food and shelter to Ogadeni refugees after the 1978 war with Ethiopia. Since then, humanitarian assistance has been a constant feature of Somalia's relations with the international community. For example, even the 1992 U.S. military intervention in the country was prompted by pleas from aid agencies to protect food aid in a turbulent and famine-hit Mogadishu after the fall of the Siad Barre regime.

For the last two decades, Somalia has been in a continuous state of crisis and chaos because of an unending civil war and cyclical droughts. The role of aid agencies in saving lives and alleviating human suffering in the midst of ongoing violence and food shortages has continued to be critical for the people of Somalia. Somalia is heavily dependent on foreign aid and aid to Somalia from the UN and other agencies (USAID and WFP) amounted to more than US\$1 billion in 2009 and over US\$800 million in 2010.¹

In recent years Somalia has increasingly become geopolitically significant in the Horn of Africa region as well as in global politics. With the designation of Al Shabaab as a 'terrorist' organization, piracy on the Indian Ocean and the advent of external actors such as the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and Ethiopian forces, instability in Somalia has gained more international attention than ever before. The country remains the regional epicenter affecting the political, security and humanitarian situation in its neighborhood.

This complex military and political situation has been compounded by the worst regional drought in 60 years. There have also been a large number of refugee flows across the Kenyan and Ethiopian border into and across the sea to Yemen. Although the 'end-of-transition' process

has put in place a new constitution and a new federal government, the civil war and foreign military intervention are far from over.

Impediments in Aid Delivery

Aid agencies have delivered assistance to Somali people for decades. Both development assistance and humanitarian aid have been critical for the survival of Somali society. Efforts to promote livelihood opportunities for the population have also been a key component of aid work. However, as insecurity increases and multiple emergencies (floods, famine and conflict) continue to impact various parts of the country, population displacement becomes the norm and the coping mechanisms of people further deteriorate. The result is that the level of assistance provided by aid agencies is dwarfed in comparison to the needs in the country.

The deteriorating security situation and shrinking access create further impediments to reaching the most vulnerable population in various regions of Somalia. The lack of meaningful and sustained access for aid agencies to deliver assistance to those most in need complicates the situation resulting in aid being concentrated in areas where access is possible, which primarily tend to be urban centers. Therefore, in this complex web of challenges on the ground, achieving sustainable and holistic solutions throughout Somalia, especially South-Central Somalia, remains difficult.

Some of the major field impediments for aid agencies can be summarized as follows:

1. **Worsening insecurity:** South-Central Somalia is the main theater of conflict as well as droughts and displacement. Many regions are still controlled by Al-Shabaab which has either banned aid agencies or put in place severe conditions and restrictions on aid work, which means that access is limited and confined to small secure pockets.
2. **The rise of mini-states:** Several semi-autonomous, state-like regional administrations have emerged in the country in addition to several militias controlling different parts of the region. Aid agencies have to negotiate access with a multitude of actors on the ground, which makes the process lengthy, cumbersome and frequently dangerous.
3. **High cost of delivering aid:** Insecurity and multiple administrations result in a much higher operational cost for humanitarian agencies. All stages of aid delivery—needs assessments, procurement, transportation and distribution—cost more in Somalia than

most other country contexts. Extra security measures also consume more resources than in any other emergency.

4. **Politicization and Humanitarian Principles:** There is a perception that the line between humanitarian and political processes has blurred. This creates operational complications for humanitarian agencies which are being seen as part of the political process. Therefore, the threat of targeting and other security concerns has increased. Sustained access, especially in Al Shabaab controlled areas, thus is a constant challenge.
5. **Misleading Perception of Security:** With Ethiopians, Kenyans and AMISOM forces working with Somali allies to secure areas and open access, mostly in urban areas, there is a perception that security in South and Central Somalia has improved. However, access remains dependent on the presence of these foreign forces which is unsustainable in the long run. The peace processes have not taken root locally. If the foreign militaries pull out of an area, the militants return and take control making aid agencies highly vulnerable.

Options for Somali Youth

Life continues despite the prevailing chaos, and the Somali population has to make dangerous choices in trying to cope with the situation and risking their lives for survival. The combination of the various factors listed above has eroded the coping mechanisms of communities and left individuals and households with limited and dangerous choices in the war torn country. One such option for the youth has been to get engaged in dangerous professions including militancy and piracy as an alternative source of livelihood in the absence of any meaningful employment options and earning opportunities.

Although statistics indicate that piracy off the coast of Somalia has decreased recently due to international patrols and use of armed personnel on vessels, militant activities remain strong. Piracy as an attractive option for youth is closely linked to the economic hardships and change in the Somali value system. The links between lack of economic opportunities and increasing criminality and militancy are clear — and are connected to the increasing food insecurity and decreasing livelihood opportunities for the youth.

In a war torn society, with high poverty and unemployment, the possibilities of getting cash, even if it means risking life, seems to be an attractive option for the youth. In such a situation criminality such as piracy and terrorism complement and supplement one another. The argument being, that the link between piracy and militancy and the lack of livelihoods for the Somali youth is undisputed.

What can be Done?

The prioritization of assistance packages particularly linked to livelihood programs require multi-year projects, sustained access and continued funding — all of which remain a challenge. Addressing some of the root causes of vulnerability is crucial in reducing militancy and breaking the cyclical nature of poverty.

The ongoing humanitarian interventions should incorporate resilience and livelihood-building components, especially targeting young girls and boys both in displacement areas and in vulnerable communities. For that, long-term commitment by agencies and donors is required. The focus should move away from short-term projects to a more comprehensive long-term plan.

Above all, reconciliation and peace-building is a precondition for addressing the vast humanitarian needs on a sustainable basis as well as setting in motion development processes to ensure employment and other means of earnings for the youth. Unless the political processes succeed in ending the conflict and creating a credible system of governance, humanitarian agencies will continue to face these impediments. Short-term assistance to the displaced and vulnerable population only dresses the wounds; in order to find solutions to chronic problems like militancy and piracy, the political actors must come together and resolve conflicts through peaceful means. Without that, humanitarian assistance in Somalia will reach only a limited number of people while the situation continues to worsen, pushing more desperate youth into a life of criminality and violence.

Endnotes

¹ Ahmed Warsame, Hussein “Role of International Aid and Open Trade Policies in Rebuilding the Somali State” 2012

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