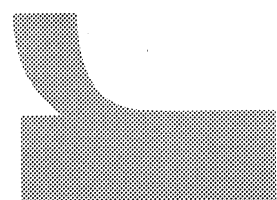
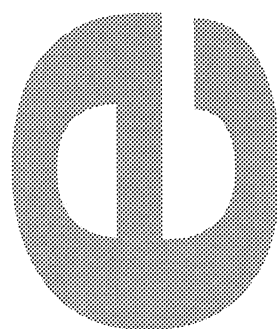


Somaliland NGOs



Challenges and opportunities



Mohamed Sheik Abdillahi

foreword

Local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are not new to Somalia. Their history goes back to the early 1980s, when the Ogaden War and the advent of structural adjustment policies saw the emergence of welfare safety nets. The rapid proliferation of local NGOs in the 1990s, however, has been in response to the collapse of government, public services and civic structures caused by Somalia's plunge into civil war in 1990.

As Mohamed Sheik Abdillahi's paper makes clear, local NGOs have played an important role in the rehabilitation of Somaliland, the north west regions which in 1991 seceded from Somalia to form an independent state. Following the secession, traditional clan-based institutions of elders, combined with fledgling governmental and non-governmental organisations, began to take responsibility for governance, security and reconstruction at community and national level. As well as implementing projects, they have been advocates of assistance for the different regions and active in peace and reconciliation efforts, providing logistical, secretarial and moral support for peace conferences. Women's organisations, in particular, promoted peace and reconciliation efforts in 1992 and 1993.

At the time this paper was written, in 1995, local NGOs were reaching a watershed. Because Somaliland is not recognised internationally it is ineligible for bilateral development aid and receives only short-term humanitarian assistance; in the absence of an internationally recognised government, foreign assistance agencies were seeking out local organisations as partners to work through. However, poor coordination within the international community was creating tension among local NGOs as they found themselves vying for donor funds. At the same time, not all groups presenting themselves as NGOs were engaged in real development work, and distrust of NGOs was taking root among the

international agencies. At a national level, government resentment of the donor bias towards local NGOs, and local NGOs' dislike of government attempts to coordinate and regulate their activities, were leading to widespread distrust and an undermining of development and rehabilitation efforts.

In December 1995 a groundbreaking workshop called Building Partnerships for Participatory Development was held in the capital of Somaliland, Hargeisa.¹ Bringing together Somali development workers from all regions of Somaliland with government personnel and international NGOs, the meeting sought to build consensus on reconstruction and development by emphasising partnership and participation and encouraging people to think in terms of cooperation rather than competition. In this paper, presented on the first day of the workshop, Mohamed Sheik set out his personal vision of a vibrant civil society and a local NGO movement.

Mohamed Sheik is an active member of the Somali NGO movement. Before war broke out in 1990 he worked in Mogadishu as technical director of Somalia's first NGO, Daryeel. Displaced by the war he moved to Hargeisa, where from 1991 to 1995 he was programme director with the Somali Relief and Rehabilitation Association (SORRA), one of the country's most well established post-war NGOs. Currently based in Boroma, his home town, he is the founder and director of the Awdal Rehabilitation and Development Association (ARDA). Through his encouragement and hard work, in 1996 the local NGOs in Awdal region formed an umbrella organisation, Awdal Association of Indigenous NGOs (AAIN), which aims to improve local NGO practices and efficacy and develop their advocacy role for the rebuilding of Somali society.

Judith Gardner
ICD-CIIR
April 1997

Somaliland NGOs

Challenges and opportunities

The term 'NGO' (non-governmental organisation) means different things to different people. But, for the purpose of this paper, we may adopt the following definition, which seems to be the most appropriate for local NGOs (LNGOs) in Somaliland:

NGOs are, in general, private non-profit organisations that are publicly registered, whose principal function is to implement development projects favouring the popular sector, and which receive financial support.

The motives for establishing NGOs are deeply rooted in the philanthropic ethos of most cultures. Motives may also spring from an ideological commitment to social development. The concept of an NGO as generally practised today originated in the North after the Second World War and passed through several phases in its development (ie from relief to development to advocacy).

