

INSIGHTS FOR RESOLVING CONFLICTS IN THE HORN OF AFRICA:
LOCAL EFFORTS BY A SOMALI NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATION

by Edward Uechi

I had landed in the Horn of Africa, and felt relieved as I stepped out of the interior of the Boeing 737 aircraft and into the bright sunlight. The mid-December day was tempered by the crisp breeze from the sea. The weather did feel nice – similar to that of northern California.

I was welcomed by the project coordinator (an unassuming gentleman) who represents the Somali organization with which one American organization had signed a strategic partnership. He quickly informed me of the procedures for exiting Berbera airport. I had to pay \$70, \$20 for the entrance fee and \$50 simply to exchange U.S. dollars for Somaliland Shillings. As the agent handed three new bundles of bills in denominations of 500 Somaliland Shillings, my eyes widened in awe. I could not believe the amount in physical size.

The purpose for traveling to this particular place in East Africa was to meet the local organization, Haqsoor NGO, and to evaluate its capacity to carry out programs related to conflict resolution. This visit had been the first to see the real situation on the ground and from the local perspective. I had consciously made the effort to suspend my judgments so that my senses could absorb the feelings, attitudes, and overall environs. I listened to what the locals had to say.

This article is about one Somali, non-governmental organization (NGO) that has been operating since 2003 to build peace in its native homeland. It is unique in its region where it focuses on the essence of peace. That is, it facilitates the coming together of people to talk about the issues and to settle disputes and grievances. The concept is rather simple, but one that carries significance in the development of political stability, economic longevity, and social cohesion.

The work of Haqsoor NGO shows that there is a constructive way toward rebuilding a nation that has only seen violence and suffering for 20 years. This article informs the general public on what can be done to solve the dilemma of the Somali people.

While the south-central region of Somalia has been engulfed in violent conflict, the northern region called Somaliland continues to operate and struggle under the radar to develop itself. Previous literature on Somalia labels Somaliland as the “northwest” region. The odd, arrow-shaped border layout of the entire country does not provide for neat demarcation of geography. It seems more appropriate to label Somaliland more generally as the northern region. This part of Somalia has had the stronger foundation on which to nurture a democratic society. Mr. Mohamed Salaax, who (had been educated in the United Kingdom and had served as a director-general in the Somali government) is the executive director of Haqsoor, said, “Peace and democracy is not by accident [in Somaliland].” He referred to the past when the British had ruled over Somaliland for 80 years. He contrasted that experience with the history of the south-central region. He called the Italians as “ruthless” in controlling the south. The difference in British and Italian administrations became evident after the two colonies were merged in 1960. Mohamed Salaax humorously recalled that the British had the desire to “save the Somali people.” He mentioned that the British had taken a peculiar interest in the origin of Somali. People in this part of Somalia refer to themselves as “Somalilanders.” He further explained how the foreigners’ motivation was a driver in dividing the Somali ethnic group whereby British leaders could focus their attention on the northern region with particular emphasis on the Gulf of Aden, which has held strategic interest for trade and commerce.

From the end of British and Italian rule in 1960 to a military coup in 1991, the two regions had been united under one country. The military general, Siad Barre, seized control in

1969 and had instituted a mix of Islam and socialism. Separation between the north and the south continued to exist in a kind of social isolation. Mohamed Salaax expressed that there was no social contact between the two regions. Within the immediate months after the downfall of Siad Barre, Somalilanders had successfully broken away to form the Republic of Somaliland in May, 1991. To date, no foreign country has officially recognized Somaliland's independence. The international community observes Somalia as a single nation-state. A central government in Mogadishu has been formed since 2004, but its status is transitional. Because of historical legacies, Somalilanders consider themselves separate – on political and social grounds – from their fellow Somalis in the south. Mohamed Salaax hopes that there can be congenial relations.

Unifying forces that bring the two regions together are rooted in ethnicity, language, and religion. The majority of Somalis follow Islam – Sunni Islam. The Somali language is the written and spoken language. The Somaliland government has made Somali, Arabic, and English as three official languages. The Somali ethnicity is a distinct group in the wider, East Africa region. The Somali culture forms the basis for a homogeneous nation.

What creates disunity, in the word of Mohamed Salaax, is the tradition of the clan. Based on family ancestry, a single clan can extend to 30 generations. The core unit of the clan – which provides the most stability – makes up the last four to six generations. These smaller units can develop into several sub clans. Members in recent generations represent the most loyal group of the clan family.

When a crime has been violated or a civil dispute has arisen in Somaliland, the involved parties go through procedures of customary law known as Xeer (pronounced, “Hare”). Xeer is a type of social contract as agreed to by members of a clan. The mediator (who is the judge in Western terminology) is the clan leader or traditional elder. The elder handles the case by the use

of past experience and precedence. If different clans are involved, then the elders from respective clans are represented. Often poetry is expressed. All cases are undocumented, oral interpretations. The Xeer procedures have elements that have shared principles with Western democracy like jury trial and appeal. Xeer is the traditional system that has existed before the introduction of Islam and has evolved to incorporate Sharia law. In Somaliland, certain punishments such as stoning are not followed. Death may be imposed. Most penalties are less punitive and involve the transaction of livestock, the confiscation of property, or the prohibition of some act. Most people in Somaliland prefer the traditional system over the judicial courts as being inexpensive, expeditious, and unbiased.

