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# Questioning ‘drought displacement’: environment, politics and migration in Somalia

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The role of the recent drought in producing migration cannot be understood in isolation from human practices and past and concurrent political processes. The environmental dimensions of recent displacement prompt a series of policy challenges in relation to prevention, response and rights protection.

In 2011, a severe drought combined with intense political violence and general governance failure caused widespread hardship in south-central Somalia, with famine declared in parts of the territory. This crisis generated – and was exacerbated by – high levels of forced displacement, with around a quarter of the population displaced within the Somali territories and abroad in 2011.

Prominent in the political and media hype which ensued were references to ‘drought displacement’ as distinct from movements prompted by conflict and persecution but there are problems with this interpretation, both empirically and in terms of the policy responses it tends to support. In this case, severe structural violence and years of ongoing armed conflict strongly shaped the experience of drought by different groups in society, and whether they were forced to migrate or not.

## Environmental conditions, rural livelihoods and mobility

The Somali territories have an arid and semi-arid environment, and frequent episodes of drought, when rainfall is low for a prolonged period, are a major problem. Prevailing ecological conditions are critical to the rural activities – livestock rearing and crop production – which are a key component of the livelihoods of the majority of Somalis.<sup>1</sup> These livelihood systems are not static but crucially mediated by political dynamics and other human factors.

More than half the population are either pastoralists or agropastoralists, deriving

food and income from rearing livestock. Mobility is at the centre of their livelihood system; pastoralism is a nomadic or semi-nomadic activity, involving the seasonal concentration and dispersal of herders and their livestock according to the availability of forage and water in different places.

Most nomadic pastoralists have some urban-based kin, and some of the family may settle on the edge of town for part of the year, or move to urban areas on a temporary or more permanent basis to work or for schooling. These movements give rise to important flows and exchanges of basic supplies, cash, business transactions, and mutual hospitality and assistance. International migration of some family members often provides an additional dimension, and an important source of cash remittances.

But drought is a major challenge for pastoralists. When adequate pasture and water are hard to access, one coping strategy is moving longer distances in search of water and pasture, sometimes even across international borders. This may be seen as displacement in the sense that the pastoralists’ usual migratory pattern has been disturbed. Key tools in this process are on the one hand traditional provisions within customary law which oblige Somalis to allow access to other groups at times of drought and on the other the modern mobile phone which helps pastoralists seek information about water availability in other locations.

The vital interconnections between environmental conditions and political context are illustrated by the Somali proverb *nabad iyo*

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*caano* (peace and milk), stressing the strong positive association for pastoralists between security and prosperity, with access to pasture and water relying on peaceful cooperation. The complementary proverb *col iyo abaar* (conflict and drought) highlights negative synergies which threaten access to pasture and water. Drought may lead to pressures on resources and spark violent conflict, or conflict and insecurity may exacerbate environmental problems and the experience of drought.

After the collapse of the state in 1991, challenges emerged or worsened in the absence of state institutions. However, free from state interference, in many ways pastoralism thrived, despite the tough ecological conditions and the political violence. By contrast, crop production is more closely dependent on local conditions, and has been more vulnerable to environmental hazards and conflict conditions in recent decades, with civil war politics undermining access to effective water irrigation systems. For farming and agro-pastoral communities alike, migration is among the key responses to these risks.

While both routine mobility and displacement in the wake of natural hazards have been recurring features in rural Somali livelihoods, these dynamics cannot be understood without reference to the political context in which they occur. Before the civil war, state intervention

in people's relationship with their natural resource environment was far from benign. Nonetheless, since the collapse of the state in 1991, violent and predatory political actors have exacerbated the impact of environmental hazards on particular groups, and existing governance frameworks often lack the capacity and will to regulate environmentally damaging practices,

or to respond adequately to changing vulnerabilities in the population.

