

Crisis and displacement in Somalia

Anna Lindley

Can displacement shocks offer opportunities to change the parameters of response to protracted refugee situations?

Somalia epitomises for many a situation of constant crisis, a 'black hole' of death and disaster undergoing a process of 'development in reverse'. Such images in a sense rob the Somali regions of the history of the last 20 years. It hides the realities of emerging sub-national political entities that have ensured a degree of civilian security in particular places at particular times. It misses the ways that people have adapted their behaviour and livelihoods to cope with insecurity and even to profit from the opportunities that conflict throws up.¹ Life has gone on, albeit in ways that outsiders often find hard to imagine.

However, the dominant narrative of constant crisis inside Somalia has, according to critical reflections by aid workers, fostered a kind of functional ignorance among humanitarian agencies of Somalia's shifting political landscapes and the political impact

of often poorly monitored aid distributions to internally displaced people. The overwhelming conception of the Somali situation in terms of an emergency has been misused as a justification for not learning lessons and for not thinking about the long-term consequences of compromises of humanitarian principles.²

Meanwhile, the protracted refugee situation in Kenya – the country that hosts the largest number of Somali refugees – is often characterised, like many protracted refugee situations, as chronic and static, with the refugees portrayed as passive people in limbo, warehoused in camps. While it is indeed true that the Somali refugee population remained fairly stable (in the region of 150,000) between 1999 and 2005, the reality is that the refugee situation has in fact been evolving, in terms of membership (with people moving back and forth from Somalia and onwards

to new countries), demography (as people are born and die and children grow up in exile), geopolitics (with dwindling donor funds, the hardening of security concerns in Kenya and Somalia becoming a theatre for the unfolding of the war on terror) and as refugees seek their own solutions (searching for a means of living beyond the structures of the official refugee regime and humanitarian assistance, often via clandestine relocation to urban areas or to other countries).

However, the international response to the problems faced by Somali refugees did stagnate, dominated by strategies for containment which stifle the life chances of large numbers of people in limbo for nearly two decades. The lack of political will from Kenya and other members of the international community has been a key reason for the failure of initiatives such as the Comprehensive Plan of Action for Somali Refugees³ in the mid 2000s.

Thus, the common narratives of the situation in the country of origin as one of permanent crisis and upheaval, and the refugee situation as one of protracted stasis, which can be challenged on closer analysis, seem to have shaped international responses in important ways. Recent events in the Somali regions throw some light on this. The violence following the ousting of the Islamic Courts and the arrival of the (then) Ethiopian-backed Transitional Federal Government (TGF) in 2007 prompted a massive displacement



Displaced woman and children at Sheikh Omar camp in Jowhar, Somalia.

shock. Against a background where it had been possible for people in Mogadishu to cope – to a certain extent – with urban insecurity, they then experienced a major upheaval, many turning to migration as a survival strategy. Whole neighbourhoods emptied as people sought refuge elsewhere in the Somali territories and abroad. *Prima facie* refugee arrivals in Kenya rocketed to a level not witnessed since the early 1990s, despite border closures and attempts by the Kenyan authorities to impede the arrival of refugees.

It is important to recognise this recent episode of mass displacement as an unmitigated human disaster, distinguishable in scale and nature from that which occurred in the years running up to it, rather than subsuming it in the narrative of constant crisis and protracted refugee situation. However, could such displacement shocks offer opportunities to change the parameters of humanitarian response?

Opportunity

Domestically, since 2006, the numbers of people in need of humanitarian assistance in south-central Somalia have soared, prompting aid workers to talk about ‘an emergency within an emergency’.⁴ With humanitarian agencies struggling more than ever to deliver assistance, circumstances may

be forcing strategic change. There are signs of a more reflective internal dialogue in the aid community, a willingness to engage in debate about humanitarian principles, compromises and innovations. After the hugely damaging US and Ethiopian involvement in south-central Somalia, it appears that the combination of increased media coverage, inauguration of a new president in Somalia and changing administration in the US may have opened up some space for a more constructive political engagement.

On the refugee front, while the increased caseload since 2006 has largely been dealt with within the existing refugee regime, the sheer numbers of people arriving may provoke innovation. For example, the need to allocate more land for refugee camps has forced UNHCR, government ministries and other UN agencies to engage with each other, in a way which has long been recommended as necessary for finding ways to overcome the problems of long-term refugees. If Kenya’s 2006 Refugees Act, which provides a clear institutional framework for refugees, were implemented properly, it could provide refugees with important rights, including the right to move within Kenya, allowing them openly to use their creativity and

energy to provide for themselves and benefit the host country.

Protracted displacement situations are basically the result of the lack of political will to resolve problems in the country of origin and to find solutions to refugees’ problems. Recent political upheavals and displacement shocks in Somalia should not be seen as more of the same old story to be responded to in the same way. Rather they must be recognised as a significant change, and it is important to explore what possibilities current circumstances may offer to change the parameters of international political and humanitarian response and create new opportunities for the displaced within and outside Somalia.

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1. See Anna Lindley (2009) http://www.microconflict.eu/publications/RWP15_AL.pdf
2. See Frans Bernard and Catherine-Lune Grayson (2009) and Erik Abild (2009) ‘Creating Humanitarian Space in Somalia’, MSc Dissertation, Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford.
3. See <http://tinyurl.com/SomaliaCPA2005>
4. Hassan Noor (2007) ‘Emergency within an emergency: Somali IDPs’ FMR 28 <http://www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR28/16.pdf>