

A new donor approach to fragile societies: The case of Somaliland



**Timothy
Othieno**

‘Somaliland is unique in that, unlike southern Somalia, it has restored law and order and become one of the most democratic parts of the Muslim world.’

Over the past two decades, development practitioners and donor agencies have been pre-occupied with the need to engage more effectively with fragile states. In many fragile societies, the state-building process is a violent one, leading to human tragedy and the destruction of infrastructure. Donors have been reassessing how they engage with such societies to move away from the traditional ‘response to crises’, to an approach that is more effective and involves the people they are trying to help.

Some researchers (Fritz and Rocha Menocal, 2007) observe that the state-building model promoted by donors has a narrow focus and fails to address some of the challenges facing fragile societies. This model – state-building through the promotion of democracy based on market economics – may need rethinking. Several alternatives have been proposed, including state-building efforts that are shaped and led from within the state to ensure legitimacy and sustainability.

In the absence of a comprehensive and internationally accepted state-building strategy, it would be sensible to adopt a strategy that would support peaceful local/internal state-building processes in fragile societies. The purpose would be two-fold: to give donors ‘entry points’ to engage effectively with these types of societies in areas where they could actually make a positive impact; and to move away from their comfort zone to focus on local ownership as the key ingredient. It would be especially important to shift the focus of donor engagement on such processes that have had either minimal or no donor or other support to sustain them.

Somaliland casts light on such an approach. Here, peaceful, indigenous state-building processes have benefited from limited donor assistance. Since 2000, Somalia has received an average of around £100 million a year from the international community, with the bulk of fund-

ing going to the south of the country. However, this imbalance is slowly changing. The UK government, for example, has increased funding for Somaliland’s home-grown initiatives over the past six years. Funding from the UK Department for International Development (DFID) for its overall Somalia development programme increased from £3.1 million in 2002-2003 to £26.5 million in 2007-2008. Somaliland now receives around half of this funding for governance, security, emergency humanitarian relief and assistance to service delivery.

DFID also provides institutional support through a partnership with the UN Development Programme (UNDP), including capacity-building for key ministries and local administrations and support for a new constitutional process. This partnership also focuses on establishing the rule of law, including training for the police and judiciary. DFID not only co-funds the Interpeace programme to promote peace-building across Somalia, it also funded Somaliland’s democratic presidential elections in 2003, as well as the parliamentary and local elections in 2005.

Somaliland is unique in that, unlike southern Somalia, it has restored law and order and become one of the most democratic parts of the Muslim world (Bradbury, 2008). The dynamics of its reconciliation process revolve around a complex interplay of modern forces on the one hand, comprising the generation of African post-colonial liberation-cum-resistance and, on the other, the traditional, indigenous forces of the north-west’s clan leadership (Hussein, 2003).

In the early 1990s these forces were accommodated by several ‘hybrid’ institutions, mixing western and traditional forms of government. Somaliland adopted a national charter known as a *beel* – a clan or community system.

The *beel* system of government acknowledges kinship as the organising principle of society. It has developed into a power-sharing coalition of Somaliland’s main clans, integrating tradition and modernity in one holistic

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governance framework. This framework, which aims to foster ‘popular participation’ in governance, might best define the essence of democracy without Western connotations.

The structure is comprised of an executive (*Golaha Xukuumadda*) with a president and vice-president and council of ministers, a legislature that includes a bicameral parliament with an upper house of elders (*Golaha Guurtida*) and a house of representatives (*Golaha Wakiillada*), and an independent judiciary.

Presidential appointments to the executive are made to ensure a clan balance. In the upper and lower houses of parliament, seats are proportionally allocated to clans. This political system integrates traditional authorities in the state administration to guard against the re-emergence of authoritarian rule.

The role of elders was formally recognised by giving them responsibility for selecting a president, ensuring state security by managing internal conflicts and demobilising the militia. The masterstroke of this hybrid system is the incorporation of the elders into the upper house of the new legislature to act as a check on the executive and the repre-

sentatives. For Somaliland, donor aid has played an integral role in sustaining and even developing these institutions and arrangements. The result: a peaceful and developmental society in the midst of a chaotic regional environment.

Somaliland demonstrates that aid can make a difference if targeted to the right areas. Similarly, if we look hard enough, we can find other ‘progressive nuggets’ in similarly fragile settings. The task before us, therefore, is to identify these nuggets of development and use aid to nurture and sustain them.

Although state-building in Somaliland has been an internal initiative, the authorities in Hargeisa have worked with donors from the beginning, advising them on the funds and assistance needed.

The analysis of peaceful indigenous state-making processes in fragile societies, backed by efficient and limited donor aid, could inform a possible new donor engagement approach in such societies. Donors have not yet found concrete ways to make failed states function, and in the absence of a comprehensive and internationally accepted state-building strategy, it is vital that donors engage with the indigenous, local, peaceful processes that are already taking place, and foster them through sustainable aid.

In conclusion, donors need to be both sensitive and attentive to indigenous state-building and developmental processes. Their understandable urge to act at speed should not jeopardise developmental work alongside fragile societies. This is work that will, in the long-term, help to remove that fragility as Somaliland demonstrates. There, we have seen the value of allowing citizens to share their own vision of the future and the kind of state they want.

Written by Timothy Othieno, ODI Research Fellow (t.othieno@odi.org.uk). For more information visit <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/consultations/somalia-consultation-background.asp>



Overseas Development Institute

111 Westminster Bridge Road, London SE1 7JD

Tel +44 (0)20 7922 0300

Fax +44 (0)20 7922 0399

Email publications@odi.org.uk

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