



Nisar Majid

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## Researching food, power and aid practices in Somalia

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Food is central to power. Food has influenced power relations through land grabs and the manipulation of food aid as part of a system of political patronage, through looting, displacement and diversion of aid by soldiers, warlords and militia. It has played a role in how countries are governed and who benefits from famine and relief. At the same time, in famine or protracted crises, certain groups may be marginalised, discriminated against and exploited, for example the agro-pastoral populations in Bay and Bakool regions and the riverine farmers along the Juba and Shebelle rivers. These groups have shown persistently high levels of acute malnutrition and suffered the most

severe famines, including in 1992 and 2011.<sup>1</sup> This article draws on a forthcoming CRP report on 'Food and power in Somalia' by Susanne Jaspars, Guhad Adan and Nisar Majid.



*Residents from Gobweyn village in the Lower Jubba Region of Somalia carry food stuffs and medicine.*

Susanne's study examines, in particular, the changes in the political economy of food with changes in governance, and with the change from food aid to cash transfers over the past 10-15 years. The wider political economy of food, and in particular food assistance, has been much examined for the 1990s, but less so for the food crises and famines of the 2000s. Changes in governance include the rise and fall of the Union of Islamic Courts, from 2005 onwards. The group Al-Shabaab, initially a militia under the Courts' control, became the principal Islamic extremist group after the defeat of the Courts in December 2006, controlling most of south-central Somalia thereafter. The other key change in governance is the establishment of Somalia's internationally recognised Federal Government, which followed previous attempts at installing governments in 2000 and 2004, and came into effect in 2012.

The study combines political economy with the concept of the political marketplace (a political system characterised by constant bargaining over power and loyalty) and with that of regimes of aid practices to

examine how food practices influence politics and relations of power. Analysing regimes of food practices involves identifying sets of linked practices, their objectives and assumptions, the organisations, authorities and businesses involved and the power effects they have. In Somalia, this meant considering the full supply chain and all of the actors involved in its production and/or supply. These may include farmers, traders, businesses, as well as aid organisations, and other non-state and state actors. The analytical framework for the study was based on Susanne's PhD on the history and politics of [Food Aid in Sudan](#).

From the mid-1990s to 2010, many of the largest commercial contracts in Somalia were those for the provision of food aid; ICRC, CARE and WFP were the main food aid actors, often working with or through private contractors. In 2010 the UN Monitoring Group accused WFP of working through a cartel of private businessmen, some of whom were connected to the Council of Islamic Courts and the rise of the transitional government of the time. Tensions between Al Shabaab and international aid agencies led to a huge reduction of food aid (and its associated contracts) from 2010 and coincided with the rise of cash as a new aid delivery modality. The Somalia famine of 2011 led to an unprecedented cash-based humanitarian response and, since this time cash has continued to be a critical delivery mechanism for assistance in the country. The form of cash assistance has itself evolved quickly as the telecommunications and money transfer sectors in Somalia have developed, with mobile money transfers taking over from cash-based *hawala* transfers.

As these technological changes have been taking place, southern Somalia has increasingly been turning into (or resembling) a series of city-states, representing both the government and its international backers and the rural, agricultural hinterland largely controlled by Al Shabaab. Most attention and resources are focused on urban areas,

where many displaced populations live, while changes in the rural economy and interaction between the rural and urban environment are little understood.

The report shows that where power (and profits) were concentrated in large food aid contracts for many years (benefitting large Mogadishu-based brokers), the shift to cash has resulted in a dispersal of power among a wider group of actors. International and local aid actors often alongside district commissioners and other local power brokers are now often part of networks that determine who does and does not get assistance, typically based on local power configurations. Furthermore, where previously, food aid was often looted or sold and sent back to Mogadishu, cash often remains in the districts and regions but is part of the management of population and political marketplace at the more local level.

Many of the businessmen and politicians who made their money from the earlier food aid contracts and economy continue to be active, especially in Mogadishu, and have moved into other areas of contracting, including in fuel supply management, security and hotel provision, much of which is based in the 'green zone' of the MIA (Mogadishu International Airport).

One of the most concerning trends is the transformation that appears to be taking place in the rural economy, with the huge displacement/outward migration of rural populations and the shift from food to cash crops that is occurring across southern Somalia. The focus of attention and resources in urban areas is likely to be contributing to this rural-urban movement, while increasing demand for sesame and lemon from the Gulf and India is thought to be leading to big businesses and traders buying or taking land from farming populations. This is increasing vulnerability to food insecurity and perpetuating the economic marginalisation of certain rural populations. Equally concerning is that the exclusion and marginalisation of

particular groups remains, whether in rural areas or as displaced populations (and one influences the other).

Somalia has increasingly turned into a space that favours the emergence of oligopolies rather than a free market. Even the displaced have become a business opportunity. This oligopolistic pattern or tendency may even describe parts of the donor-agency networks.

Within this landscape international actors struggle to 'see' – make visible – the power relations that are determining these changes (and continuities) and the role they play in it, including in the position of vulnerable groups. The report argues that current aid practices have made the political causes and benefits of this ongoing marginalisation invisible.

Our study challenges contemporary humanitarian analysis and response, and provides suggestions for key policy issues that need to be addressed.

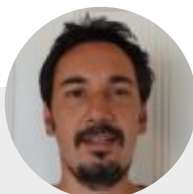
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1 Daniel Maxwell and Nisar Majid. *Famine in Somalia: Competing Imperatives, Collective Failures, 2011–12*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

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*Note: The CRP blogs gives the views of the author, not the position of the Conflict Research Programme, the London School of Economics and Political Science, or the UK Government.*

### About the author



**Nisar Majid**

Dr Nisar Majid manages the Somalia country programme. He has worked in and on Somalia and the Somali territories of the Horn of

Africa for twenty years, in various applied research capacities, including for his PhD research which focused on transnational and diaspora aspects of the Somali.

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