



Hidden dimensions of the Somalia famine

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ABSTRACT

This article adopts a socio-political lens in order to better understand the Somalia famine. As a result it draws out important continuities with the famine of the early 1990s as well as specific food security and vulnerability characteristics within Somalia which have largely been absent in discussions of the famine to date. 'Minority' populations were most affected in both famines and this identity overlaps with specific geographic areas and more sedentary, rural and agriculturally based livelihoods, distinct from other population groups. We argue that these dimensions, important in understanding long-term marginalization processes and outcomes, also help to understand the differential levels of risk and other complicating factors in the 2011 famine.

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1. Introduction

The dominant explanatory narrative of the 2011 Somalia famine has been based on drought and crop failure combined with restricted humanitarian access ascribed to the extremist group, *Al-Shabaab*. Certain ethnic, livelihood and wealth groups were disproportionately affected by the 2011 famine in Somalia. These were predominantly drawn from historically minority and marginalized populations that were also by far the biggest 'victims' in the 1991/92 famine; the *Reewin* and *Bantu* (De Waal, 1994; Cassanelli, 1995). This socio-political dimension has not been evident in the discussion and analysis of the famine to date. Understanding why only certain populations groups were reduced to catastrophic humanitarian levels within a widespread humanitarian crisis across south/central Somalia, since 2006, is the central aim of this article. Of particular interest is that the areas and people identified as being in the worst humanitarian conditions prior to the famine were generally not those who fell into 'famine', according to the Integrated Phase Classification (IPC) categorization system used in Somalia (see explanation of the IPC in Box 1).

The following analysis reveals a unique convergence of risk factors facing the poor wealth groups of the agro-pastoral *Reewin* and riverine *Bantu* within a broader context of narrowing livelihoods and diminishing resilience. This understanding has implications for food security and livelihoods analysis, early warning and

programmatic responses. The authors have drawn upon available technical information from international agencies, particularly the United Nations Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit (FSNAU) and the High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), and other available literature and complemented this with interviews and exchanges with a number of Somali and non-Somali scholars and 'experts'.

2. Who were the famine affected population?

By October 2011, 750,000 people were classified as being 'in Famine conditions' (FSNAU and FEWS NET, 2011), which translated into approximately 17% of the population of south/central Somalia. Of this population roughly 65% were from rural areas and 35% were Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) residing in the IDP camps in Mogadishu and the Afgooye Corridor. Of the 490,000 people from rural areas, they were all identified in the 'poor' or 'very poor' wealth categories, the majority (81%) from the inter-riverine agro-pastoral areas of Bay and Bakool, and the remainder divided between the riverine, farming areas of Middle Shabelle and Lower Shabelle (15%) and 'poor' pastoralists (4%) (FSNAU, 2011: 2–3). See Somali livelihood groups in the map on page 5 The agricultural populations — the riverine farmers and agro-pastoralists — are the focus of this article, and considered 'minority' groups (Cassanelli, 1995).

The vast majority of agro-pastoralists residing in the famine affected areas are also identifiable as the *Reewin* clan. They are part of the Somali segmentary lineage system, but considered distinct from the 'noble' or major clans (ibid). This broad clan-family is more sedentary than the major, and historically pastoral, clans, growing rain-fed sorghum and keeping cattle and small ruminants. The poorer populations within this livelihood group

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Box 1–The IPC.

This article refers to the Integrated Phase Classification framework (IPC), originally developed by the FSNAU in Somalia and since extended to other countries. The framework is used to facilitate analysis of food security conditions based on available indicators, information and local knowledge. The major output of the IPC is a scale of food security and humanitarian status ostensibly used to target humanitarian resources, and based on the following five categories (in descending order): Generally Food Secure; Chronically Food Insecure; Acute Food and Livelihoods Crisis; Humanitarian Emergency; and Famine/Humanitarian Catastrophe. We refer to the Humanitarian Emergency (HE) and ‘famine’/‘in famine conditions’ in the text below.

rely on agricultural and/or urban-based labor in particular to supplement their own crop production, small livestock holdings and other minor food/income sources.

The second largest rural population ‘in famine conditions’ were riverine farmers. This group is primarily composed of the Somalis of *Bantu* origin, not part of the Somali clan system, and considered a ‘minority’ group (ibid). They primarily live along the Shabelle and Juba rivers, farming a variety of cereal and cash crops, including maize, in irrigated and rainfed conditions, keeping few livestock. The poorer wealth groups here, with no or small landholdings, also rely heavily on agricultural and/or urban-based labor for access to food/income. The *Reewin* and *Bantu* reside in and constitute the ‘breadbasket’ of Somalia.