#### A multi-faceted, multi-layered crisis

The humanitarian crisis which peaked in 2011 has often been described as the result of a 'perfect storm' of concurrent conflict, drought and poor governance. Following years of much more localised, lower-intensity conflict, and pockets of peace in south-central Somalia, in 2006 the political conflict entered a new and intense phase, with the rise of the Islamic Courts Union and the hostile international response, reflecting the context of the global 'war on terror' and regional fears of Somali irredentism. After the Transitional Federal Government and Ethiopian troops ousted the ICU, locals in Mogadishu in particular witnessed high levels of combat-generated insecurity, disregard for civilian life and a weakening of clan-based protection mechanisms. The conflict also had direct economic consequences, disrupting livelihoods through the wholesale destruction, confiscation or occupation of homes, property and businesses; key infrastructure such as roads or markets damaged or blocked; and mobility heavily circumscribed by violence. Numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) escalated from 400,000 in 2006 to one million in 2007.

It was against this background of conflict that drought emerged in 2010, coming in

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some areas on top of several consecutive seasons of poor rains. The impact on rural livelihoods was severe. Cereal prices reached record highs and pastoralists struggled to find water and pasture, leading to high levels of animal mortality and low sale prices due to the deteriorated condition of livestock reaching market and over-supply, and to localised conflict between pastoralists. The situation was compounded by the restriction of the usual risk-spreading and coping strategies used by rural people; due to the widespread nature of the hardship, casual labour opportunities were in short supply, wages contracted, and family and community support mechanisms were eroded. As a result (echoing the famine displacement of 1991-92) rural people migrated in large numbers towards urban centres, particularly Mogadishu, in the hope of accessing humanitarian assistance.

Thus an environmental emergency overlapped with an extant political conflict. Available domestic and international governance mechanisms failed to check the situation. The situation in Somalia was thrown into sharp relief by more coordinated policy responses to the regional drought in Kenya and Ethiopia, underlining that natural hazards like drought do not automatically lead to human disasters like famine; questions of governance, accountability and entitlements are key. In Somalia, domestic political actors on all sides failed to address the significant vulnerabilities in the populations under their control, and indeed the way they pursued the conflict often exacerbated the situation for civilians.

As a result of the way this crisis unfolded, a combination of factors was evident in most people's decisions to leave their places of residence. While for some there was a clear primary driver, for many people things were more blurred. As one refugee from Mogadishu said, "I cannot say in one story why I wasn't safe; there are too many stories".<sup>2</sup> Many people might have been able to weather drought using normal coping strategies without becoming displaced were it not for the contracting labour

opportunities, restricted mobility and uneven distribution of humanitarian aid which resulted from the political conflict. Others would have been able to weather conflict better were it not for the drought.

Beyond this simultaneous combination of factors, there is also the culmination of factors over time: the underlying structural factors and the personal histories that shape migration. For example, for some people drought and hunger were the immediate drivers of movement but the groundwork had been laid by years of conflict, marginalisation and abuse. For some, an upsurge in violence was the straw that broke the camel's back, against a background of long-term strains on rural livelihoods which already predisposed them to migrate. In this context, a useful analytical distinction may be made between structural factors, proximate causes, immediate triggers and intervening factors.<sup>3</sup> We often focus on proximate causes and immediate triggers but less on the structural factors and processes of deprivation, vulnerability and disempowerment that underlie displacement.

This nuanced view of causation stands in sharp contrast to the frequent references to 'drought displacement' by politicians and the media in the context of the 2011 humanitarian crisis. While host-country governments like Kenya have been particularly keen to use such terminology, it has also featured in the announcements of international humanitarian organisations. However, the multi-faceted and multi-layered nature of the humanitarian crisis as outlined above suggests that the large displacements in 2011 clearly cannot be viewed as purely 'environmentally induced'.

It is true that the 'drought displacement' terminology sometimes fits with survey evidence. For example, in the Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit's 2011 sample of IDPs in south-central Somalia, 60% said that they were displaced by the drought while in a 2012 survey of recent arrivals in Kenya, 43% of respondents said that they had come to the camps for drought, livelihood or

family reasons, not making reference to any additional conflict- or persecution-related reasons for leaving. However, such surveys tend to capture immediate triggers but tell us little about the structural context of people's migration. The 'drought displacement' label greatly over-simplifies the nature of Somali mobility in 2011 and we need to be wary about the political functions that this serves.

