

**Humanitarian assistance during
conflict in a state-less society:
The case of Somalia**

Siegfried Pausewang

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Prepared for the workshop on "Aid and Humanitarian Assistance in Africa", Arusha 27-29 June 1998

Chr. Michelsen Institute *Development Studies and Human Rights*

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Price: NOK 50 + postage

ISSN 0804-3639

ISBN 82-90584-38-5

Indexing terms

Humanitarian assistance

Conflict

Public administration

Local partners

Somalia

Summary

This working paper was prepared for the workshop on "Aid and Humanitarian Assistance in Africa" in Arusha, 27-29 June, 1998, with financial support from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It is based on a series of interviews with aid agencies operating in Somalia after the crisis of 1992-1993. It tries to map out how different agencies reacted in a state-less society, which efforts they made to help re-build local administrative and political structures, which local partners they worked with, how they dealt with security issues, and how they assessed the prospects for the future of Somalia.

The report first gives a critical overview over the problems and the different positions held on these issues, before giving a short overview over the responses of the different agencies.

The central observation of the report is the dilemma faced by agencies which want to give humanitarian aid to the affected people without compromising the efforts of the local population to form new local structures, and without contributing to a continuation of internal warfare. It shows that agencies find different solutions to these problems, and act on different assumptions and hence with different objectives - though towards a common goal.

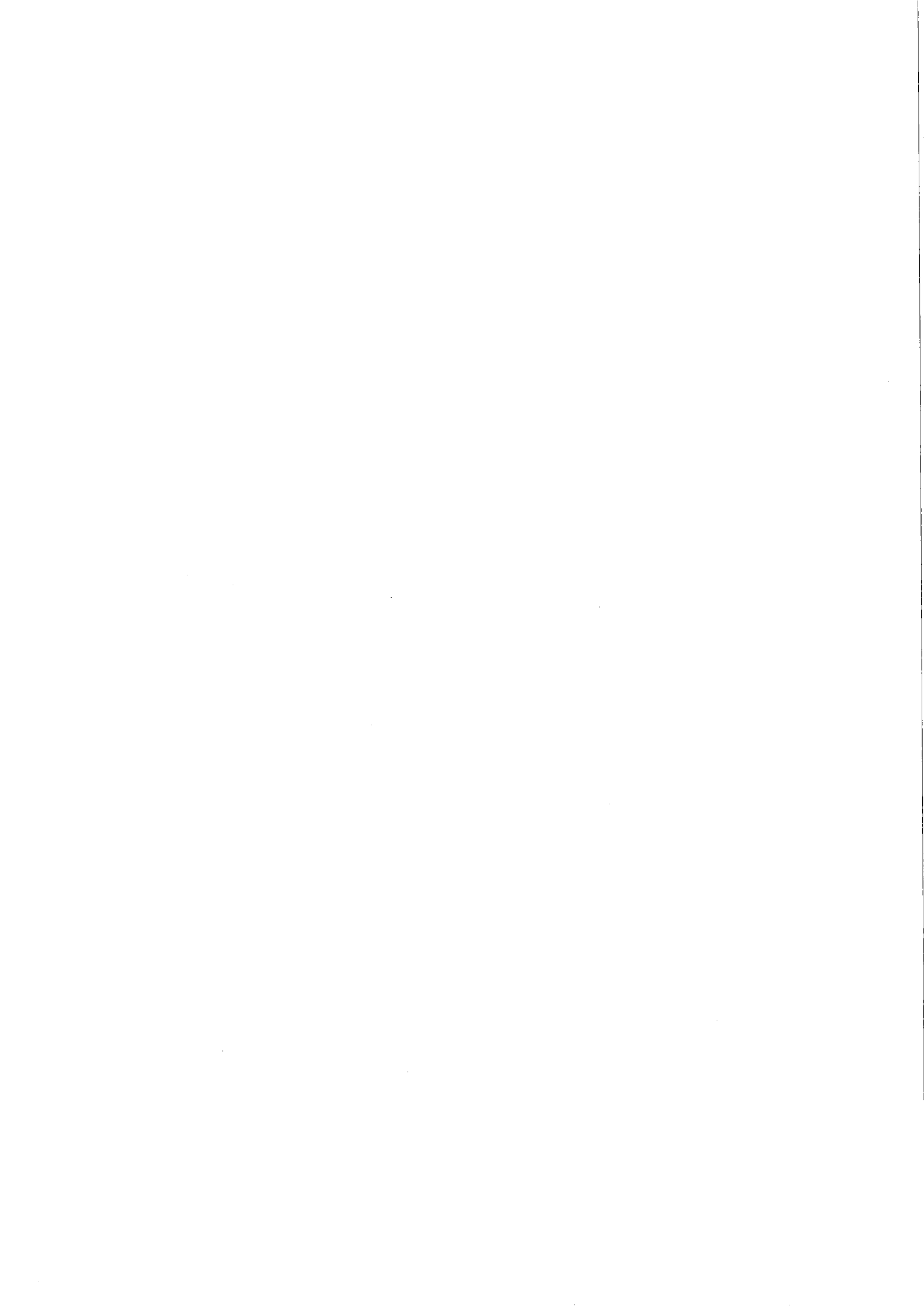
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Humanitarian assistance during conflict in a state-less society: The case of Somalia

