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The Scarcity of Land in Somalia

Natural Resources and their Role in the Somali Conflict

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Natural Resources
and their Role in the Somali Conflict

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The responsibility for contents and views expressed in this *Occasional Paper* lies entirely with the author

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Introduction

In the past years, Somalia has become the most prominent example of state-failure in Sub-Saharan Africa. It is important to note, however, that not the entire country is plagued by the breakdown of civil and state order. Quite on the contrary, parts of Somalia seem to be better off now than twenty years ago. In the northwestern part of Somalia, in the former British protectorate of Somaliland, a new political system was established following the proclamation of independence in 1991. The Republic of Somaliland, though not (yet) recognized internationally, has since managed an impressive transition towards democracy, reaching a preliminary climax with first democratic parliamentary elections in September 2005. In the northeastern part of Somalia, Puntland declared its autonomy within Somalia in 1998 in what led to a phase of relative peace and stability. Somalia today is a highly fragmented country, but much of the fighting and instability commonly associated with Somalia is concentrated in the south, and particularly around Mogadishu and in the Lower Shabelle and Jubba valley.

The conflict in Somalia has drawn academic attention in various ways. The majority of the academic research has focused on the dynamics of state failure, foreign military intervention, and clan structures. The scarcity of natural resources, in particular of land, however, has played a significant role in fostering conflict and in the collapse of the government in 1991 and has drawn significantly less scholarly attention. On the one hand, pastoral societies have regularly crossed the border into neighboring Kenya and Ethiopia, raising the threat of possible spill-overs. On the other hand, the scarcity of land has fueled inter-clan rivalries, especially when specific clans have had access to government resources and posts, while others have been marginalized and not represented in the country's political landscape. A historical perspective, as proposed by this Occasional Paper, might illuminate one of the underlying roots of conflict and state failure and might also help address central problems to conflict resolution in Somalia. It is the thesis of this Paper that in the fertile riverine areas of southern Somalia, natural resources and especially land have become a key driver of armed conflict. By looking at the current conflict from a historical perspective and by considering core issues such as access to land more closely, bottom-up approaches in conflict resolution might be developed on a broader basis and in the end be more effective in a country that is still best described as a pastoral society. The north of the country has experienced a phase of relative political stability. Here again, a historical perspective might explain the success the north has had in contrast to the south. In northwestern Somalia, which was a British protectorate, the British applied their policy of indirect rule allowing clan structures to remain intact. The Italians on the other hand, who colonized the south, tried to actively undermine them. As the focus of this Paper is to explain current violence in Somalia, it will exclusively focus on southern Somalia.

In trying to describe the role of natural resources and the impact of the Barre dictatorship on local land use and traditional ways of resolution of conflicts over land, this Paper describes the traditional conflict resolution system in the first section before describing the role of land and the state's politics' impact on land use. Finally, some preliminary conclusions and policy recommendations will be drawn.

Traditional conflict resolution in the clan-based society of Somalia

The roots of the Somali conflict have been traced back by scholars to two fundamental causes: clan-dynamics and warlordism. In the past, these phenomena were analyzed as being either mutually exclusive or were dismissed as non-convincing when only one of the two processes was analyzed. Ioan M. Lewis for instance, who has conducted some of the most influential research on Somalia, was criticized for his clan-based explanation of the Somali conflict, as Somali society has historically been based on clan-lineages and nonetheless managed to survive nearly thirty years of independence.[1] Clanism, however, is still very important to understand the conflict in Somalia. It is important to note however that neither warlordism nor clanism are the single reason for the political unrest in the country. The missing link in most accounts of the crisis in Somalia is the role of natural resources, which is at the center of the armed conflict. Only if their role is taken into account, can the formation of warlordism and the role of clans be understood to their full extent. Conflicts over natural resources in Somalia are by no means a new phenomenon. Historically, clans and subclans have often fought over the use of resources such as land or water. But in the absence of state authority, parties to the conflict have often reverted to traditional forms of conflict resolution, using what could be described as chieftain diplomacy. The present extent in the use of violence, however, is unprecedented even in Somalia and a direct result of the political developments since 1977, the beginning of the Ogaden-War. In order to understand the role of natural resources as a source of conflict in the Somali setting and the impact the state's politics have had after 1977, it is indispensable to explain how society dealt with such conflicts traditionally.