African NGOs can be characterised by their rapid and ad hoc growth, and their structures tend to mirror those of their Northern partners. This may not be a suitable expression of their identity or most appropriate for what they want to do. African NGOs on the whole are severely limited by their dependence on external funding and by technical staff who may not have the requisite voluntary ethos or ideological commitment.

All over the Third World, however, the emergence of the voluntary sector as an agent of change has been revolutionary in addressing the old questions of oppression, chronic poverty, social injustice and the newer concerns of democratisation, respect for human rights, balanced development and protection of the environment.

Indigenous Somali NGOs: Origins in Somalia

Indigenous Somali NGOs appeared first in the early 1980s, in the wake of international aid agencies that rushed in to help with the huge influx of Ethiopian refugees into Somalia as a result of the 1977-78 Ogaden war. As the international agencies began to withdraw, local NGOs increased rapidly in number. As the 1980s progressed, the majority were still based in Mogadishu.

Organisations such as Haqabtir, Daryeel, Adamiga (a women's organisation), Gurmad, and Al Muntadii started implementing projects, mainly in the health sector and in income-generating activities. The following is worth noting with regard to the NGO experience in the Somalia era:

1. The World Bank established a US\$3 million fund in 1988 as seed money to encourage local NGOs to implement projects in basic social services, with the aim of alleviating hardships resulting from a Bank-imposed structural adjustment programme. The fund was administered by the Somali planning ministry and few NGOs were capable of taking advantage of it.

2. The US Agency for International Development (USAID) established the Management Unit for Supervision and Training (MUST) to work with local NGOs implementing agency-funded projects. MUST was engaged in training, research, monitoring and evaluation.

3. The idea of NGOs was so new and perplexing to the then Somali authorities that they had to resort to an old fascist-era charity law to register the first ones.

4. After a year of wrangling Somali NGOs agreed to form a consortium, COSVADA (Council of Somali Voluntary Development Agencies). A constitution was passed and a secretary-general chosen just two days before war broke out in Mogadishu in December 1991.

Somaliland NGOs

Somaliland indigenous NGOS are only as old as Somaliland itself, and this must always be remembered when evaluating them. The main factors behind their emergence (and indeed mushrooming) are as follows:

- the forced return of many educated and qualified Somalilanders² to their communities and the extremely limited job opportunities open to them
- the devastation of the country and the urgent need for immediate intervention at every level
- the fact that it was imperative for the international aid organisations operating in the country to do something immediately in response to the prevailing tragic conditions
- the fact that the only avenue open for these organisations was to invite the local NGOs as partners because of the international community's non-recognition of the Somaliland administration and because of the non-existence, for all practical purposes, for the first few years, of government institutions
- easy entry into the NGO sector because of the predominance of the relief and rehabilitation activities.

Since the inception of Somaliland NGOs five years ago, the following features have been observed:

- regional development reflecting the transitional socio-economic and political realities of Somaliland
- proliferation of NGOs in every region, which created or reinforced negative perceptions about the NGO movement everywhere
- urban or semi-urban bias in the activities of most local NGOs
- failure to develop a clear definition of an indigenous NGO's role and responsibilities — in other words, a continuing search for identity
- managerial and organisational weaknesses reflecting the NGOs' infancy as well as the impact of the socio-economic and political milieu in which they operate

- misunderstanding and 'mistrust' between indigenous NGOs and their 'linkages' (authorities, international organisations operating in the country, communities and elders) and between local NGOs themselves
- failure of local NGOs to organise or to develop a sense of community at regional and national levels.

Despite these difficulties, the record of Somaliland NGOs in relief and rehabilitation is quite impressive. Schools, health facilities, watering points, prisons, roads and so on, have been rehabilitated and contributions made to the peace and reconciliation process.

The working environment

Somaliland NGOs, however, are at present at a critical juncture in their development. Their tarnished image, the deterioration of relations with principal 'linkages', and their disorganisation prompt a mood of self-examination, at least among the 'first generation' of Somaliland NGOs. The fact that the phase of 'excitement' and easy access to rehabilitation funds is almost over heightens the growing feeling that the indigenous NGOs must either realise their potential or perish. In the following sections this paper will discuss the extraordinarily difficult environment in which the local NGOs have had to operate, the constraints faced and the relationship with their linkages.