Aid organizations which continued to operate in Somalia after the civil war in the early 1990s are faced with an extraordinarily difficult situation. There is a great need for humanitarian aid, but there is no legitimate state authority to which the organizations can relate, and the identity of partners for collaboration is uncertain. Even more problematic is the confusion about who are the recipients of aid. The lack of clear structures on both the authority and recipient side raises the prospect that instead of reaching people in need, aid may go to the warlords and fuel the conflict. The problem has been noted in many situations, but is particularly serious in the Somalia case (Alex de Waal 1995, 1996, Mark Duffield 1996, John Prendergast 1996, 1997, Michael Maren 1997).

The humanitarian motivation of giving aid to save lives and reduce human suffering is not invalidated by the fact that relief aid, once it assumes massive proportions, necessarily constitutes an intervention that rarely is neutral in its effect on the conflict. However, the aid intervention in Somalia has been sharply criticized for having little or no relation to Somali society or the decision-making processes of the recipients.

This paper discusses some of the dilemmas of providing humanitarian assistance during conflict as these appear in the context of Somalia in the 1990s. Specific attention is given to the issue of the relationship between aid and authority, and the role of the Somali state – or its alternative – in the transition from relief aid to development assistance. The analysis is partly based on structured interviews with major Scandinavian and other international aid agencies that operate in Somalia in the 1990s. A summary of these interviews is given in the second part of the report.

I: DILEMMAS OF PROVIDING ASSISTANCE:

An understanding of the dilemmas facing foreign aid organizations must take as its starting point the nature, and disappearance, of the Somali state. Somalia, it will be recalled, was for two decades known as the only ethnically homogenous state in Africa. This gave reason for concern among neighbors when Somalia claimed areas inhabited by Somali people in Djibouti, Ethiopia and Kenya, all of which had considerable Somali minorities in the border areas. A "Pan-Somali" ideology might have served the military regime to create an alternative legitimacy for the centralised nation state. Yet, instead of uniting the Somali people in all these areas into one nation, the Somali state broke apart in internal fighting.

Several observers have argued that the Somali government never represented the Somali people in any meaningful way. The Somali state was purely a creation of the colonial powers. The Somali people were divided between British Somaliland, Italian Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya and Djibouti (or French Somaliland). At independence, the Italian and British colonies of Somalia were united under one state, and its administration handed over to Somalis who were at hand and could take over: persons and parties created by the colonial authorities from elites in their service. They inherited a state apparatus and a military, but no meaningful relations to the cultural life of the nomadic clans and families in the countryside. The Somali society - which revolves around, and is structured into, clans, subclans, lineages and families - did not even provide the tax base for a central government: the latter existed largely on resources provided by foreign aid, including military assistance (Heinrich 1997:124, Lewis 1996:24).

