Voices of the dispossessed

Displacement and peacebuilding in the Somali regions

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Displacement – the movement of people associated with severe disruption of security and livelihoods – is a common consequence of conflict, and raises several issues for peacebuilding. For the last twenty years the Somali regions have witnessed massive and chronic displacement of people – both internal and external. Yet the voices of the displaced often go unheard in both Somali-led and internationally-sponsored peace processes.

For a more detailed account, see A. Lindley (2009), Leaving Mogadishu: The War on Terror and Displacement Dynamics in the Somali Regions, MICROCON Working Paper, No. 15. Falmer: Institute of Development Studies

Populations on the move

Somalis’ security and livelihoods have been affected in different ways by state disintegration and political reconfigurations. Migration has been a common response. There have been multiple patterns and layers of movement. Some have been temporary and others more permanent, some acute and massive and others involving smaller numbers, but no less significant for those involved.

The distances people move can be small: some people have moved within conflict-ridden urban centres, navigating shifting socio-political geographies. A displaced woman in Hargeisa, for example, explains how her family had been displaced and dispossessed long before she left Mogadishu in 2008:

“We owned a small piece of land in Hodan neighbourhood but it doesn’t belong to us anymore. It was taken over by a Hawiye family and since we are Bantu we can’t go and claim it”.

Another common feature of displacement over the past two decades has been the movement of people between urban and rural areas as these respective territories have been fought over. Some city-dwellers faced with insecurity move to rural areas or other towns where they have family and clan connections, often returning if and when conditions permit. Nomadic pastoralists and other rural dwellers who are facing livelihoods and security problems often seek refuge with urban relatives or in peri-urban settlements.

Finally some people move much longer distances within the Somali regions, particularly to more stable areas of Puntland and Somaliland, as well as abroad.

During 2007 and 2008 a particularly dramatic period of displacement in south-central Somalia resulted from violent conflict between the Ethiopian-backed Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and armed groups originally linked to the Islamic Courts Union (ICU). Some two thirds of Mogadishu’s population abandoned the capital in this two-year period, many leaving for the first time. One of those who left the city explains why:

“I didn’t know what to do but I decided to keep running our business. I am considered a minority in Somalia, I am hamar aad. We are successful in business but we are an easy target for the Hawiye and the Harti – and the Ethiopians, who seem to think we are Eritrean, I don’t know what gave them that idea … I was managing OK though, I was managing to take care of my son … But if you can’t go out to look for your daily bread it is a problem, if you can’t sleep at night peacefully it is a problem, if you can’t stop thinking of what might happen it is a problem – so you can see life in Mogadishu is a problem.”
And it isn’t just for a day or two, it’s constant, no rest, no day off. A situation that made me ask myself, am I going to make it and see my son grow up into a fine man or not? ... And as I am hamar aad I kept asking myself am I going to get raped or kidnapped by the Ethiopians? This was a change because two years ago I wasn’t worrying about my security or safety, but now I have to really worry about it seriously ... After all I saw, I realized I couldn’t go on like that any more. I decided to leave for a safer place.”

**Struggling to be heard**
Displacement is not only a side-effect of violence and political upheaval, but may also be orchestrated as a war strategy by armed actors seeking to control territory, resources and people. The presence of large numbers of displaced people or returnees can be evidence of the relative stability of the host location, but it can also create economic and political pressures that affect the consolidation of peace in post-conflict communities who are themselves still recovering.

Displaced people have a huge stake in peacebuilding and reconstruction processes, and yet they are routinely excluded from conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts for a variety of reasons.

Whatever the causes of their movement, displaced people can find themselves doubly disenfranchised. Their departure from their former place of residence often consolidates and reinforces the voice of powerful social actors in local peace processes, further marginalizing dissenting voices.

In places of refuge, both within the country of origin and without, displaced people often struggle to access resources, work and political representation. This has been the experience of many southerners in Puntland, Somaliland and Kenya.

In contrast, people who have gained citizenship further afield can have, and have had, a much stronger influence in peacebuilding processes. The influence of the Somali diaspora comes in many forms and has a range of effects. By remitting money to relatives and making business and property investments, they have had a significant impact on the economy of the Somali regions.

Often members of the diaspora are also politically engaged in different ways: in local clan matters, such as helping with compensation payments, funding community improvements, or funding local conflicts and peace processes; or backing major political actors, such as the political parties in Somaliland, members of the TFG parliament, or Al Shabaab. Meanwhile, people living in refugee camps and settlements in neighbouring countries can also sometimes be drawn into the dynamics of violence, providing a source of recruits and support for armed parties.

Transnational elites have financial clout and are a major voice in Somali politics. This is increasingly recognized by international organizations engaged in the Somali regions, as typified by the series of ‘letters to the Somali diaspora’ issued by the UN Secretary-General’s Special Representative to Somalia, Ahmedou Ould Abdallah.

Attempts to involve displaced people as stakeholders in peacebuilding processes are important and must be welcomed, but such initiatives must come with an awareness of the risks of privileging transnational elite voices at the expense of more marginal people both in the Somali regions and in the diaspora.

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