



Fishermen, pirates, and the politics of aid: An analysis of the Somali Fishermen Registration Programme



Dr. Brittany Gilmer

Department of Criminal Justice, Florida International University, 11200 S.W. 8th St., Modesto A. Maidique, Miami, FL 33199, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 15 June 2016

Received in revised form 17 October 2016

Accepted 18 October 2016

Available online 25 October 2016

Keywords:

Development

Identities

Fishermen

Pirates

United Nations

Somalia

ABSTRACT

Once labeled the largest single threat to international shipping in recent years, piracy off the coast of Somalia is at an all-time low. Although the immediate threat of piracy attacks appears to be quelled, the issue of Somali piracy still haunts the coast of Somalia through the criminalization of maritime populations. This paper analyzes the joint effort of Somali regional governments and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) to register and decriminalize Somali fishermen off the coast of Somalia. As part of the Somali fishermen registration programme, over 5000 fishermen have registered their biometric data with the Puntland, Galmudug, and Somaliland governments. I examine the practices of data entry and the distribution of fishermen identification cards through interviews with government officials, FAO field officers, representatives of fishing communities, and participant observations made at a data validation workshop held in Bossaso, Somalia. Located in the context of long-term research on United Nations programming to combat piracy off the coast of Somalia, the case study illustrates how various actors utilized the Somali fishermen registration programme to marginalize particular populations and reshape future geographies of aid.

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1. Introduction

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS) states “the high seas are open to all States, whether coastal or land-locked,” and included in the freedom of the high seas is the freedom of navigation and fishing (www.un.org). As such, the seas are generally considered public space. However, recently spotlighted issues such as the migration crisis and maritime crime reveal that the seas are neither apolitical spaces nor are they accessible to all. Attempts to identify, monitor, and address illegal activities taking place on the high seas during “anxious times” have proved difficult (Silvey, 2009). One such maritime issue that has solicited unparalleled amounts of international attention and investment in the past five years is piracy off the coast of Somalia. Labeled the “largest single threat to international shipping in recent years,” the international community’s response to the Somali piracy “crisis” was the establishment of various multi-lateral and bi-lateral counter piracy operations that remain in operation today (Oceans, 2013). These counter piracy operations totaling an estimated \$3.2 billion per year include naval operations, criminal justice programming, and onshore development and advocacy projects (Oceans, 2013).

E-mail address: bgilmer@fiu.edu

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2016.10.017>
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The number of Somali piracy attacks peaked between 2009 and 2010. At the conclusion of 2015, the Commercial Crime Services of the International Maritime Bureau reported no actual or attempted piracy attacks off the coast of Somalia (ICC IMB, 2015).¹ Although the international community applauds the successes of both the onshore and at sea counter piracy efforts, they neglect to recognize the long-term impacts of both piracy and counter piracy operations on the region, Somalia, and the people of Somalia. Even though the immediate threat of piracy attacks appears to be quelled, the issue of Somali piracy continues to haunt the coast of Somalia through the criminalization of maritime populations and space. As the waters off the coast of Somalia are continually constructed as harboring potential pirates and/or pirates-in-waiting, any male Somali found transiting through or laboring within these waters risks being suspected of or arrested for piracy-related activities.

This article situates the criminalization of male Somalis in maritime spaces within critical development studies literature to

¹ These statistics are slightly different from those reported by the International Maritime Organization (IMO) who recorded four attempted or actual attacks in East Africa and eighteen attempted or actual attacks in the Indian Ocean in 2015 (IMO, 2016). However, it is unclear whether the attacks recorded by the IMO are associated with Somali piracy or individuals of other national origins. Irrespective, piracy attacks off the coast of Somalia are at an all-time low.

analyze the joint effort of Somali regional governments and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) to register Somali fishermen off the coast of Somalia. The goal of this article is not to evaluate the effectiveness of the registration programme. Rather, the purpose is to illustrate how the politics and practices of development as they played out at various sites of the registration process became central to shaping who is recognized as legitimate fishermen in Somalia, and therefore, decriminalized and eligible for future development aid. The way in which Somali fishermen and their employment niches are being legitimized and managed demonstrate how the identification of Somali maritime populations has come to embody tensions between combatting a regional threat to the global political economy, protecting Somalia's natural resources, and gaining a better understanding of Somalia's artisanal fishermen.

In order to work through these arguments, the paper is divided into four parts. I begin by discussing how maritime geography and critical development studies scholarship provide a framework for examining the FAO Somali Fishermen Registration Programme within the longer history of international intervention in Somalia. I then introduce the concepts of “potential pirates” and “pirates-in-waiting” to explore the criminalization of Somali maritime populations. Next, I introduce the FAO Somali Fishermen Registration Programme and outline the programme goals, key actors, and sites and practices of the implementation process. Here, I discuss the ways in which obtaining fishermen's biometric data was promoted as a tool for better understanding Somalia's artisanal fishermen, developing Somalia's fisheries sector, and decriminalizing Somali fishermen. I then examine the practices of entering data and distributing fishermen identification cards to draw out the local politics and struggles at work in legitimizing fishermen and securing access to future development aid. Lastly, I conclude by reflecting upon the role of the FAO Fishermen Registration Programme in remapping spaces of de/criminalization and aid.

