



## Conflict Research Programme Dissemination Memo

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# Talking Food and Power in Somalia: Discussions in Nairobi and Mogadishu

*“the conversation is twenty times more important than the report”*

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Following publication of the [‘Food and Power in Somalia: Business as Usual?’](#) report, in January 2020, the CRP Somalia Team invested in a major dissemination and discussion exercise; presentations were made in London (23rd January) but more importantly in Nairobi and Mogadishu, between the 24th February and 2nd March. Meetings in Nairobi included a [public presentation through RVI](#), a mixed donor group meeting, a small Somali NGO group meeting, as well as on an individual agency basis with DfID, FAO, WFP and ICRC. In Mogadishu, presentations were held with a joint UN group, through the UN Integration Unit (under the deputy SRSG) and with a mixed international and national NGO group (under the NGO Consortium). 1 Individual meetings with Government representatives and private businesses were also held in Mogadishu. Each of these meetings was at least 1.5-2 hours long and involved extensive discussion of the research findings and implications. Over 150 people collectively were involved in all of these meetings, the majority being aid practitioners. The online version of the report has been downloaded approximately 600 times (Jan 2020 – Mar 2020).

The purpose of this memo is to capture key issues raised during this intensive dissemination process. The objective of the study itself was to examine how the political economy of food in Somalia had changed with shifts in food assistance (particularly from food aid to cash and nutrition interventions) and changes in governance (the establishment of the Federal Government and the rise of Al Shabaab) over the last 10-15 years, to explore the political marketplace in relation to food, and to analyse changes in regimes of food assistance practices (see page 2 and 3 of report). The role of food in the political economy of Somalia has been well-documented for the 1980s and 1990s (for example in relation to land grabs, control of trade or production, and manipulation of food aid) but much less so in more recent years. This memo summarises some of the key findings of the study along with the messages coming out of the discussions in London, Nairobi and Mogadishu.

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<sup>1</sup> The joint UN meeting in Mogadishu was interrupted by a mortar attack which cut short the discussion, following the presentation itself.

## Key messages from dissemination meetings

**Engagement to discuss findings highly appreciated.** Meeting participants were highly appreciative of the in-depth engagement to discuss the study findings. All considered the report highly critical, with one using the phrase 'disheartening', but also reflecting much of the reality of working in Somalia. Some suggested that the timing is good for discussions on the challenges of aid in Somalia, as the pressure to respond to humanitarian crises is reduced (following good rains), and thus giving some space for reflection. Most importantly, participants – in particular Somali aid workers – welcomed such a frank and honest report. Almost without exception, stakeholders were keen not only to discuss the report findings, but also for this to be the start of a longer-term engagement to improve aid operations in Somalia and to better understand its political economy. Somalia, as one participant said, represents the much discussed 'nexus' where it is necessary to move beyond alleviating symptoms to addressing structural causes of food insecurity.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, some pointed out that forthcoming national elections, debt relief discussions and institutional inertia may act against meaningful change. The COVID-19 emergency may now be added to this.

An often repeated sentiment throughout the dissemination process was that 'the conversation is twenty times more important than the report' highlighting the need and demand for face-to-face interaction and discussion to attempt to address issues raised, above and beyond the dissemination of a report alone.

Another comment received, from the Director of CaLP, was that 'Not every good read is a comfortable one. This new report asks important questions of aid in general and how different modalities - cash included - can concentrate power and be misused. The evidence presents two parallel worlds which need to be brought closer together. The questions raised in this report need a bigger conversation and more action.'

**Need for acknowledgement of achievements since 2011.** The report concludes that despite the changes in governance and in food assistance, power gained through controlling food (whether production, trade or aid) remains concentrated within a limited political and business elite. Another conclusion is that inequality and exploitations of marginalised groups remains, as does diversion and corruption. At the same time, however, the shift from food aid to cash reflects a diffusion of power, as the WFP cartels (and associated diversion) of 2010 and before were replaced by over 1000 WFP vendors as part of a new system of electronic food vouchers. The change also led to aid resources remaining in areas of distribution (e.g. Baidoa), rather than being shipped straight out again through diversion processes (see pages 14-16 of report).

Many participants felt that the report had not reflected sufficiently how things had improved since the famine response of 2011/12. Some felt that the report was very negative and commented that after reading it they had felt like just giving up. This particularly related to the conclusion that aid is not meeting humanitarian aims, as IDPs are in fact often targeted for assistance and are amongst those most in need (see page 10-11, however, for past evaluations showing taxation of aid and exclusion of marginalised groups). In contrast, some audiences suggest things are actually getting better, not only politically and security-wise in Somalia, but also in terms of how the aid community had attempted to address issues of exclusion, diversion and collusion since 2011. Discussions about the considerable resources put into risk mitigation and accountability measures, and on improvement because of diffusion of economic and political power, were much appreciated during the dissemination process. Yet, at the same time, participants felt that the issues raised in the report were true reflections of the challenges they faced on a daily basis. One particular difficulty for operational agencies was that the report presented many challenges but did not give clear programmatic recommendations (and that, of course, there is no simple solution).