While the clan structure continued to govern local life, the government was confined to administer Somalia's participation in the international world of states. Based on military power and functioning in the margins of the society, the leaders were viewed by the people as the donors' government - or, after the coup which brought General Siad Barré to power, that of the military establishment. When Siad Barré tried to establish control over the country, clashes ensued, and the government responded with military force. That eventually brought the clan structure up against the government and led to civil war. When Siad Barré was ousted and sent into exile with his military elites, a structure of warlords developed in the military power structure which existed alongside the clans, each of them aspiring to inherit state power. The clan leaders, however, generally did not see a need for a new government, and were unwilling to provide resources for its establishment.

Somewhat simplified, the present "amorphous" or "anarchic" situation in Somalia can thus be described as a competition between two opposing concepts of political order: the "central government and military" tradition of the warlords, versus the people's representation in clan leaders, elders, local councils.

In this perspective, the "implosion" of government, as it is termed in an international context, may from a Somali point of view appear far less dramatic. Somalis may simply see the dissolution of an unnecessary, predatory and dysfunctional structure, whose absence makes possible a more "natural" development and more representative forms of self-determination, - a freer life for the clans.

It has been said that those who attempt to explain the Somali clan systems to others, have not understood anything of it. It can at best (drawing on I.M.Lewis) be described in glimpses:

The clan and the subunits live in a nomadic economy, and constitute loose, situationally cooperating groupings. An elaborate balance of power, with a system of cross-cutting and shifting alliances, assures that no single clan or group becomes too powerful. The primary function of clan, family and tribal structure is to secure every member's physical safety, life, and health. The traditionally flexible system of fragile alliances serves to aid the weak and secure their "democratic" rights. Everybody is bound to stand in for anyone else who is in trouble. Somali rally automatically and unquestioningly around any member needing their support against another clan or an outsider. An unlimited right to solidarity with members can mean a family standing against another family, it may mean one clan against another or all the Somali against other peoples. These situationally fluctuating levels of solidarity help to maintain an equilibrium which does not allow domination of one over the others. In that context, one family might even command the support of another more distant family or clan against a nearer one in a situation where the adversary is becoming too strong and potentially dominating.

This mechanism also has a conflict-generating aspect. As I.M. Lewis describes it: "One of the main problems is that all these units are in principle flexible and fluid, they are reactively defined in opposition to opponents" (Lewis 1996:16). It is me against my brother; it is me and my brother against my half brother; it is the brothers against our uncle; it is the family against another family; it is both families against a neighboring group; and it is the whole clan against another one. On the other hand, when a family feud threatens to disrupt the peace or the balance, elders will start negotiations for reconciliation, a compensation will eventually be agreed and paid, and that puts an end to the hostilities. Balancing mechanisms favoring

peace are also found in the "Xeer", the traditional oral law, the judges administering it, and the religion. A factor of considerable importance may be the relations any Somali has to other families and clans through their wives' close relationship to the family-in-law. The women can thus assume a central role in maintaining peace.

One critical operational question for the donors in this kind of situation is to *find appropriate structures of authority* with which they can work. All donors say they support the people. But they differ in their views as to who represents the people, and which administrative links to use for bringing their aid to the people. Should they work with the warlords who wield very tangible power in their respective areas of control, or work with "local representatives"? In the latter case, who are the legitimate local representatives - the district councils, or the clan leaders and elders? Or should the aid organizations wait for a new national government to be formed, or for local representative bodies to emerge out of the slow, Somali social process of achieving consensus through continuous debate and negotiation?

Another set of questions concern *the purpose and consequences of aid*: Does aid in practice feed the war? Does it reach the local people who are most in need? And does it help them to re-construct social conditions and an economic base that encourage a return to self-sufficiency? Or does aid create and perpetuate their dependency as receivers? What is the effect of aid on the re-emergence of indigenous structures of authority, administrative capacities, and lines of representation? In particular, how does aid affect the balance between the opposing concepts of political order: the European-style central state or the traditional balance of power system of the clans? More generally, does aid strengthen the emergence of a new administration from above, or an administrative capacity legitimized through representation from and accountability to local and indigenous social structures?

