

If Mayors Ruled Somalia

Beyond the State-building Impasse

By Ken Menkhaus

This Policy Note critically assesses the strengths and weaknesses of two competing school of thoughts on state-building and international aid in Somalia - the "Marshall Plan" approach and the "Social Contract" approach. It also proposes a third option - a transitional strategy that includes more support to municipalities as the source of the most practical, legitimate, and effective formal governance in Somalia.

Over the course of a single week in April 2014, two Nordic diplomats publicly voiced polar opposite views on how external actors can best support the critically important task of state-building in Somalia. Both criticized what they saw as flawed assumptions and analysis behind "conventional" approaches to aid to Somalia, even as they disagreed on their own interpretations of failed aid and state failure in Somalia. Their positions capture a long-running debate on the issue, and one that is overdue for resolution.

The "Marshall Plan" approach

In an interview with the Institute for Security Studies, Jens Mjaugedal, Special Envoy of Norway to Somalia, called for the international community to recognize "battlefield realities" in Somalia and urged donors to release large-scale flows of aid to strengthen the dangerously weak Somali government. He criticized donors for pledging \$2.3 billion to Somalia's fledgling government as part of the "New Deal" Somali Compact and then failing to deliver after reported allegations of corruption, collusion, and mismanagement inside the government. The gist of his remarks was that a certain amount of



Somalia's municipalities are the most promising locations for good governance, basic service delivery, and law and order.
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diversion of funds was inevitable, but a small price to pay for jump-starting a besieged government that needs both to defeat a dangerous jihadi insurgency and deliver basic services to its people. According to this view, starving the government of foreign aid in its greatest hour of need plays into the hands of the militant group al-Shabaab.

Mjaugedal's views represent the "Marshall Plan" school of thought on Somalia – the belief that urgent security imperatives require a massive infusion of financial, technical, and military support to "prime the pump" of the collapsed government and win legitimacy from the Somali people by delivering jobs, security, and basic services. State weakness is at the core of the crisis; therefore the goal of strengthening the central government overrides all other priorities. Gradualist approaches, from this perspective, will doom the current government to failure and

perpetuate the conflict trap it has been locked into for 25 years. The Norwegian government has acted on this position, providing \$30 million in direct budgetary support to the Somali government, despite concerns in some quarters that the money will be lost to corruption.

The "Social Contract" approach

On April 10, Finnish Minister for International Development H.E. Pekka Haavisto offered keynote remarks on a panel on Peacebuilding and State-building in the Horn of Africa at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington DC. Haavisto drew extensively on the Somali case to raise broader points about successful aid to fragile states. He argued that formulaic state-building approaches in fragile states have had little success globally -- even when they include massive amounts of aid -- because they privilege government capacity-building over local ownership,

government legitimacy, and trust-building. Trust in government is typically low after a long conflict, and processes by which new governments and constitutions are formed are often deeply contested. When fragile states lack legitimacy and the trust of their own people, rapid state-building efforts can actually work against rather than for peacebuilding, inspiring resistance from those who fear how state authorities will wield their new power.

Haavisto's talk represents the "social contract" school of thought on state-building in Somalia – the belief that successful state-building first requires a legitimate government, which in turn depends on greater local ownership of processes leading to the formation of new governments and constitutions, strong accountability mechanisms, greater public trust, and more responsive governments. From this view, government legitimacy must be earned, not bought.

In Somalia, donors embracing this view have tended to privilege peacebuilding over state-building, and have looked to support more local-level, inclusive, and organic forms of governance and representation. They have also been

more wary of government abuse of power and funding, and more conflict-sensitive to the impact of their aid in the country. In practice, this school of thought has tended to gravitate toward a "go-slow" approach to aid to the series of transitional governments in Somalia from 2000 to 2012, and in some cases has been more inclined to work around rather than through Somali governments with poor track records of accountability.

Both of these approaches can claim to be advancing aspects of the 2011 New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States.

Mjaugedal invokes the New Deal in his call for pledges of aid to be released to and through the government. Haavisto's position highlights the pledge of peacebuilding and state-building principles articulated in the Somali Compact – of accountability, inclusiveness, legitimacy, and justice, among others.

Political economy of state-building

Two aspects of the "Marshall Plan" argument are especially powerful. The first is the sense of urgency it conveys, especially with regard to the enduring threat posed by al Shabaab. However disappointing the Somali government has been, allowing it

to fail is simply not an option. The second is its analysis of the failure of Somali state-building as part of a pathological syndrome requiring transformational intervention to "break the cycle" of poor government performance, low legitimacy, and low government revenues.

But advocates of a Marshall Plan for Somalia fail to fully appreciate the political economy dimension of state-building and corruption in Somalia. For years, Somali political elites have embraced state-building as a lucrative project, but not an objective, exploiting the fact that Western counter-terrorism priorities have meant that donors cannot afford to allow the Somali state-building project to fail.

Somalia has for many years ranked at the very top of Transparency International's list of most corrupt states, with most state-building aid vanishing into private pockets. For some local actors, state weakness is the desired outcome, not a problem to be solved. A Marshall Plan approach to state-building can work when a government has the will but not the capacity to govern. When its leaders lack both capacity and political will, no amount of aid will succeed in strengthening the state, as the West's sobering experience in Afghanistan attests.