**Pressure to speak positively.** In addition to wanting acknowledgement for past achievements, there were other reasons why meeting participants felt there is a need to speak more positively about Somalia. The political-security trajectory in Somalia today is considered by many to be better than it was 5-10 years ago (there are examples in justice, security, health, etc). In addition, a number of participants were fearful that in criticising Hormuud, its role might be jeopardised, and much of Somalia depends on their telecoms and money transfer services. Participants felt that they do good work (schools, hospitals, fire brigade etc.) The study, however, expresses concern at the unregulated increase in the power of money transfers agencies (e.g. Hormuud and Amal), which have grown enormously since aid agencies started cash transfers. It consolidates economic and political power once again within a small number of businesses. Such businesses invest in a range of other products and services, including food trade

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.unocha.org/es/themes/humanitarian-development-nexus>

and production (see page 18-19). They wield an extra-ordinary amount of political and economic influence in the absence of any regulation for business practices, including suitable conditions for labourers.

It is also important to emphasise the link between the need and the pressure to speak in more optimistic terms about both political and humanitarian/aid 'progress', and that this language or discourse becomes part of the reason for insufficient exploration and engagement with underlying power dynamics (this is discussed further below under the 'humanitarian theatre'). The sensitivity around a negative portrayal of Somalia also reflects resentment in Somali circles about always being portrayed as a place of famine, violence, conflict and corruption, and the need to say that some good things are happening. Life in Somalia, they said, is not like in the 1990s.

**Limited government role in aid.** The study finds that the Federal Government (through line ministries) plays only a minor role in food and power, compared to business and aid actors and that this can be a source of resentment (see page 39-42). In meetings, this perception that the Federal Government has no control over how humanitarian assistance funds are spent was confirmed. Some meeting participants thought that the Federal Government's role might change with the increase in development aid, for example by the World Bank. Even with this aid, however, it is easy to underestimate government capacity constraints and there may still be a need to implement with UN organisations. The limited power of the Federal Government ministries contrasts with the district level where district authorities can be much more influential. The case of Dolo, in North Gedo, was brought up as an example of this where a well-known District Commissioner has long controlled all aid resources (see page 43).

**Frontstage and backstage in the humanitarian theatre analogy a good way of analysing aid in Somalia.**

In analysing new aid practices (e.g. cash transfers, nutritional products, behaviour change, resilience promotion, new quantitative indicators of food security, third party monitoring), the study made use of Desportes et al. (2019) analogy of frontstage and backstage in the humanitarian theatre. The study interpreted this in Somalia as reflecting a frontstage of technical progress, but that backstage politics and power continue to be part of aid practices. Most aid actors operate front and backstage at the same time, but keep the two separate (see page 29-30, 35-38). Much discussion was focussed on why and how this happened, and its consequences.

Everyone knows about ongoing collusion and manipulation of aid, of ongoing exclusion or not meeting the needs of vulnerable groups, but there is little incentive to speak about this. Worse, it appears that local NGOs or Somali staff are actively discouraged from talking about it. For example, a local NGO participant in Mogadishu pointed out that he was admonished for speaking out about some of the difficulties of distributing aid in Somalia. For donors and UN agencies too, speaking out about the backstage could mean the closing down of their operations. Another local NGO representative felt that the aid system was not reformable and that the only option is to 'follow the money'. Most, however, thought that a more transparent and honest discussion about what happens to aid in Somalia has to be the starting point for improving it. The involvement of international actors in backstage politics in Somalia was identified by a number of participants as a gap in the study. The role of activism rather than policy in bringing about change was also brought up.

**Continuities in concentration of power and recognition of associated responsibilities.** Aid actors acknowledged that power remains concentrated in small elite circles, currently in particular by WFP (and Amal bank) and Hormud. The position of Hormud was discussed at length by different audiences. As indicated above, on the one hand Hormud is appreciated as a provider of an essential infrastructure and financial services, with thousands of shareholders and tens of thousands of employees, and with a considerable charitable dimension. Hormud have also recently started an agro-bank that provides loans to buy land for commercial agriculture. This appreciation contrasted with its monopoly position and less visible political role vis-à-vis resisting regulation. Some also suggested that Hormud was no different from big businesses elsewhere in the world. At the same time, both WFP and Hormud engaged at length with the report authors, recognising that with their size and power comes with responsibilities, and expressed an interest in follow-up processes.