The socio-economic and political milieu

Somaliland has been destroyed in the prolonged civil conflict and the fight against a brutal dictatorship. The utter destruction of the economy, the infrastructure and all institutions, both civil or governmental, has created an extraordinarily difficult and chaotic situation in which to start the recovery process.

The brutalities of the civil conflict and the violence and lawlessness it unleashed resulted in tremendous social, economic and cultural upheavals in which core traditional values were eroded and society was left anchorless and at the mercy of gun-toting, traumatised, youth clan militia. At the same time, the pervasive clan politicking, operating in a political vacuum, resulted in a chronic instability that still affects the country.

The nascent indigenous NGOs have had to operate in this milieu for at least the first three years of their existence. The situation has, since then, improved dramatically in most parts of the country and the government founded at the historic Boroma Somaliland elders' conference has established governance in the areas under its reach.³ However, the armed conflict between the government and renegade militia, which first flared in Hargeisa in November 1994 and which has since spread to the central and extreme western parts of the country, is a serious setback for Somaliland's stability and return to normality. This has tremendous implications for the work and growth of the indigenous NGOs. This conflict is also extremely divisive and rubs raw clan sensitivities across the board in Somaliland, with huge implications for the role of indigenous NGOs, their relationships, their growth and for the emergence of a national NGO movement.

Institutional framework

From their inception the indigenous NGOs were operating without the benefit of an institutional framework (governmental or civil) to support them or to foster and facilitate their growth. The Somaliland government established an office to coordinate the United Nations and international NGOs. This had a fuzzy mandate and its impact on indigenous NGOs was limited to registering (at a fee) anyone claiming to be an NGO and wishing to register in Hargeisa.

Infrastructure

Imagine a country without telephones, banks, postal services, faxes and other communication facilities and with few good roads and one can understand the isolation of Somaliland NGOs and appreciate the circumstances in which they work.

The qaat habit and NGO performance

Qaat is a mild narcotic used extensively in Somaliland, by mainly the adolescent and adult male population. Its present widespread use (and often abuse) is directly related to the trials and traumas of recent history and has a devastating effect on the country and particularly on the economy, on the health and well-being of its citizens and the chances of recovery.

Qaat affects the resources and performance of many NGOs because it is expensive, time consuming and causes insomnia, a deadly combination that adversely affects the efficiency, effectiveness and capacity for work of NGO staff. Additionally, since qaat is addictive and since Somalis are linked by intricate kinship/friendship relationships governed by a deep-rooted ethos of hospitality, NGOs are plagued in the morning hours by numerous visitors bent on *shaxaad*, a euphemism for gentlemanly begging. These encounters entail demands on both the finances and working time of NGOs.

Relations with authorities

Relations between the indigenous NGOs and Somaliland authorities at both the regional and central levels are often characterised by misunderstanding, mistrust and private recriminations. The government's barely concealed hostility to local NGOs was evident in a draft law regulating NGOs and proposed by the interior ministry in 1994.

The whole thrust of this draft law was to circumscribe the activities of this new-fangled phenomena, the indigenous NGO. Any understanding of NGOs' role in the country's reconstruction was missing from the text of the proposed law. The Steering Committee of the Hargeisa-based NGOs made a strong rebuttal and clarification in response and, fortunately, nothing more was heard about the proposed law.

Legally, the indigenous NGO movement is in limbo. There are (to my knowledge) no statutes or regulations governing them and/or granting a legal space for them to operate. This has grave implications for the legal protection of the emerging civil society in Somaliland.

The causes of the difficult relationship between the government and the indigenous NGOs are, inter alia:

- the complete lack of understanding on the part of

high government officers of the role and responsibilities of a local NGO because of the novelty of the concept and practice

- the adversarial relationship and territorialism common between governments and indigenous NGOs in the Third World were exacerbated in Somaliland in the early years by some of the NGOs having more resources than the administration
- non-recognition of Somaliland and the non-existence for all practical purposes of governmental structures resulted in the channelling of aid mainly through the local NGOs in the early years; the government resents this
- the local NGOs, because of their disorganisation, failed to make conciliatory moves towards the government or explain their role and responsibilities clearly
- the Somali curse — which is the breakdown of communication between intimately related people — is at work here, in the troubled relationship between authorities and the local NGOs.

