

A defenceless country



The calamitous conditions in this war-torn country are being exacerbated by the global systemic crisis. With the means of production, finance and the provision of basic services in the hands of a few, the cost of living has soared. Currency devaluation has been coupled with hyper-inflation and increased food prices; unaffordable energy is further limiting the delivery of services such as education, health and sanitation. Moreover environmental degradation is reducing the availability of water, grazing and bio-diversity, thus negatively affecting livelihoods.

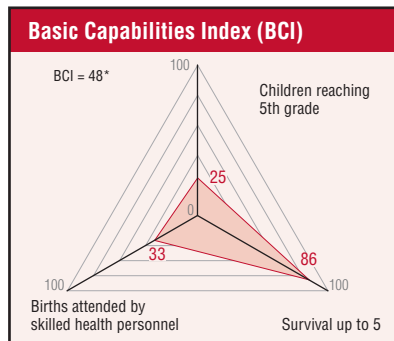
Somali Organization for Community Development Activities
Housing the Secretariat of SW Somalia Coalition
Ali Mahamoud Osoble

Somalia is the only country in Africa, if not the world, where a central authority is unable to provide even basic public services, whether in the area of health, education, sanitation or security. For two decades the nation has been experiencing clan warfare led by Mogadishu-based warlords whose militias have been engaged in killing mainly innocent, unarmed civilians. In 2006 they were defeated by the Union of the Islamic Courts, made up of Islamists who had used a network of clan-based courts as a political platform. Further fighting, however, took place between the Islamists and other forces backed by Ethiopia before the latter pulled its troops out in January 2009 and the moderate Islamist Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmad was installed as the new president. Despite the presence of a peacekeeping mission from the African Union, there continues to be ongoing conflict caused by power struggles between political and religious groups and resource-based clashes between clans.¹

The civil war ruined the country and affected its people economically, socially, culturally and politically. In the absence of an effective central government, many services are now being provided by the business sector at high cost. The global crisis is also affecting food security, energy, water and climate in Somalia, deepening insecurity and instability. As in the rest of the Horn of Africa, food shortages have been worsened by rising commodity prices, conflict and piracy (limiting the movement of people and goods) and imperilled aid operations. Increased food prices have also been blamed on rising fuel costs, lower agricultural production and weather shocks.

Food crisis

Livestock has traditionally been the most important sector for income generation in Somalia, while agriculture has provided staple and cash crops including sorghum, maize, beans, sesame and diverse fruits such as bananas and watermelons. However, many



farmers have lost productive assets, including livestock and irrigation equipment, to invading militias or have been expelled from their farms. In addition, agricultural production has been declining as a result of drought and low rainfall in most areas of the country.

At the same time, there have been rising maritime freight charges on imported goods due to the hostile actions of Somali pirates bent on hijacking ships. The prices of basic commodities, including food, went up by between 200% and 400% in many urban markets in the first six months of 2008.² The effects of decreased cereal production, coupled with general insecurity, have lowered the living standards of the majority of the population. Due to the humanitarian crisis, in 2008 more than 3.2 million Somalis (that is, over 40% of the population) became totally dependent on food aid and emergency services provided by international agencies. These agencies, however, are facing extreme difficulties in trying to get food into the country; the task has been hampered by the violence that internally displaced a million Somalis in just 18 months (from April 2007 to September 2008).

Up to 70% of rural people in the south are threatened by food shortages, and about 36% of children are underweight, with one in six suffering from acute malnutrition. The number of malnourished children nationally is currently estimated to be 200,000, of whom 60,000 are severely malnourished and could die if treatment is not made available. In 2008, UNICEF began supplying supplementary feeding to 44,000 children under five years old along the 30 km Mogadishu-Afgoye corridor and in central and southern Somalia.³

Spiralling inflation

As there is no central bank, all currency circulating in the market was either printed before the Government collapsed or is being produced by business people with links to local authorities or former warlords; thus, inflation has spun out of control. In 1991 the exchange rate for one US dollar was 2,000 shillings; in 2009 it is 35,000 shillings. Dishonest traders have pushed inflation to its highest level during 18 chaotic years by refusing to accept the various denominations of the Somali shilling and only taking US dollars. Demonstrators in Mogadishu denounced the traders and were quoted as saying: "We have our own currency, if that currency is rejected, it means that we have no way to live."⁴

Water crisis

Northern and central Somalia suffer from acute water shortages. Even important provincial capitals like Hargeisa, Dusamareb and Garowe face this situation. Southern Somalia is generally greener because the Shabelle and Juba Rivers flow down from the Ethiopian highlands. Nevertheless, this area also becomes semi-arid when droughts affect these sources. According to Sidow Ibrahim Addou from the USAID-funded Famine Early Warning Systems Network, water shortages in the Gedo region mean the disappearance of virtually all pastureland.⁵

In the north-eastern regions, where the majority of people depend on animal rearing and there are no rivers, environmental changes – especially La Niña, which lowers ocean surface temperatures causing lower rainfall – have led to tremendous losses of cattle. In 2007, for instance, citizens fled areas such as Hamure village, 280 km east of Bosasso, because of water scarcity. The wells there have dried up and no one maintains the boreholes, a situation made worse by the lack of a functioning central government and the weakness of regional authorities. As the land is becoming drier and rainfall has shrunk from its average of 250 mm per year, potential evaporation soars above 2,000 mm per year.