The dilemmas of *relief versus dependency* are aptly illustrated by an experience recorded by the Médecins sans Frontières in Kismayo. Local people wanted to use the local MSF-established hospital, but saw its operation as the responsibility of MSF. They were not willing to contribute to costs or to share administrative responsibilities. For MSF the question was whether to hand over the hospital nevertheless, with the possibility that it would fall into neglect within a short period, or to continue to run it themselves. As long as the local people could rely on a donor to operate the hospital, they would not invest their resources to maintain it. If the MSF pulled out, the local population might then wait for another donor to come to their rescue. For the MSF, the question could come down to how many innocent people would have to die for the principle of handing over responsibility? (Jan Stevens, MsF, Kismayo, interview 28.4. 1998).

Some foreign aid workers maintain that "handing over" is not possible because the Somali have no concept of public resources, and cannot convert public into private. In one story from Gadabursi, a man was given the responsibility to maintain the local well and charge fees, 50 % of which he was to keep as his salary, the other 50 % being a collective revenue. Within few weeks the man was killed by his cousin, because he refused to share the (common) resources he collected. (Michael van Notten, EHDA, interview, 20.5.1998)

The dilemmas of relief versus dependency relate to the more fundamental question concerning *recipient responsibility*. As soon as the immediate emergency is over, the issue of recipient orientation, responsibility and self-sufficiency reappear on the agenda. In the long run, it is not possible to aid recipients who seem to lack the will to become self-reliant again. However, adaptations may nevertheless lead to "self sufficiency strategies" in which donors are to remain a regular source of supplies.

Donor agencies are not always clear as to who the recipients are, who represents them, who can organise and finance permanent solutions. Often it is unclear who is administratively responsible for the recipients. Can aid be given without administrative authorities? How can aid lead over to rehabilitation if, as in Somalia today, there are few structures available for a "recipient orientation"? The very term "recipient" is interpreted differently, meaning anything from the individual accepting a dish of food at the field kitchen of the Red Cross, to the state authorities with which aid agencies negotiate the terms of assistance.

It is by now commonly accepted in donor communities that aid agencies must assess the capacity of recipients to organise, otherwise they may easily be manipulated by their supposed clients. Negative forms of recipient organisation may occur for manipulative purposes, as observed in refugee camps in the Ogaden. Donors insisted on controlling food distribution and defining rations by their own standards. As the Somali refugees in the camps were not given any influence on distributions, they tried to maximise them. Their self-styled leaders justified taxing the camp population, arguing that only their organised pressure could guarantee undisrupted supplies of donations. They put pressure on the donors for more distributions, sabotaging all attempts of donor agencies to encourage self-help, and emphasizing the refugees' claim to distributions. When donor agencies decided to reduce handouts, the self-styled leaders brought together starving children, threatening to present them to the international press as victims of arbitrary donor policies. Some donors suspected the camp leaders were deliberately keeping some children severely undernourished as a proof of continuing need for aid. The camp leaders, for their part, clearly considered the donors as a normal source for resources, and were willing to take violent action to maintain this

"rightful" supply of income, to which they considered having a legitimate claim, a traditional right (Pausewang 1994).

In principle, then, it is vital for donors in emergency situations to develop early and solid relations with organisational structures of the recipients, to help rebuild indigenous capacities to administer services which can only temporarily be provided by the donors. Failing this, the most likely result will be that recipients turn into clients, and recipient structures into permanent pressure groups or even criminal gangs set on extracting aid. How a workable strategy can be developed in practice, however, is unclear. There are no set recipes.

Humanitarian assistance and security

The involvement of aid agencies in Somalia was further made difficult by acute security problems. At the height of the civil strife, in the early 1990s, looting of relief supplies, attacks on relief transport, burglaries in food depots and hijacking of aid agencies were rampant. Even burglaries in the homes of Somali families who had received aid distributions became common, while in some areas warlords or factions "taxed" the population on the distributions received.

The aid agencies reacted differently to this situation. Some pulled out, while others hired armed guards to protect their operations. Others tried to protect themselves by negotiating with dominant warlords or local clans. The agencies recognized that negotiating with warlords would add to the legitimacy of the latter, hence indirectly they became involved in the conflict. But accepting that a proportion of aid deliveries would get to the warlords, through direct theft or through taxation, meant directly feeding the war.

Another aspect of the security problem was the *chat* traffic. *Chat* (or *kat*) is a local drug widely used in Somalia, its use spreading rapidly in wartime. The production and trade of *chat* has become a major economic activity at the expense of local food production. There is a distinct danger that food aid could perpetuate the *chat* business. By depressing food prices, food aid might simultaneously make local food production less attractive than growing *chat*.