The following discussion is based on six months of participant observation with the Somali Fishermen Registration Programme conducted by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) Somali Fisheries Sector.² As part of the programme, I analyzed fishermen registration data and co-conducted a research data analysis workshop in Bossaso, Somalia with members of the Puntland and Galmudug Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources, FAO Somali-based project staff, and representatives of various Puntland and Galmudug fishing communities. The goal of the workshop was to “ground truth” the quantitative data by asking the Somali representatives to interpret it within the respective cultural, social, and historical contexts of Somalia and local fishing communities. The discussions that took place during the workshop not only shed light on the successes and challenges of implementing the fishermen registration programme, but they also provided a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics and social profile of Somalia's artisanal fishermen. This article is part of a larger ethnographic research project undertaken between 2012 and 2016 examining the establishment, expansion, and impact of United Nations programming for combating piracy off the coast of Somalia.

2. The sea, development, and international meddling

Maritime spaces and populations remains an understudied area in geography. Phillip [Steinberg \(1999\)](#) argues that maritime spaces

are socially and culturally rich spaces that have been marginalized from traditionally studied land-based regions. Agreeing that geography is a “landlocked” discipline, [Lambert et al. \(2006\)](#) call for a re-centering of oceans and seas in geography studies. Heeding this call, several geographers are producing research that examines maritime spaces and populations utilizing various theoretical approaches including mobilities studies, historical research, and political ecology. Recent research by [Peters \(2015\)](#) explores the action of “drifting” as a form of maritime movement. [Stanley's \(2008\)](#) historical research shifts the analysis on board ships to examine gender through oral narratives of women seafarers. Also considering gender, work by [Hapke and Ayyankeri \(2004\)](#) explores different patterns of work among male and female fisher folk in a South Indian fish market. These studies of maritime movements, seafarers, and fisher folk have all contributed to re-centering maritime populations and spaces.

Critical development studies scholarship can also play a critical role in challenging the land/sea divide of academic inquiry.³ In doing so, development scholars should pay particular attention to theorizing maritime spaces as spaces of development and maritime populations as both subjects of and experts of development politics ([Silvey and Rankin, 2011](#)). In particular, studies must recognize how and under what circumstances particular politics and power struggles transverse the land/sea boundary as individuals move about maritime spaces and across land. Utilizing an analytical approach promoted by [Li \(2005\)](#), one that avoids focusing on the state and instead focuses on “the practice of politics and people's interactions with the interventions of national government and intuitions”, this article examines how the Somali Fishermen Registration Programme is appropriated by different actors through different practices. (p. 384) This framework also considers [Lawson's \(2007\)](#) argument that mainstream development is an “unfinished” project that is “continually being reworked in specific sites and places” (p. 69).

Heeding [Hickey's \(2009\)](#) call to take history seriously and promote a long view within development studies, it is essential to note the messiness relative to (and even within) particular expert visions of the need to develop and secure Somalia has persisted across historical periods. Preceding and throughout the colonial period, Somalia and the Somali people were subjected to the violence of territorial expansion and political jockeying occurring between various Western states. Moving forward, the Somali people were treated as pawns throughout the Cold War era as both Washington and Moscow intensely competed to gain the allegiance of the strategically located country. This external meddling has continued throughout and long after the fall of the Siad Barre regime. Today, Western governments and international organizations remain openly (and covertly) involved in the daily political, economic, and social life in Somalia, albeit under the guise of improving Somalia's development and security situations. The recent incidences of piracy off the coast of Somalia must also be understood within this context of Somalia's long geopolitical history of failed international interventions. Ensuring the safe passage of shipping vessels transiting waters off the coast of Somalia is vital to the economies of many Western governments. As a result, piracy has triggered a new wave of external military and international aid programming for which the long term successes and impacts on the Somali people are yet to be fully understood. This article contributes a very specific, focused study—with a focus on UN interventions into developing Somalia's

² The FAO documentation classifies Somali artisanal fishermen as “fisher folk” to reflect the gender equality goals of the broader United Nations system. However, “fishermen” is the term used throughout Somalia where fishing is considered a man's profession. I use the term “fishermen” throughout this article.

³ A separate, extensive literature that has relevance for the study of piracy and the fishing industry more generally is political ecology. Although the political ecology analysis is outside the scope of this paper, several key studies include: [Elmhirst \(2011\)](#), [Goldman et al. \(2011\)](#), and [Bakker \(2013\)](#).

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