Contrary to the received wisdom that climate-related movements are short-distance and temporary, the 2010-11 drought was associated with high levels of regional movement because of the ongoing insecurity and the difficulty of accessing humanitarian assistance inside the country. In the context of regionalised drought, people migrating from inside Somalia found themselves crossing borders into areas that were also under considerable environmental stress. The largest numbers went to Kenya where the government took pains to distinguish in public statements between long-term refugees displaced by conflict and people more recently displaced by drought – implicitly circumscribing its responsibilities under international law.

### **Policy responses**

Responses to movement in humanitarian crises often focus on already displaced populations but it is equally if not more important to address what forces people to move. This requires working across what are often viewed as discrete policy fields and specialisms, bringing together elements of climate change adaptation, humanitarian relief, livelihoods development, post-conflict recovery, and human rights protection. Recent analysis suggests that when early warnings of disaster are triggered, these need to be geared more towards the information needs of domestic actors, and there is a need to clarify the rights, resources and responsibilities of international humanitarian actors to secure a stronger compact against famine.

Many NGO and community interventions aim to mitigate the impact of drought by increasing people's resilience. However, this is not just a technical challenge but a

deeply political and rights-based one as the most vulnerable people have been on the receiving end of systematic violence and marginalisation for more than two decades – and are deeply vulnerable to any kind of shock, including drought. Routine and emergency coping mobility, including across borders, has long been a major source of resilience but militarised frontlines and closed borders have threatened this, and future policy should be sensitive to the value of mobility in sustaining rural livelihoods.

When drought is allowed to unfold into a severe crisis, the humanitarian effort is hampered by the acute politicisation of aid and the corrupt political economy surrounding it. But these problems highlight not so much a need to depoliticise humanitarian aid as a need for humanitarian agencies to redouble efforts to address the needs of the most vulnerable civilians – an inherently political act – while distancing themselves from particular state-building projects.

Finally, there is the classic challenge of moving from relief to recovery, in the absence of durable political stabilisation.

### **Protecting the rights of displaced people**

The role of Somali socio-cultural resources, including kinship, religion and diaspora support, have been increasingly prominent in the context of the international aid paralysis, and where possible international actors should work in harmony with these indigenous sociocultural protective capacities. However, the role of macro-political authorities is absolutely vital for protecting all Somalis on their territory.

In the major refugee-hosting country, Kenya, as elsewhere, there are concerns about the shrinking of asylum space in response to the latest humanitarian crisis in Somalia. It is extremely unlikely that all refugees can or will return to Somalia and organisations trying to protect refugees should continue to push for gradual pathways to more positive participation in society, ensure that their

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presence is taken into account in urban and rural development planning, and support their mobility as key for livelihoods.

Although there is a common assumption that the 'drought-displaced' find it easy to return once the rains fall, the fear and impoverishment among many displaced Somali people and the ongoing political uncertainty in their home areas suggest otherwise. Despite improved rainfall, by June 2012 only 14% of refugees surveyed in Dadaab said they would consider returning, and by mid-2013 returns were still limited, despite the increased pressure on refugees in Kenya. In light of these pressures, international and domestic actors must emphasise the need to uphold the principle of voluntary return. This further highlights the critical role of broader political processes in addressing displacement. Any return movements of refugees and IDPs will need to connect with long-term efforts towards rehabilitation and building rural resilience if they are to be sustainable in the long run.

It is abundantly clear that drought poses a major and recurring challenge to the livelihoods of many people across the Horn of Africa. However, Somali mobility in 2011 cannot be boiled down to the simple epithet of 'drought displacement'. Such reductive terminology misrepresents the drivers of displacement and hides how drought interlocks with political processes, both historical and concurrent. Although thinking across policy silos can be professionally and politically uncomfortable, problems arise with a single-sector approach to policymaking in contexts of humanitarian crisis.

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1. Coastal fishing and urban livelihoods are also affected by environmental issues (the tsunami, illegal fishing, toxic waste dumping, poor waste and water infrastructure, flooding, slum issues).

2. Amnesty International (2008) *Routinely Targeted: Attacks on Civilians in Somalia*  
[www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AFR52/006/2008](http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AFR52/006/2008)

3. Van Hear, N (1998) *New Diasporas*. London: UCL.