As Somalis share a common history (Arab origin), a common language (Somali), and a common religion (Sunni Islam), many observers and scholars during much of the 1950s and 1960s believed that Somalia had a great potential to become a strong nation-state, perhaps one of the strongest on the African continent (Davidson, 1975; Kibble, 2001). But even at the height of its power, Somalia's political landscape was determined by clan-politics. The society is split along clan-lines, and clans are themselves split into various subclans and subsubclans. The core unit of this lineage system is the so called *dia*-paying group[2] that usually consists of a few hundred or a few thousand Somalis (Kivimäki, 2001; Lewis, 1998). The size of these groups is determined by environmental and economic conditions, since much of Somalia's economy is based on livestock. Somali pastoralists live with their cattle and move their herds whenever necessary to regions where water and food are available. As water resources were scarce and pastoralists had an economic interest in raising big herds, clans and subclans were often competing over the same resources. Hence, conflicts over arable land and water are quite common in Somali history, even when state structures existed. In this pastoral system, traditional conflict mediation is a vital part of civil life. Conflicts between two clans were usually mediated by clan-elders, who were trying to balance the different interests. A conflict between two men from different clans customarily caused a conflict between the two respective clans. Such a conflict could easily turn into a war between the belligerent factions if clan elders were unable to discuss conditions for

1 Kinship and clanism-based explanations came under pressure most prominently by Compagnon, 1998.

2 The term *dia*-paying group literally means blood compensation. A group is held responsible for each offence conducted by one of its members.

peace. In their mediating efforts, clan elders collected all available information about the conflict and after obtaining all accessible data, a council of elders decided whether to initiate relocation of the clan or to dispatch a delegation to foster peace. This customary mediation system implied that clan elders had to enjoy immunity from hostile action and rested on the belief that clan elders' legislation was binding and that a sensible balance of power was to be maintained at all times. It was thus a system in which not power, but respect and reciprocity were the core values.

This traditional system of conflict resolution came under stress when Siyad Barre staged one of Africa's first successful coup d'états. Barre fostered the national integration in the early years of his reign by bringing all major clans into the political arena. Even on a cultural level, did he challenge the traditional clan-structure. When the regime adopted its ideology of scientific socialism, Somalis had to refer to their kins not by traditional titles, but by comrade (Ssereo, 2003). The program of scientific socialism, however, could only superficially mask historical clan structures. Clan lineages remained largely untouched and clans residing in the interior of the country—particularly clans that raised cattle and regularly moved to grazing sides in neighboring Ethiopia or Kenya—were never reached by the program. In light of the initial progress in national development that was being made under the auspices of the Barre-regime, it was a common impression among scholars that the state, or rather, a sense of national identity was slowly but perhaps lastingly to replace clan-identities in what would lead to a modernization of the entire Somali society. Following the devastating Ogaden-War in 1977/78, the power of Siyad Barre in particular and of the state in Somali affairs in general eroded. An economic crisis was inevitable and with the apparent failure to unite all Somalis in a single state, the legitimacy of the Barre-regime came into question. The war had a significant impact on Somali society in two important ways. First, with state authority declining, the role of the clan as the most influential body in the daily life of ordinary Somalis again increased and the *dia*-paying group as the smallest entity within a clan was restored as the basic social unit of Somali society. Second, Barre switched sides in the Cold War. After the Ogaden-War, Somalia moved into the Western camp after having been a Soviet satellite since 1969. Although he had initiated a development policy within the framework of scientific socialism after his coup, his major focus after the war was simply clinging on to power and the program of scientific socialism was subsequently abandoned. But with resources becoming scarce and the regime no longer being able to satisfy the demands of all pressure groups and an economic crisis looming, competition over state resources was on the rise. In an effort to strengthen his position, Barre rested his power nearly entirely on the loyalty of what was known as the MOD-alliance, the Marehan, Ogaden, and Dhulbahante clans that were all affiliated with him through his kins (Reno, 2003, p. 18). This selection of privileged and favored clans led to the alienation of major clans from the regime, such as the Hawiye or Isaaq, and even more importantly to the alienation of clans from each other. It consequently, it culminated in the regime's politics of arming particularly loyal clans. This process has fostered clan-based fragmentation and particularization of Somali society as it is aptly described by a 2005 World Bank study. "Clan identities are not the basis for conflict; rather their deliberate manipulation creates and exacerbates divisions (p. 15)." Conflicts over land—the heart of the conflict in Southern Somalia—turned violent because the traditional conflict mediation system was corrupted by Barre's power politics. Historically, clan legislation helped to avoid open warfare among belligerent clans and created a fragile peace when conflicts over land arose. This system, as pointed out, rested on traditional norms such as respect and