Transporting *chat* by road and air constitutes a growing business. *Chat* planes arrive daily in Somalia and Somaliland from Ethiopia, Kenya and Djibouti, as the local production can not

keep pace with demand. *Chat* planes are the most regular and reliable means of transport, and aid agencies have frequently used *chat* planes on the return run for their own transport. *Chat* transport by car constitutes an increasing danger in road traffic, as drivers hurry to get their cargo fresh to the market and often are intoxicated themselves.

Reconstructing the Somali state?

The question of indigenous responsibility and administrative capacity is essential if relief aid is to be handled and terminated responsibly. Customarily, administrative responsibility is organised in a state. In a situation as in Somalia, where the state in 1990 ceased to exist, donors might be tempted to support the re-establishment of a central state authority. However, it could also be argued that the implosion of the Somali state freed the Somali society from a straight-jacket and offers a unique opportunity for Somalia to develop new administrative structures that are based on delegation from the bottom upwards, and hence represent the majority and are accountable to the local people. In that case, a new central state administration should, if at all, come at the end of the process which would be aborted by an early formation of a central state apparatus.

The United Nations intervention in 1992-94, which for some time was almost totally dominated by the United States, has been criticised for being preoccupied with re-establishing a central state in Somalia (Prunier 1997). The UN intervention has been described in several publications and need not be repeated here (see Heinrich 1997; Sahnoun 1994; Samatar 1995). What is important for our analysis is that part of the UN initiative which led to the Addis Ababa agreement in 1993 to organise "district councils" in Somalia. Utilising local foci and opportunities, the district councils were negotiated with local elders and other persons seen to represent, in one capacity or other, the local constituencies.

The process of district council formation was uneven. In some areas the councils were hardly representative, elsewhere they seemed to develop into genuine representation. In some places the process turned sour, in others it was abandoned altogether. One important dividing line between aid agencies is the position taken on the emerging district councils. Some see in the district councils the nucleus of a genuine bottom-up representation of the people, others see the top-down approach of the United Nations in initiating the process. This view holds that the councils can never become democratic, administrative bodies.

The Life and Peace Institute (LPI) in Uppsala, Sweden, was invited in 1992 by the UN Special Representative of the Secretary General in Somalia to assist in strengthening the role of the civil society in the peace process. This assistance was based on an understanding that "peace is not a condition that can be achieved by signing agreements at conference tables, but rather, peace is a process that has to involve the entire society". In line with that philosophy, the LPI, according to its own assessment, "supported traditional leaders of the Somali communities, chiefs, elders, religious leaders, but also women's groups and intellectuals to play an active role in peacebuilding on the local level. By supporting the formation of councils for self-administration on the district and regional levels, the LPI - in its own view - has combined a community-based peacebuilding approach with 'institution-building'" (Heinrich 1997:xi).

Wolfgang Heinrich has recently made a comprehensive assessment of the institute's experience in this process (1997). He clearly sees the district councils, in those areas where they became permanent, as genuine representation of the people and as a nucleus for a bottom-up reconstruction of an administration. He criticises other NGOs for questioning the legitimacy of the councils, claiming that the NGOs otherwise tend to uncritically register and negotiate with any "authorities" for fear of being evicted or losing work permits. He claims that a "constructive engagement" could be a more adequate approach for NGOs. In that way "NGOs could strengthen the foundation of a system of 'good governance'. To wait for the establishment of a national government, which will most likely attempt to reinstall another top-down, administrative structure with centralised control, is definitely the worst alternative" (Heinrich 1997:123). He expects that the emerging and growing control of the district councils will eventually marginalise the warlords, drying out their support and source of finance and supplies.