Relations with international organisations

The relationship between local NGOs and the international organisations is an uneasy one. It is fundamentally skewed by the donor-recipient relationship and is characterised by the accumulation and nursing of grievances on both sides.

The international organisations are on the whole sceptical about whether the local NGOs are bona fide and often question their claim to represent their communities. International organisations often also have doubts about the professional capacity of the local NGOs and sometimes characterise them as clan-based contractors. The international agencies' perceptions seem to have been coloured by experiences in Mogadishu, where, according to anecdotal evidence, the local NGO situation is out of hand. (There are reportedly more than 2,000 indigenous NGOs in Mogadishu with a mixed record and tales of extreme corruption.)

The indigenous NGOs perceive an inherent bias against local NGOs on the part of international organisations. They ascribe this to the international organisations' fear of the local NGOs as potential competitors (although this may spring from the Somalis' highly evolved sense of conspiracy).

The local NGOs' complaints comprise, inter alia, the following:

- the international organisations pay lip service to the urgency of capacity building for local NGOs but, until recently, have not delivered on their promises
- the international organisations play down the local NGOs' impressive record achieved under extremely difficult circumstances, but play up their weaknesses
- the international organisations treat the local ones as second-class citizens in terms of access to resources earmarked for those engaged in relief and rehabilitation and development. An example is access to flights: these chartered planes consume a sizeable chunk of the funds allocated as aid to Somaliland.

Having said this, it is important to put the matter in perspective. Most international organisations operating

in the country have productive working relationships with the local NGOs. Attitudes range from the sympathetic to the distrustful non-cooperative. The present misunderstandings could be clarified or at least minimised through improved communication between the two communities.

Relations with the public/communities

The litany of misunderstandings and mistrust is again at work in the relationship between the general public/communities and the local NGOs which purport to represent them. Some of the causes are:

- The general public's misunderstanding of a local NGO's role and responsibilities, because of the novelty of the concept. The Somali name for a local NGO, *ha'ad samafal wadani ah*, which could be roughly translated as 'do-gooder agency', leads to raised expectations and unrealistic demands by the public on the NGO.
- During the Siad Barre dictatorship massive corruption was rampant and embezzlement of project funds and misuse of resources was not only extremely common, but was often encouraged by the dictator, reflecting his policy of clan patronage. The legacy of this tradition is corrosive cynicism on the part of the communities about NGO-implemented projects; rip-offs are expected.
- In the early years members of the local NGOs which had managed to attract funding were often the targets of envy and resentment.
- The mushrooming of local NGOs in all the regions, and the fact that many of them have been established as an income-generating opportunity for their members, reinforces the communities' cynicism and negative attitudes.
- Today, communities perceive local NGOs as 'middlemen' standing between them and the aid meant for their benefit. International aid organisations' growing tendency to deal directly with the communities has tremendous and complicated implications for the relationship under discussion.
- The local NGOs bear a major share of the blame for the souring of their relationship with communities. After all, the main reason for their establishment is to represent their communities and they should have done more to repair the damage to the relationship.

Organising efforts

From the beginning, indigenous Somaliland NGOs felt the need to organise to address the multitude of problems facing them. However, early efforts at organising crumbled when confronted with the fractious socio-political reality in the country, since the local NGOs are themselves steeped in this same fragmenting and debilitating social process.

In 1993 the active members of the Hargeisa-based NGOs formed a Steering Committee to act as the mouthpiece and advocate for the community and to prepare for the establishment of a consortium of Somaliland NGOs. One of the first fruits of this self-organising effort was an invitation from the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) for the Committee to nominate the local NGOs representative in the then

Tripartite Commission (comprising the Djibouti government,⁴ UNHCR and Somaliland administration) for the Voluntary Repatriation of Somaliland refugees.

The Steering Committee organised a conference in March 1994 in which 20 leading NGOs from all the regions met at the premises of the Somali Relief and Rehabilitation Association (SORRA) in Hargeisa to discuss an agenda for the establishment of a national consortium.