reciprocity rather than power or justice. The Barre regime politics of favoring some clans over others inevitably undermined this traditional system and conflicts over land turned violent.

Land as a natural resource and its role in the Somali civil war

In attempting to regulate the agricultural economy of Somalia, the regime of Siyad Barre in 1975 introduced a new land registration law, which was designed to legislate land allocation and legalize inherited claims by a registering process. But instead of simply legalizing the claims of local clans or peasants, all land was considered as previously unclaimed and state property. The state suddenly emerged not only as the center of politics but also as the center of economic activity (Bakonyi, 2006, p. 101). Most local farmers, however, who had inherited the land from their ancestors or were given land by local clan elders simply could not afford the expansive bureaucratic process of registering their claims with the authorities, hence making their claims practically illegal. As might have been hoped, the government did not respond to this problem by altering the process or giving local tenants more rights. Even in cases where local farmers managed to raise the money necessary to register their land, competing claims by more influential civil servants, businessmen or politicians of the Marehan, Ogaden, and Dhulbahante-clans often prevailed. Here in general, Somalia might serve as an example of land tenure reform in Africa as ist should not be carried out. Contending claims made local land rights less secure for local smallholders and turned the Somali land reform from a titling program in essence into a redistributive land reform at the expense of local smallholders.[3] Instead of making land rights secure, the reform fostered a system of unjust and exploitative social structures.

A further and more practical problem arose from the inability of many local tenants to properly identify their land; the use of mathematical items such as hectare was simply uncommon to many of them (Helander, 2003, pp. 61-63). The emerging pattern was that registered landlords and local tenants laid claim to the same piece of land. The local population, however, had no legal course of action once claims had been registered. Another motivation for not registering their land was local customary tradition. As pointed out above, conflicts were traditionally mediated, a system that worked as long as the state did not interfere. Hence, smallholders lacked motivation to register their land as long as a local consensus existed in which the traditional system served their interests. As long as they did not perceive state intervention as a danger to their claims, they had no motivation to challenge their traditional customs of land use by participating in a land reform that would put their claims in jeopardy. Robert E. Smith (2004) points out:

> "A title is a legal instrument that is worth no more or less than the quality of guarantee that the instrument's guarantor offers. One form of guarantee may prejudice another. For example, obtaining a title might alienate a smallholder from the local polity that backs customary land rights, thus making the title actually less secure" (p. 213).

The situation was even more severe for those who did not only farm, but also or exclusively raised cattle. Somalia in large parts is a livestock economy and herds had to be moved according to seasons or available land. Frequent droughts made mobility a key

[3] As Borras Jr. pointed out, land rights mean what the claimant can make of it, with or without the support of state institutions (2006, pp. 126, 130).

factor in economic survival and as a result of the land registration law, the most valuable land was concentrated in the hands of businessmen or civil servants from Mogadishu. Pastoralists who lacked close ties to the political scene in the capital found it difficult to find places where they could move their herds to. Many herders moved to grazing lands in neighboring Kenya in what led to strained relations between Nairobi and Mogadishu, a problem amplified by overgrazing in Somalia proper (Molvær, 1991; Little, 2003b).

