

# Leaving Mogadishu

Researching the causes of displacement, 2007–2008



In 2007 to 2008, some two thirds of Mogadishu's population abandoned the city in the wake of intensified violence following the ousting of the Islamic Courts and the arrival of the (then) Ethiopian-backed Transitional Federal Government (TFG). Whole neighbourhoods emptied as people sought refuge elsewhere in the Somali territories and abroad. Confronted with often massive and precipitous population movements associated with violent conflict, there is an understandable tendency to accept macro-political explanations of the causes of migration: people fled civil war. And certainly, on one level, the question of why people have been leaving Mogadishu since 2006 has an obvious answer. But, on another level, many of the people leaving had lived their entire lives in one of the most insecure urban environments in the world, finding ways to negotiate daily dangers. To understand this exodus, and its future implications, we have to listen to how the conflict and other factors impinged on people's everyday lives, and how this changed over time.

The RSC has been working to develop a micro-sociological analysis of mobility in this specific episode in a protracted

conflict. This research is part of a bigger project on conflict and mobility within the EC-funded consortium MICROCON (A Micro-Level Analysis of Violent Conflict), and focused on people from Mogadishu seeking refuge in Somaliland, mainly Hargeisa, investigating one fragment of the complex picture of mobility in the Somali territories. From June to August 2008, with a team of research assistants (including two people originally from Mogadishu), we carried out 21 individual interviews and four focus groups, with people of a range of demographic, economic and clan characteristics. Combined with other sources, these accounts provide insights into out-migration from Mogadishu during this troubled period.

Participants described two key shifts in Mogadishu in recent years – the rise of the Islamic Courts, which for a short time brought the capital under a coalition administration and dramatically improved security, and the arrival of the TFG, which was followed by devastating violence between a fragmented, insistent insurgency and counter-insurgent response with little regard for civilian welfare, including indiscriminate bombardments of densely populated

neighbourhoods. This second shift – fuelled by the geopolitics of the war on terror – impinged on participants' varied configurations of capabilities and resources in several ways.

First, many people's human capabilities and resources were decimated as people lost family members when their homes were destroyed, when they took flight, or when they were shot by combatants or arrested. Several participants or their family members had experienced severe disability as a result of violence – including injuries from beatings and rape, loss of hearing, loss of limbs, and psychological problems. This had a huge effect on the emotional lives of individuals and families, as well as on their security and ability to pursue existing livelihood strategies. Second, loss of physical and financial resources – the wholesale destruction or confiscation/occupation of homes, business premises and stocks – was a major precipitating factor for some. While businesspeople had weathered previous crises by temporarily closing down, adapting activities or buying protection, many found it impossible to continue in 2007. Bakara Market, the biggest Somali market and the heart of Hawiye (the dominant clan family in Mogadishu) economic power, has continued to operate but was frequently the epicentre of battles. Meanwhile, physical and financial resources in some cases helped people to cope during turbulent times before they decided to leave, and ready cash significantly facilitated the process of migration. People often tried to convert their physical assets into cash, or place them in the care of others, before leaving Mogadishu.

Finally, but significantly, previous mechanisms of socio-political protection were weakened as patterns of political power in Mogadishu were dramatically reconfigured, exposing people to greater physical insecurity. This affected even prosperous families that had hitherto led relatively comfortable lives. For women, exposure to increased risk of rape often contributed to the decision to depart. For many people, the increased urban insecurity impeded their usual livelihood strategies as it became much riskier to move around the city. Meanwhile, aid workers and journalists were specifically targeted by militant groups and government forces.

The situation in Mogadishu remains volatile. Following the resignation of Abdullahi Yusuf, former president of the TFG, withdrawal of Ethiopian troops, and the inauguration of the moderate Islamic Courts' leader Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed as president, some of the internally displaced have reportedly



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returned in 2009 to Mogadishu. But the new president will have to navigate complex political challenges – including political entrepreneurs, clan tensions, extremist militant groups and international pressures – to secure peace in the city.

Detailed findings will be published shortly on the MICROCON website. I carried out the fieldwork as a visiting scholar at the Academy for Peace and Development in Hargeisa, and greatly benefited from the guidance of colleagues there. We are very happy to have secured a MICROCON-funded visiting fellowship for one of their senior researchers, Mohamed Hassan Ibrahim, to come to the RSC in 2009.

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