However, during the discussion, it became clear that the time was not ripe for this move as some of the NGOs voiced their strong suspicion about the nature and functions of a national umbrella organisation. The underlying fear was that the new organisation would usurp the role of individual NGOs. The disappointed organisers sensed the depth of regional divisions within the NGO community and came to realise that organising efforts would bear fruit only when the need was felt by all, and that the best place to start organising was at the regional level.

At present, indigenous NGOs' organising efforts are under way in most of the regions. Awdal region is the most advanced in the preparations for the formation of an accountable and credible association, advocating the interests of the region's indigenous NGOs.

Women's organisations

Women's NGOs are now active in all regions of the country, although their development is more advanced in some than others. These organisations are faced with opportunities and constraints that are gender-related and are worth mentioning.

Opportunities

- Women's NGOs are, on the whole, drug-free or women staff do not chew qaat, which translates into enormous benefits in work discipline and reduced overhead expenses.
- The target communities of women's NGOs are more cooperative and compliant than their often truculent male counterparts. Also, in the case of women, benefits go directly to the family and are not wasted on addictive habits, and this boosts morale for the programmes' implementers.
- Somali women's NGOs benefit from the worldwide preoccupation with the status of women. International aid organisations operating in the country nearly always have specific projects targeting women and prioritise their needs in all their programmes.

Constraints

- Women's NGOs are severely constrained by the near total absence of educated and skilled women in the country. Somali women have had limited access to education in the first place, and educated women nearly all joined (and often led) the diaspora. The few remaining Somali women with any education or skills are being hotly pursued by the international organisations, which recruit them as secretaries, gender officers and so on.
- Women are the mainstay of Somaliland society in these troubled times and are increasingly emerging as the major breadwinners and as heads of

households because of the conflict-fuelled socioeconomic upheavals. Traditionally Somali women were active in the family and community affairs, in contrast with many of their sisters in the Islamic and African worlds. However, they have always been excluded from the top power structures, be it the *guurti* in the old days or government structures today. The lack of exposure to executive decision-making combined with cultural bias against female leadership (to which even women often vocally subscribe) tend to make women's organisations in Somaliland prone to conflict. Thus, the two most established and prominent women's NGOs in Hargeisa were nearly wrecked by disputes over legitimacy, power and personalities.

Capacity building

Indigenous NGOs in Somaliland always put capacity building at the top of any needs/constraints assessment or enquiry. By 'capacity building' the NGOs primarily mean training and the organisation of technical, administrative and managerial skills. This preoccupation reflects the following realities:

- of the hundreds of local NGO practitioners in all the regions, only two or three had had experience in NGO work before 1991
- the near total lack of access to data, technical literature, reference works etc pertaining to the running of an NGO in Somaliland
- the indigenous NGO community's isolation from the experience of the worldwide NGO movement as a result of communications constraints.

Capacity building for the local NGOs has been a contentious issue, souring relations between them and representatives of the international community in the country. However, capacity building programmes finally took off in the second half of 1995 as can be gleaned from the following brief history:

October 1993: Oxfam America sponsored a week-long orientation workshop in Addis Ababa for six Somaliland local NGOs and six from Somalia

August 1994: income-generating activities workshop in Hargeisa sponsored by the European Community

October 1995: Capacity building workshop in Hargeisa, sponsored by the UK Overseas Development Administration.

September-December 1995: Capacity building workshops in Boroma, Erigavo, Hargeisa, sponsored by the German development agency, GTZ.

December 1995: Capacity building workshop in Hargeisa, sponsored by the British-based International Cooperation for Development (ICD) and VetAid.⁵

Observations and initial evaluations of the main workshops:

1. The intensity of participation in these capacity building workshops was amazing. Participants from all the regions were active and vocal in all the sessions. This reflects both the hunger for this kind of experience and the vitality of the local NGO community.
2. The relatively restrained participation of female members in mixed groups owed more to language and

education barriers than cultural constraints. Educated and experienced Somali women are generally quite vociferous.