The second event that shaped the country's future and accelerated the process of land alienation was the devastating Ogaden-War which erupted in 1977. The Ogaden province belonged to Ethiopia, but was inhabited mostly by Somalis. The Somali elite had been advocating the unification of all Somalis in a single state since its independence, calling for the 'liberation' of Somalis in the Ethiopian Ogaden, the Kenyan Northern Frontier District, and parts of Djibouti, an ideology referred to as the 'Greater Somalia'. Shortly after Ethiopia's emperor Haile Selassi was ousted by a coup d'etat and the country afterwards switched sides and became a Soviet ally, Barre, himself a Soviet ally at that time, considered the turmoil in the neighboring country as a window of opportunity to incorporate the Ogaden into Somalia and in doing so tighten his grip on the country and enhance the legitimacy of his rule by expanding Somalia's influence and uniting Somalis. Despite initial successes, the Ethiopian military regime—the *Dergue*—managed to win Soviet support and, with the help of Cuban troops and Soviet military aid, finally defeated the Somali forces. With defeat in the Ogaden, Barre's popularity declining, an economic crisis at home due to inflation, the Ogaden-War, the regime buying military equipment, as well as a livestock ban on Somali cattle by Saudi-Arabia in 1983, the regime reverted to an old-fashioned politics of *divide et impera* along clan lines. The defeat in the Ogaden, hence, brought the seeds of war back home. The regime that had never found a way to participate in the wealth generated by local businessmen from livestock and khat export, now considered the land resources as a primary tool to reward political loyalty.[4] The resource politics that emerged allowed for the members of the political elite to raise revenues and political weight in advance to gain control of the resources they would later claim (Humphreys, 2005, pp. 509-13).

The economic marginalization of clans already residing in the fertile riverine areas of the Lower Shabelle and Jubba valleys is particularly instructive, when considering how the regime of Siyad Barre used the land resource as a means of its domestic power politics. The Geedo region, located along the northern part of the Jubba River, for instance, is extremely dry and hot, but due to its climate, the region belongs to the few places where the tsetse-fly cannot survive. Animal husbandry, hence, was more productive and the families belonging to the Rahanweyn clan that were residing in this region had historically been considered relatively rich. While the Rahanweyn settled on the eastern bank of the Jubba, the western bank was inhabited by members of the Darood clan who commanded much more influence in Somali politics. Environmental pressures finally led the Rahanweyn to develop an irrigation system whereas the Darood responded to that pressure by regular incursions into the region occupied by the Rahanweyn using their political and military dominance (Merryman, 2003). These conflicts were no longer mediated by clan elders or clan legislations; they quickly turned violent and those clans marginalized by the government were often on the loosing end. Other developments of

[4] The regime used the money of development aid in a similar fashion. Barre gave government posts to allies in order to enable them to funnel the development money into their hands. The state here again was the center of an informal political economy (Webersick, 2006, p. 1467; Hyden, 2006).

the 1970s and 1980s put additional stress on local tenants. Population growth, drought, land speculation, and a rapid urbanization of Somali cities led to an increase in demand of agricultural products and as a result, rural land became more valuable during the 1970s and 1980s. Land speculation became a lucrative source of income. Here again, the case of Somalia can serve as an example of how population growth and a high population density in relation to limited cropland can contribute to potential conflict, a conflict that might even become inevitable if the regime uses the scarce land resources to buy political loyalty (Urdal, 2005, p. 421).

The land registration law contributed to the emerging political economy of Somalia where some clans were privileged at the expense of others following the devastating Ogaden-War and fostered the breakdown of the economy that was still based primarily on agriculture. The final breakdown of the state did not solve the problems for the local communities. Quite on the contrary, the situation deteriorated even further. Militias from Mogadishu, mostly from the Hawiye clan, penetrated the fertile regions around the city and looted farms. The ensuing clashes between Hawiye and Darood militias devastated the region in what led to the worst humanitarian crisis and famine the country experienced in recent decades. Even the international intervention by the UNITAF (United Task Force, led by the United States) and UNOSOM (United Nations Mission in Somalia) forces could not stop the militias and protect the citizens of the Lower Shabelle and Jubba valleys (Cassanelli, 1997) but turned the region into the center of a developing warlord-economy. Local resources were plundered and the peasants in the area were exploited (Höhne, 2007, p. 87). The massive displacement of citizens from Mogadishu put another burden on the region. Land was now claimed not only by local villagers and by those who registered their claims, but also by militias and warlords who made the land their primary tool to finance their war efforts. The region thus turned into the center of an emerging war economy (Besteman, 2003, p. 45). Against this backdrop, it can be concluded that whereas during the period that led to the collapse of the state, two groups laid claim on the most fertile land of Somalia, the collapse of the state brought another group into the arena and hence worsened the situation. Moreover, whereas the two groups during the initial phase of the conflict used the state institutions and customary law to support their claims, the breakdown made these obsolete and the groups had to revert to violent means to enforce their respective claims.

