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’. 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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Addressing core problems

Hassan Noor

Somalia is a country where problems seem to outnumber solutions. At least half the country is experiencing a food and livelihoods crisis, blurring the distinction between needy settlements of IDPs and the flourishing city where they are located. There are multiple causes of displacements, not only war. State and economic collapse and environmental degradation are some of the main drivers of displacement, as well as floods and droughts, and these causes of displacements must all be addressed.

A lesson learned over the years is that it is unhelpful to provide continuous humanitarian aid to hundreds of thousands of IDPs without assisting them to be productive and have livelihoods. One step would be to relocate IDPs to a third location in the same country where they can be economically productive and their children can be secure, for example by relocating some of the displaced farmers in Mogadishu to a relatively peaceful location elsewhere in the country. Some of these IDPs were Somalia’s best farmers before the civil war and their absence from the agricultural sector has been felt ever since their displacement in the 1990s. Any host community would benefit from the presence of these food-producing communities.

Interventions neglecting the roots of the crises are nothing more than temporary band-aids. This calls for a revisit to the rationale of intervention and justifies the need to develop much more integrated support to the affected people through a systemic understanding of the crisis. For example, aid agencies providing support to Somali people should have a dual strategy – to help with immediate needs but also to tackle recovery needs, addressing core problems effectively over time. Any single intervention will not help in Somalia and indeed is a waste of resources in one way or the other. This response should not rest only in the hands of international aid workers but should also involve diaspora and community aid, which can help identify needs and mediate issues around accountability of the response and local perceptions about it.

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