It is too early to evaluate these workshops against their objectives, but the following initial and broad assessment of their impact may be in order:

1. The workshops taken together helped the participants to understand, or at least introduced them to, the basic values and skills needed in running a successful NGO; in other words, the workshops introduced them to the role and responsibilities of an indigenous NGO as well as its relationship with principal linkages.
2. The need for coordination, organisation, networking and the development of a sense of community was highlighted and given an impetus.
3. These workshops have begun to open up the channels of communication between the local NGOs, the government and the international community, but the under-representation of other international organisations and the government's being represented by only mid-level officers means this is no more than a beginning. The important matter of creating harmony and understanding between all the actors in the recovery process needs to be developed in future workshops.

Conclusion: Challenges and opportunities

Somaliland indigenous NGOs are confronted with a rare opportunity — to participate in the reconstruction of their country from scratch. The priority areas for local NGOs in the recovery process are:

- conflict mediation and reconciliation
- revitalisation of the basic social services and productive sectors of the economy
- democratisation and governance
- empowerment of the marginalised and the disadvantaged through participatory development
- protection and regeneration of the country's endangered environment and eco-system.

The challenge for the local NGOs is how to overcome present weaknesses and constraints and realise their full potential. This could be done by developing their capacity and professionalism. This capacity must be underpinned by the basic values of commitment to social development, peace and reconciliation, democratisation and the preservation of the rich cultural heritage of the Somali people.

The international community, the government and all those concerned with the welfare of the Somaliland people and their future must not be daunted by the present confusion in the local NGO scene. They should focus instead on their true potential as agents of change and as the building blocks of the emerging civil society, which is essential for the democratisation and recovery process of this troubled country.

Recommendations

Capacity building

The on-going capacity building programme may be intensified, broadened in scope and, above all, coordinated. Priority capacity building measures that should be considered include:

- upgrading the technical, administrative and managerial skills of the executive staff of local NGOs
- study tours within the region and in Africa and Third World countries facing similar problems
- connecting Somaliland NGOs to local NGOs in the Horn of Africa through the establishment of reliable mechanisms for the continuous exchange of ideas, information and expertise in conflict resolution, reconstruction and development.

Institution building

The following measures for institution building of local NGOs should be considered:

- establishing common resource centres at regional and national levels; communication facilities, technical literature and reference works etc. may be made available at these centres for the common use of all bona fide local NGOs
- repatriation of technical data and information on Somaliland from sources in Europe and North America for the use of local NGOs and the public sector
- establishing some form of postal service.

Organisation of local NGOs

- Organising local NGOs at regional and national levels is a precondition for their development. Organising would help in the critical areas of advocacy, networking, coordination, capacity building, awareness raising and in promoting harmony and understanding with the international community, authorities, target communities and the general public.

Legal status

- The legal status of the local NGO community must be clearly defined. Local NGOs must energetically campaign to secure legal protection for their civil and institutional rights and for the rights of the emergent civil society.

Maintenance of standards

- Funding agencies must set high professional standards as a condition for cooperating with their local NGO partners. This would be crucial for their growth in capacity.

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ARDA NGO

Notes

1. Full reports of this workshop and the 1996 follow-up, Building Partnerships for Peace and Development (see note 5), are available from CIIR.
2. Most local NGOs have been founded by Somali professionals displaced by the war and now living in communities where they have family roots. The conflict forced many educated people to move from urban to rural areas.
3. As of February 1997, the president of this government was re-elected and a new constitution agreed.
4. During the war, many thousands of Somalis fled to Djibouti.
5. A further workshop, Building Partnerships for Peace and Development, sponsored by ICD, took place in December 1996.

Somaliland NGOs

Challenges and opportunities

The collapse of government and public services in Somalia as a result of the country's civil war left a vacuum that has seen a rapid growth in the number of local non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In the north west regions — which seceded from Somalia in 1991 to form Somaliland — local NGOs have played a central role in rehabilitation, governance, security and reconciliation.

In this paper, first presented at a workshop of local NGOs in Somaliland in 1995, Mohamed Sheik Abdillahi, an active member of the movement since its beginnings, outlines the achievements of Somaliland's NGOs and the many challenges facing them, including strained relations with government and international bodies. He sets out recommendations for local NGOs to realise their full potential in the vast and urgent task of reconstructing their country from scratch.

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