Conclusion

From 1977 to 1991, the political elite of Somalia was drawn from a few major clans. Other clans were marginalized at the same time and political loyalty was ensured by allocating land as a resource of revenue to loyal clans. In contrast to other parts of Somalia, the southern region and particularly the riverine areas of the Lower Shabelle and Jubba valley are very fertile and certainly the one single most important natural resource the country has to offer. It is no coincidence that much of the political turmoil and conflict after the Ogaden-War and much of the fighting after the breakdown of the central order centered in this region of Somalia. James Merryman (2003) convincingly summarized the evolving pattern:

> "The natural environment dictates what types of economic activities are practicable (livestock versus agricultural production), but the sociological environment determines who practices which economic activity where and with what degree of intensity. Politics, both contemporary national and traditional local-level, have played an overriding role in the area's patterns of access to resources (p. 77)."

Here, Somalia is an outstanding example for patterns of conflict centered on natural resources. Such conflicts are determined by

two interlinked factors: the allocation of revenues and the certainty with which revenues are distributed (Herbst, 2001, p. 5). The allocation of land as a source of revenue is usually not driven by economic considerations, but by the politics of clientalism. In Somalia, clans residing in the area were marginalized first by an inappropriate land registration law and later by a dictatorial regime that used their land to buy political loyalty, a pattern that can be found in other conflict situations as well. The second important factor was the sustainability with which political loyalty had to be bought. Land was simply in short supply and could not be allocated indefinitely, which underlines that land is less valuable as a resource to buy political loyalty as for instance, extractable resource. Incursions into the riverine areas put the traditional production systems in Somalia under pressure. Hence, potential revenues were shrinking. Shrinking revenues, however, are not only a problem in Somalia. Whenever land is distributed in the interests of specific clients instead of local stakeholders, production decreases and the remaining land becomes even more valuable and hence interesting for politically motivated redistribution. With an economic crisis marked by hyper-inflation developing, the allies of Somalia's dictator Siyad Barre consequently demanded more resources. At a time when more donor countries were reconsidering their development policy and were about to adjust it to compliance with standards of good governance and human rights, less development aid was allocated to Somalia. In addition, while the regime was losing its control over large parts of the Jubba valley due to increased guerilla activity, the regime slowly ran out of money to ensure the loyalty it needed for its very survival.[5] Again, similar patterns may be disclosed in other states that experienced the breakdown of state order, as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The breakdown of civil order accelerated the process even further. Actors that were favored by the Barre regime emerged as the dominant political players and many of them used their privileged positions acquired between 1977 and 1991 to perpetuate their power by turning into so-called warlords. Somalia, as the Paper has shown, serves as an ideal example of how misguided and non-sustainable resource governance can undermine the prospects of development not only in Somalia, but in other countries as well.[6] The international community eager to resolve such conflicts, so far concentrated on these players in virtually every peace process, but failed to address the scarcity of land or other resources as a major reason for conflict and the suffering of the marginalized groups. It is therefore worth summarizing how and why this issue needs to be addressed:

- **Resource conflicts over land are especially difficult to tackle.** In contrast to other resource conflicts, land is not a traditional extractable resource and it is important to note that it has so far not attracted as much academic attention as other conflict resources such as oil or water. As previous research has shown, different resources can have a different impact on civil war (Schure, 2007, pp. 10, 16; Franke, Hampel-Milagrosa, and Schure, 2007, p. 14). The case of Somalia, however, supports some basic assumptions and general conclusions on the impact of natural resources on civil war. First, better resource governance could have averted the outbreak of civil war; the dependence on a single resource has increased conflict intensity and duration (Schure, 2007, p. 25).