In Somaliland, comprising the north-western territories, the water crisis is even worse. Entire

* "Children reaching..." estimated following procedure "2" in p. 209.

** There are no available data on GEI.

1 FSAU (Food Security Analysis Unit – Somalia). "2008/09 Post-Deyr Analysis." Technical Series Report No. V, 17. 2009. Available at: <www.fsasomali.org/fileadmin/uploads/1481.pdf>.

2 *Ibid.*

3 UNICEF. "UNICEF feeds 44,000 children in Somalia." Press Centre, Nairobi, Kenya, 14 May 2008. Available at: <www.unicef.org/infobycountry/media_43930.html>.

4 Abdinur, M.H. "Somalis rally against rising food prices, inflation." Agence France Presse (AFP), 6 May 2008.

5 IRIN (Integrated Regional Information Networks). "Somalia: Severe food and water crisis in Gedo". UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 5 April 2006. Available at: <www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=58667>.

villages are being abandoned as adverse climate change is reducing water sources instead of replenishing them.

Health crisis

The movement of populations from drought-affected areas to camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) is increasing the risk of epidemics such as cholera, diarrhoea and other water-borne diseases and of the spread of polio.⁶ Somalia's lack of a basic functioning health infrastructure that could adequately respond to these emergencies worsens the plight of those affected, especially women, children and the elderly.

The infant mortality rate is estimated to be 156 per 1,000, an upsurge from earlier UN records of 132/1,000. The maternal mortality rate has also gone up to 1,600 per 100,000 live births, from earlier UNICEF records of 1,400/100,000. AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis and other diseases continue to take a heavy toll.

Refugees and displaced people

More than 60,000 Somalis crossed the border into Kenya in January 2009 alone, and the Dhadhab camps in north-eastern Kenya are estimated to hold 230,000 refugees. Some 850,000 fled Mogadishu's violence in 2007/2008 while 400,000 of those internally displaced, previously in Mogadishu's IDP camps, fled to the outskirts of the city seeking safety. Another 50,000 persons were displaced as a result of the 2008 border dispute between Somaliland and Puntland; they remain in camps in Ethiopia, Somaliland and Puntland.

Unfortunately, the assistance provided by both international and local NGOs has been hindered by the seemingly endless insecurity, especially in the southern and central regions. Two World Food Programme Somalia staff members were deliberately targeted and murdered in January 2009, while 34 aid workers were killed in 2008; other aid workers have been kidnapped and remain in captivity. There continue to be roadblocks set up at strategic positions to hijack supplies, and piracy against vessels carrying humanitarian goods.

Fuel crisis

Somalia is a net fuel importer. Any fluctuation in oil prices therefore directly affects the country. Fuel nearly tripled in price during one two-week period in late 2007 and early 2008, from USD 0.40 per litre to USD 1.10. In some cases, the cost of transportation has quadrupled, leaving many people cut off. Other goods such as imported foodstuffs and medicines,

as well as services such as education and health, have also been affected. In a country where electricity is mostly generated from diesel-fuelled generators, oil price increases have affected the generation companies. The additional cost has been transferred to the sectors that need electricity most, and the public bears the brunt of the crisis.

The lack of a centrally functioning government or bilateral relations with energy-producing countries has prevented the Somali people from buying oil more cheaply from countries in the Middle East, or purchasing electric energy from countries in the Horn of Africa such as Uganda and Ethiopia that have high potential for hydroelectric generation.

Environmental crisis

Deforestation is a major cause of lower rainfall and drought, which in turn lead to famine. Trees are cut, forests are cleared and branches and trunks are burnt for the production of charcoal, a large quantity of which is exported to countries in the Gulf States, with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates being the main buyers.⁷ It is estimated that boats carry abroad on average the equivalent in charcoal of 10,000 trees. This trade in Somalia's 'black gold' causes an environmental disaster. As traders demand more and more charcoal, the loss of trees leads to scarcity of water, lower rainfalls and extremely high evaporation.

Unfortunately, droughts are often followed by devastating flooding of the rivers that flow from the Ethiopian highlands. This has become a recurrent cycle.

Recommendations

Civil society groups, from community-based organizations to national forums, are advocating for the causes of the disasters to be addressed. Government ministries and empowered bodies are badly needed to combat deforestation. Action against environmental abuse will limit its adverse effects on rainfall, the soil's capacity to hold water, the local climate, habitats for animal species and bio-diversity in general. ■

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6 WHO (World Health Organization). "Drought Worsens Health Crisis in Somalia." Nairobi: WHO, 31 March 2006. Available at: <www.emro.who.int/somalia/pdf/PressRelease_31March06.pdf>.

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