Heinrich's analysis conveys a vision of a bottom-up reorganisation of Somali administration. It goes from the district councils to regional councils and eventually up to a loose federation-type national roof-administration, without military power and dependent on a tax base under the control of the lower councils, and is thus controlled from below. Instead of re-establishing a state apparatus in the classical sense, Somalia could do without a central state, thereby giving room for strong and self-reliant local units and self-administrations. The sovereign would be the people, as represented in the district councils, and the state apparatus would be nothing but a roof – a coordinating body depending on popular control and consent. Reflecting this vision, the LPI advocates establishment of a local police force responsible to local councils, a local tax base for the district councils, and independent local courts based on traditional law and nationally negotiated codes. (Sture Normark, LPI, interview 31.3.1998)

There is a question whether the LPI District Councils-approach is the best road towards the envisaged goal, or whether the Somali clans consider the district councils yet another imposition which prevents them from developing their "Xeer" and their own system of fluctuating alliances into a viable system of political authority from below. Other agencies criticise the district councils as a UN-imposed structure without legitimacy or representative qualities. Less critically, Said S. Samatar describes the district councils as an attempt at bottom-up organisation, but criticises them for having unclear functions and authority, and lacking legitimacy. Part of the problem was the speed at which UNOSOM implemented the programme, which left no time for local reconciliation. While the UN initiative was designed to marginalise the warlords, the process was neither impartial nor indigenous (Minority Rights Group 1995: supplement p. 2-3).

Possibly an alternative "Somalia style" democracy might emerge after a protracted process of reconciliation and debate, and materialise as a highly decentralised administration on local and district levels, controlled by and accountable to the people through the traditional clan and family structure. Democratic decisions might be reached by consensus after long Somali-style public debates, and positions might be assigned according to a general feeling of clan balance, rather than (or in addition to) elections. The structure would have a coordinating body at national level with no military or other coercive power.

The position of aid agencies in Somalia

Analyzing the current history of aid agencies in Somalia with reference to questions of authority, collaborating partners, and recipients, several distinctions appear.

Agencies can be distinguished with respect to the *principles of neutrality versus solidarity*. Typical for the first position, of neutrality, is the Red Cross and Red Crescent family of agencies offering relief regardless of political position and social or other standing. For them, neutrality and impartiality is a precondition for their ability to act in conflict situations, on both sides of the frontlines, and on all sides in emergency situations. They do not take a position on the district councils.

Those adhering to the solidarity principle can be further subdivided. Two distinct positions emerge in relation to the district councils. Some donors actively support the district councils, in line with the arguments most forcefully presented by Life and Peace, and try to encourage

their assumption of responsibility and local control. They train personnel of the district councils and improve their administrative capacities so they can develop into effective local government. Others question their legitimacy, seeing them as alien bodies imposed on Somali society by the UN. These groups prefer to work with local elders and religious leaders, hoping for a process which eventually will bring forth a genuine representation of the Somali people in locally legitimised administrative bodies.

Yet other donors leave the question of administrative relations entirely to their Somali counterparts, working only through indigenous NGOs through whom they distribute their aid.

Agencies which flag solidarity know that the district councils may not be ideal, yet offer a nucleus for a positive development towards grassroots representation. There is still a risk that the district councils may develop in the "wrong" direction, becoming new bodies of control, and eventually a central authority with control from above. On the other hand, this danger can be minimised by active support to capacity development and nurturing of genuine democratic attitudes and practice.

Aid organisations who do not support the district councils, have little choice but to work with local leaders on an ad hoc temporary base. This position, however, runs the risk that other forces within Somali society, with ambitions to re-establish the military central state structure, will re-align and entrench their grip on central state power. This risk is, of course, also present for aid organisations that leave it to their local partners to solve their political affairs alone.

II: REPORTS FROM INDIVIDUAL AGENCIES:

In order to map out the views of the aid agencies further, we conducted structured interviews with several Scandinavian and international agencies active in Somalia after 1990. Interviews were made on telephone, mail and/or E-mail, often in a combination. A set of questions was sent to all respondents to serve as a guideline with respect to the following issues:

- o Who are the receivers of aid?
- o the issue of dependency
- o Reconstruction of authorities
- o Democracy
- o The relation to the state
- o Security
- o Empowerment.

A summary of the interviews with each agency follows below. These are presented in the nature of "field notes". All were conducted in early 1998.