5 In 1989 more than 70 percent of Somalia's annual operating budget was financed directly through foreign aid (Little, 2003, p. 96).

6 Resource governance has been aptly defined by Franke, Hampel-Milagrosa, and Schure as "the way in which governments regulate and manage the use of natural resources and the redistribution of costs and revenues deriving from those resources (2007, p. 10)."

Second, better resource governance certainly could have reduced the duration of the conflict.

- **Conflicts over land have been rising since the 1970s.** Given the deteriorating environmental conditions in the Horn of Africa, it can be expected that the region will come under increasing ecological stress in the upcoming years. Against this backdrop, there will be reduced arable land available in the medium-term in the entire region, increasing the potential for violent competition over the remaining land in Eastern Africa. Policy responses therefore need to be formulated not only for Somalia, but for nearly all countries in the Horn of Africa, underscoring the need to revive the Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD) (Dehéz, 2007b).
    - **The problem of uncertain ecological prospects will get worse due to changing power-dynamics in Somalia.** As the traditional conflict mediation system rested on respect and reciprocity, the marginalization of some clans put this system in jeopardy. This has had two major impacts on the country. First, sharing resources such as pastures is on the decline, giving way to inefficient use of the country's natural resources. Second, conflicts over land can now easily escalate into inter-clan rivalries. With no state order, local governments or traditional conflict mediation system, conflicts over arable land and pastures turn into inter-clan warfare that leads to the displacement of clans and/or subclans. For security to return to the region in the long-run, increasing efficiency of land use and preventing overexploitation is of vital importance.
    - **Institutional rebuilding at the local level.** As outlined by previous research, regulation can only be as effective when implemented on the local level (Franke, Hampel-Milagrosa, and Schure, 2007, p. 26). Formulating policy responses, however, will be far more difficult in Somalia than in other countries, as there is currently no political administration in place that could guide the transition process. Identifying actors at the local level that could be supported, is the first and perhaps most difficult step at present. It has to be highlighted, nevertheless, that even the traditional conflict mediation system, which rested on the respect clan-elders commanded has had its shortcomings. It could only mediate conflicts over land once they arose; it could, however, not prevent them. The system, therefore, needs to be developed beyond traditional conflict mediation systems. Institutional rebuilding at the local level is indispensable and lessons can be drawn from similar challenges tackled in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Aust and Jaspers, 2006, p. 128).

Today, the south of Somalia is again the center of violent conflict. Recent fighting between Ethiopian forces and the armed forces of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and insurgents in Mogadishu have displaced 200,000 to 300,000 citizens of the capital. Most of them have fled to the riverine areas of the Lower Shabelle and Lower and Middle Jubba valley, regions where militias from the Hawiye clan have established a lasting presence since the breakdown of the Somali state, as pointed out above (Menkhaus, 2007, pp. 358, 374). It is certainly no coincidence that all peace processes have so far failed to address the political fragmentation along clan lines as well as the role natural resources have played therein. The most recent peace process that culminated in the formation of

the Transitional Government has favored the Darood clan and has marginalized the Hawiye. The government itself is split between the president Abdullahi Yusuf and the Prime Minister Mohammed Gedi, who resigned in late 2007. Both have signed contracts with different firms over the exploration and exploitation of the same, but yet unproven, oil reserves. The potential of oil might add to the natural wealth of the country, but it will almost certainly be another source of political fragmentation and violence. Taking the example of Somalia this study set out to explore how conflicts over land affect civil wars and how they could be addressed.

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Facilitating Peace and Development through Research, Advisory services, Training

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BICC seeks to assist in preventing violent conflict and hence contribute to their constructive transformation.

While disarmament frees resources, which can be employed in the fight against poverty, conversion allows for a targeted, best possible reuse of these resources.

Our work

Peace and development: BICC offers advisory services on demobilization and reintegration (DD&R). It evaluates demobilization and reintegration processes as well as peacebuilding tools, studies the role of the security sector, researches on the nexus between development and peace as well as early warning systems for crises.

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