Haqsoor has focused its efforts on conflict resolution by supporting the Xeer procedures and assisting the traditional elders. After identifying and assessing the problem, technical staff organize a form of community mediation for concerned groups within a clan and between two or more clans. After an agreement has been reached, staff members drive out to the districts in which the groups reside and announce the results, using a public address (PA) system mounted to the vehicle. The local communities become aware of the solution. Technical staff finally conclude the case by documenting their work in a formal report.

In 2004, Haqsoor was successful in mediating a dispute between an eastern clan and a western clan in Burao district. Several meetings were held to reconcile the issue. The traditional elders had led the discussions with support from Haqsoor staff. A tangible result of this case was the construction of an “elder house,” where traditional elders could go to and meet in a central location to discuss any issue that arose. Mohamed Salaax said that there has been no conflict ever since.

A noteworthy case illustrates the application of the Quran to protect women. Nine

widows had been forced at gun point to marry their deceased husband's next of kin. During the mediation session it was pointed out in a Quranic verse that the woman needs to give her consent to marriage. All of the involved parties agreed with the religious text. The Haqsoor project coordinator said that all available methods are applied in resolving conflicts.

Most cases that Haqsoor facilitates involve killings and rapes. Environmental issues have increasingly been sources of conflict in recent years. Competing clans have made claims over land use and water rights. During the rainy season, the dry riverbeds instantly flood and drain out to sea. The main road from Berbera to Hargeisa crosses many riverbeds without protecting structures, and as a result becomes a danger zone for least careful drivers. Healthy trees are being cut, burned, and sold as charcoal across Somaliland. This activity is forcing villagers to raise income in the midst of losing their traditional livelihood. Decreased grazing lands, increased water shortages, and other issues are driving Somali nomads to urban areas. This internal migration is applying increasing stress on city infrastructure which the Somaliland government cannot rehabilitate without substantial revenues. The capital of Hargeisa has grown in population for the last two years.

Limitations in local efforts to improve on present conditions and in resolving conflicts especially are being recognized. In a discussion about the border area with Puntland (which is the third region in the northeast at the tip of the Horn), the Somaliland Minister of Information, H.E. Ahmed Abdi Habsade, said that issues had been settled temporarily. Agreements could unravel if permanent solutions cannot be implemented. Customary law is constrained by narrow precedence to deal with modern-day problems in which the nomadic clans are forced to fit in to new, unfamiliar situations. Life in the pastoral areas has been the primary understanding of traditional elders.

Haqsoor itself is limited in resources and funding. Standing on a management foundation of financial management, human resources, and executive leadership, the organization has been able to reach to all areas in Somaliland. Low levels of knowledge in necessary skills among administrative staff pose barriers to growth, however. Managing projects and information are technical areas where the organization is weakest.

Despite limited resources and the modest budget, Haqsoor staff exude a high degree of pride in their work and communications. Mohamed Salaax created impressions of friendliness, generosity, and directness that have rubbed off to the employees. He provided encouragement with reference to the Quran and said that a problem should not go unresolved for more than three days. He proudly affirmed, “Dialog is always an option.” The majority of employees responded in a survey that they have high reliance on mutual discussions in resolving conflicts. Military force is not a reliable means, according to the average viewpoint of Haqsoor personnel.

For eight years, Haqsoor has been working to help Somalis across Somaliland. Its support for the traditional system has garnered respect among local communities. While preserving the integrity of that system, it is wrapping the system with standards of governance to elevate customary law to a new level. It advocates for and assists migrants, refugees, and other groups who need help in times of crisis. Haqsoor has remained true to its cultural heritage.

Work still remains, given limited experiences, basic tools, constrained resources, and the overall political situation. Conditions in Somaliland and across Somalia are not at all fixed. Ongoing violence perpetuated by inter-clan and sub clan rivalries continues to bog down the local population from succeeding in long-term development, and could potentially wipe away the gains.

In defining the meaning of peace, Mohamed Salaax enthusiastically said, “Peace is the

bedding of the man.” Without the foundation of peace, any attempt to provide substantial economic development like capital investment projects will be shaky at best and wasteful at worst. Peace, that is the coming to terms with grievances both individually and collectively, remains the first and critical step to achieving long-standing security. Nothing else matters if a person or a community is not at peace with themselves. People could survive, scrounging for what available means exist, but they will remain shivering in the harsh, cold world.

Haqsoor NGO, a forward-looking, progressive and independent organization, moves in a direction that can unify Somalis. Local efforts rooted in the simple concept of meaningful dialog have produced public good in Somaliland. Additional assistance could replicate the model to other areas. A positive course deemed fully acceptable by local Somalis and agreeable to foreign observers could be developed for the Horn of Africa.

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