**Political effects of cash transfers, and ongoing diversion and corruption.** Somalia has been a prominent context globally in the evolution of cash-based programming. As elsewhere, it has been promoted because – compared to in-kind aid – it offers choice, efficiency, and speed and removes the potential for diversion in transit. In Somalia it could also be scaled up rapidly in response to the 2011 famine. Our report is one of the first studies to analyse the political and power implications of cash transfers in emergency contexts. The study is unique in that it has examined the power effects of the logistics and infrastructure associated with cash transfers (using the analytical framework developed by Jaspars, 2018), as illustrated above and in the effects of the rise of money transfer agencies and the

simultaneous diffusion of power. The report also illustrates that manipulation of aid remains a feature of aid practices with cash transfers. As one participant noted, the report highlights that the shift from food aid to cash is associated with the 'decentralisation of power/corruption' in Somalia over the last 10 years'. This study shows that a different aid modality will have its own power effects.

***Sale of land, displacement, and business links – need to better understand food and power in rural areas.*** The study finds an increase in cash crop production in the past 10-15 years, in particular of sesame and lemon. This has been associated with the growth of exports in these crops (and the quick profits to be made), the sale of land in some of the most fertile areas along the river (especially Lower Shabelle and along the Juba river), as well as in relation to Al-Shabaab policies, and displacement and changing consumption patterns (see pages 21-26). Neither government nor aid actors are following these dynamics closely but they have implications for food insecurity and vulnerability to famine, as it primarily affects the livelihoods of the large, rural and structurally marginalised groups of southern Somalia. While contested by some, the purchase of land for commercial agriculture by wealthy individuals and businesses (see page 25-26) was confirmed by many meeting participants, especially in Mogadishu. The conditions under which this is taking place, and its consequences, and Al-Shabaab's role, need further exploration. Some argued, for example, that if the purchase and consolidation of fertile land by wealthy individuals led to more food production and lower food prices it could in theory improve food security. The extent to which the sale of land and movement to urban areas is forced also needs further examination. In other words, even if no physical violence is used, people may be 'forced' to sell because they have no other options. Local NGO representatives suggested that minority clans were put under pressure to sell their land, in particular during drought or floods. Others said aid in towns acts as a pull factor. It should not be forgotten, however, that Lower Shabelle has a long history of land grabs by powerful elites and clans.

***Benefits of maintaining displacement.*** The report argues that the maintenance of large numbers of protracted displaced populations has become a business opportunity (in terms of attracting aid and providing a cheap and flexible labour force - including for the commercial cash crop production discussed above) (see page 47-49). Participants commented that the report's portrayal of IDPs as a business opportunity made for uncomfortable reading and appeared too extreme. At the same time, however, meeting participants agreed that regardless of how the current situations had come about, there may indeed be little incentive for aid actors, business, government, and possibly Al Shabaab to change the status quo of the large numbers of displaced in government-held towns. This includes the political benefits for governments and western donors around narratives of state-building. One meeting participant talked about the 'ruralisation of cities' and the need to change the way we understand rural-urban dynamics. All agreed the key issue is how to better understand the social and political dynamics of the current context, including the political economy of displacement, and to find a way to get out of it.

***Need for qualitative methods in exploratory studies.*** This research exercise was a scoping study with the aim of understanding the 'big picture' around changes and continuities in food and power, and identifying key themes and areas for further exploration. For this reason, it uses qualitative methods, including a comprehensive literature review and key informant interviews in Nairobi, Mogadishu and Baidoa with long-term aid workers, businessmen (food, money transfer), government officials, and IDP representatives. All information gathered was triangulated to maximise reliability. The focus is on southern and central Somalia because this has been the area that has suffered from famine most often, and which has experienced the most extreme food aid manipulation in the past. A number of meeting participants suggested the need for more quantitative data collection, for example changes in the % of the population receiving food aid, % reliance on imported food, inclusion and exclusion errors for cash transfers as compared to food aid. These are undoubtedly useful data to understand aspects of food security in Somalia, but would not have led to a broader analysis of the political economy of food, or enabled an exploration of the relationships and interactions examined in the study.

## **Next steps?**

The report 'Food and Power in Somalia: Business as Usual?' provides a 'big picture' view of the Somalia predicament today. It raises issues around the ongoing concentration of power in production, trade and aid, the interplay of business, politics and aid, and the long-term marginalisation and exploitation of certain ethnic groups. The centrality of aid – development, security and humanitarian – has been a feature of the Somali political environment from at least the 1980s. It should be no surprise that it remains so.

The willingness to engage with the authors of such a critical report suggests there are options for continuing the conversation. Many stakeholders, in fact, suggested that rather than limiting discussion

to one dissemination visit, this should be the start of an ongoing process on how to better understand the social and political context, and to improve aid in Somalia. This could be taken forward in different ways depending on the commitment and initiative of different actors in the aid environment. Agencies in the report have expressed interest in turning the analysis on the political economy of food into more policy and programmatically actionable points. This interest resonates with the 'better aid facility', around which many discussions have already taken place but who's implementation and modus operandi is still to be developed and will take time to materialise. In the interim, this memo and the associated report and dissemination process provide an invitation for further follow-up.



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