Slow pace of institution-building

Even if new Somali leaders can purge the government of its most corrupt elements – a hope that has been repeatedly raised and dashed over the past ten years -- the Marshall Plan approach faces another grim obstacle. One of political science's most unequivocal findings is that institution-building takes a very long time – at least a generation in the best of circumstances, and Somalia's circumstances are anything but ideal. "Priming the pump" of Europe's post-war economy via the Marshall Plan worked because those governments were already strong institutions. Somalia has been a completely



In Somalia, a number of towns and cities have since the mid-1990s attracted political leaders interested in producing results, not in diverting funds. Some of these towns have sported piped water systems, police forces, land title offices, regulatory systems for private sector utilities, and market committees.
Photo: Sven Torfinn/PANOS

collapsed state for 24 years. What this suggests is that a well-intentioned international effort to jump-start Somali state-building with transformational levels of aid will not yield expected results. With or without the \$2.3 billion in New Deal assistance, Somalia's government will remain weak and fragile for years to come.

Legitimacy matters

Many of the arguments associated with Haavisto's position are compelling, especially the recognition that capacity-building without a state-society social contract risks enflaming the conflicts actors are trying to resolve.

This approach also has powerful empirical evidence to support it – especially the example of Somaliland, where successful state-building and peacebuilding have been achieved through locally-owned processes and with very modest levels of government funding and foreign aid.

Until recently, Somaliland's government operated on annual budgets of only \$50 to \$80 million, most of which was generated from local taxes, not external aid. A Marshall Plan was not necessary to build a modestly functional government in Somaliland, and might have inadvertently undermined the Somaliland project had it been offered.

But the social contract approach has its weaknesses as well when applied to south-central Somalia. It is poorly equipped to address the deep-rooted problems of spoilers and the culture of corruption that has arisen among the political and business elites in Mogadishu, as well as the grave threats posed by al-Shabaab. Security and access are so poor in much of south-central Somalia that principles of inclusivity and local ownership are beyond the reach of a government that is under siege in its own compound. And divisions over representation, clan, political Islam, and federalism are still so intense

that any newly declared government or constitution will be deeply contested and will unavoidably have weak legitimacy in the eyes of many citizens.

In sum, a social contract between state and society in south-central Somalia may not be realistic in the short-term. Local leaders and foreign donors must understand that state-building in Somalia is the "art of the possible" and may have little choice but to work with flawed, contested governments of dubious legitimacy for the time being.

Under these circumstances, can any approach successfully support good governance in Somalia? What is needed in Somalia is a transitional state-building strategy – one that can help provide core government services to the people during the long, slow task of state-building. And that is where Somalia's municipalities can play a bigger role.

If mayors ruled Somalia

Greater support to Somalia's many municipalities can be justified on the grounds that they have been the site of some of the most effective, legitimate, and inclusive political performance in the country over the past two decades. As Benjamin Barber argues in his new book *If Mayors Ruled the World*, municipalities are where the most important basic government services are performed, usually efficiently and in a non-partisan way.

In Somalia, a number of towns and cities – Hargeisa, Boroma, Luuq Beled Weyn, and Jowhar, to name a few – have since the mid-1990s attracted political leaders interested in producing results, not in diverting funds. Some of these towns have sported piped water systems, police forces, land title offices, regulatory systems for private sector utilities, and market committees. At their best, they have been models of private-public partnerships and flexible, inclusive, hybrid governance. Many of the most dedicated and honest Somali political

leaders, both from the diaspora and in-country, have gravitated to mayoral roles rather than vie for positions in the national government.

There are other reasons why municipalities are an attractive target for external aid. Somali towns and cities are more likely to be places where multiple clans reside and do business, and hence have an interest in routinized social compacts to keep the peace. Accountability is stronger in most municipalities because mayors and town officials are working in close proximity to the citizens, and because they rely almost entirely on locally-generated tax revenues.

Problems associated with the slow pace of institution-building are less an issue because town administrations are usually small, as are the tasks they pursue. Cities and towns are also less encumbered by the vexing problems of territory and clan than are district, regional, and federal administrations. External support to municipal administrations is thus less likely to get bogged down in Somali debates over federalism and clannism. Because of its local nature, support to municipalities is compatible with both federal and centralist visions of the Somali state.

Community policing

Finally, support to municipalities in Somalia has at least some potential as a counter-terrorism and law enforcement measure. Most Somali law and order, and deterrence of crime and terrorism, is based on community policing, not the work of the police and security forces. When Somalis see themselves as stakeholders in a local polity, they are quite vigilant against threats to their community. Towns and cities engender a surprisingly strong sense of civic pride among Somalis, who will sometimes self-identify as residents of a city as much as with their lineage. Effective, legitimate, and inclusive municipalities can be a powerful social deterrent to criminal and terrorist activities.

This aspect of municipal governance should not be oversold – local polities are very vulnerable to heavily armed spoilers, whether in the form of warlords or jihadis, and community policing can be silenced by threats by al-Shabaab’s Amniyat network. Al-Shabaab’s re-emergence in some neighborhoods of Mogadishu in 2014 demonstrates the limits of municipal and district governance on hard security matters.

Not all Somali municipal authorities are legitimate, of course. Some appointed or self-declared mayors and district commissioners across the country are predatory militia commanders or corrupt leaders.

Mogadishu’s district leadership has been especially uneven on this count. Engagement will require case-by-case assessments, not templates.

Toward a transitional strategy

But Somalia’s municipalities have generally been the most promising locations for good governance, basic service delivery, and law and order. And many donor states feature exceptionally strong municipal governments themselves, and so have ample expertise from which to draw.

Supporting city administrations is not a substitute for state-building at the national and federal level, but

can be an important component of a transitional strategy designed to provide Somalis with essential government protection and services during the long process of national-level state-building. And support to municipalities honors the most powerful arguments made by both Mjaugedal and Haavisto – it is aid that can quickly and effectively support the provision of essential government services to the people, while encouraging greater local ownership and accountability.

It may be our best hope for advancing the principles and objectives of the Somali Compact under very difficult circumstances.



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