The IDP population, an estimated 260,000 people, were classified by the IPC system as ‘in famine conditions’. Although not studied in detail, key informant interviews and occasional agency reports suggest that a significant proportion of this population are *Reewin* and *Bantu*, originating from the Shabelle regions, Bay and Bakool (geographical proximity and historical movements suggest these ‘minority’ populations are predominant in the IDP camps in Mogadishu and the Afgooye Corridor). In Mogadishu and the Afgooye Corridor IDPs relied on daily labor (urban and agricultural) and petty trading activities for access to food and income as well as various forms of assistance from different local and international actors (FSNAU, 2010: 37).

3. Livelihoods, clan and politics

Social and political factors are often critical yet under appreciated areas of food security and livelihoods analysis, particularly in situations of conflict and instability (Collinson et al., 2002). In Somalia, the major clans have historically dominated political and economic structures and resources (competing between and within themselves) (Cassanelli, 1995). Pastoral society became the dominant culture following the formation of the state in the early 1960s and nomadic tradition was glorified (Bradbury, 2008: 11). In an African (and global) context in which pastoralism is itself often marginalized, this is an interesting phenomenon, however in Somalia it occurred where ‘minority’ communities and their livelihood systems were marginalized.

In this light, consider the last major famine in Somalia, in 1991/92, where 200,000–300,000 people died predominantly from the *Reewin* and *Bantu* (De Waal, 1994; Hansch et al., 1994). These population groups were the target of looting and violence by the more powerful major clan militias. Livestock and food stores were targeted. There was an important spatial dimension to this famine, resonant again in 2011, with Cassanelli describing the *Reewin* as ‘landlocked’ (1995), bordered by the two rivers, more powerful clans and relatively distant from the

borders of Ethiopia and Kenya (Kenya has always been the more important safe haven given the much greater presence of humanitarian actors in comparison to the more restrictive context in Ethiopia). The famine was exacerbated by the large-scale diversion of humanitarian aid. De Waal credits the early relief response to the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement, and some international and national NGOs, with the United Nations arriving much later (de Waal, 1994; Bradbury, 2008).

The complexity of vulnerability in the Somali context is succinctly explained by Devereux, in his description of the neighboring Somali populated area of Ethiopia. He states that the ‘economy of Somali Region is a complex, interconnected system of social networks and political negotiations, where the sustainability or vulnerability of each livelihood depends as much on the individual’s interpersonal relationships, and on international geopolitics, as on his or her assets and income at any point in time. In this context, livelihood vulnerability is affected by processes of social change, and by political instability. Drought triggers livelihood crises but underlying causes of vulnerability in Somali region are social and political, not natural.’ (2006: 11). Although there are significant differences in context, there are also many similarities and these principles are applicable across the Somali populated regions (see LeSage and Majid, 2002).

This interplay of livelihoods, clan and politics is fundamental to an informed understanding of the 2011 Somalia famine, reflecting the reality of social and political life but also dimensions that are complex and fluid and therefore difficult to understand. Although we argue that these dynamics are not sufficiently integrated into food security and livelihoods analysis in relation to the famine, recent political volatility, the difficulties of field access, and the sensitivities of these subjects have complicated matters further.

4. Fluctuating humanitarian conditions and obscured levels of risk

The FSNAU information, analysis and early warning system in Somalia has been a pioneer in the field and is recognized for its quality and the critical role it played prior to and during the famine. Fig. 1 below highlights the seasonal and annual fluctuations of population in ‘humanitarian emergency’ (HE), the level before ‘famine’, by region, since 2006. Involving several hundred thousand people each year, these figures do not include the

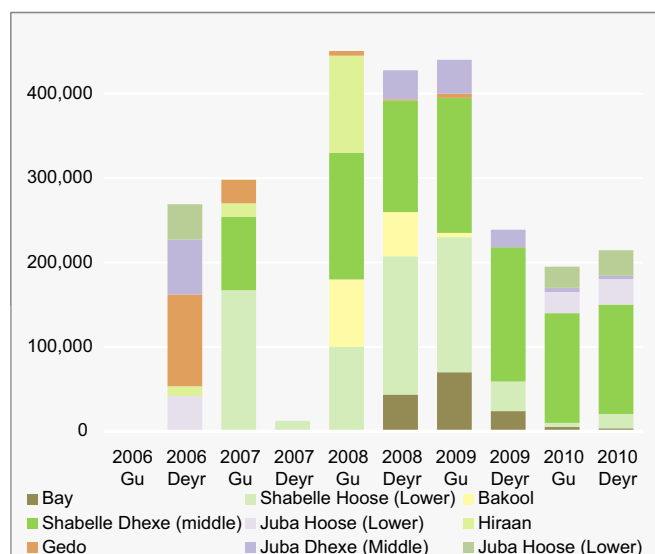


Fig. 1. Population in Humanitarian Emergency.

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