The Norwegian Red Cross, Oslo (Jan Håkonsen)

The Norwegian Red Cross (NRC) has been involved in Somalia since 1981 when it started rebuilding a rehabilitation centre for the handicapped in Mogadishu. Since 1988 NRC is also supporting a hospital in Berbera. Since 1991, when the crisis reached Mogadishu, NRC has supported the emergency aid of the I C R C, and also the I F R C. In recent years, NRC has spent 10 to 12 million NOK annually in Somalia.

The primary aim was to rebuild and strengthen the Somali Red Crescent. Support to the local organisation of the Red Crescent was all the time given through I C R C or I F R C.

The Red Cross is constitutionally mandated to be neutral. The Red Cross could therefore not involve itself in political processes. Staff members took care not to be seen together with UN authorities, especially when the UN became part in the conflict, in 1993. This caused a dilemma, though, because one was aware that neutrality in practice can favour one side.

In 1990, the Red Crescent was the only local country-wide aid organisation to relate to. This applies also to Somaliland at that time.

The district councils which the UN later tried to build up, did not function well. They were created by UNOSOM, on basis of outdated clan maps, there was little public representation, no delegation, no "ownership", they were rather built on the opportunism of individuals who saw a chance to cooperate with them. The Red Crescent built its work mainly on its own national organisation. Later, when Somaliland emerged, there were independent authority structures in the North. In the rest of the country, there are no authorities to work with. In fact, owing to the lack of authorities, the Red Crescent Mother-and-Child-clinics functioned for some time as a kind of Ministry of Health.

In the North East, there is now a process going on to build up a "Puntland state", as a regional authority built on local administrations, without ambitions of secession and international recognition.

Security: Somalia was the first time the Red Cross resorted to the exceptional practice of hiring armed guards. Hiring was entirely clan based: the clans, not the Red Cross, paid and organised them. "We even had to change guards when crossing the 'green line' in Mogadishu".

Local volunteers who know the situation suggested that the Red Cross introduced public kitchens in Mogadishu. This greatly reduced the danger of looting, since ready cooked food has low resale value for soldiers.

Chat is seen as a big social problem and a drain on local resources. In the North, there is no big problem with chat production replacing food. *Chat* is mostly imported, since Siad Barré's government in 1989 tried to stop *chat* production by burning and destroying the fields. Production stopped while consumption continued. In Somalia, an estimated 100 to 200 000 dollars is spent daily on *chat* import, earned through export of hides, meat, and cattle.

To avoid dependency, the Red Cross is conscious of the need to reduce relief aid as soon as possible, and to strengthen local Red Crescent organisations. Receiver orientation takes the form of support to the Red Crescent, which has its own local network and relations to the clan structure. In 1992, as soon as the crisis was over, food distribution was reduced to encourage home production. When local food distribution became necessary again because of recent

floods, the Red Cross used local traders for distribution. Thus food prices were kept low and affordable for the poor. Distribution is continued only as long as absolutely necessary.

The Norwegian Red Cross saw the UN as part of the conflict, not as a neutral mediator. At the beginning, as long as Mohammed Sahnoun was the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General, there were attempts to support local initiatives for a solution. Later the UN initiative became a massive operation with an unclear mandate.

The District Councils were never representative, because they were not created in direct contact with the people. Legitimate authorities do not exist today. The only people with authority are the local elders and clan leaders. They will have to negotiate the issues in their way. Only the Somalis themselves can solve the crisis and to work out their form of democracy. There may eventually be a kind of federal government as a roof over local or regional units. We can only help indirectly by not supporting the undemocratic forces.

The biggest problem in the relationship between humanitarian aid and administrative reconstruction is that outside interests get involved and meddle in Somali issues. The Red Cross is mandated to keep neutral. We have to be careful not to involve ourselves in things we have no control over. First and foremost, we should avoid flooding the country with outside help. The Somalis have to do the groundwork themselves.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Genève (Laurent Felley)

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has been involved in Somalia since the Ogaden conflict in 1982, when it visited and protected prisoners of war. Later, ICRC offered general support to the Somali Red Crescent. In the 1992 famine it had a feeding programme through public kitchens which distributed ready cooked food to up to one million people.

There was a definite concern to avoid dependency by involving local communities, and particularly women, in the programme activities. The distribution of seeds and tools, support to fisheries, cattle vaccination etc. were intended to support self-sufficiency. The Red Cross tried to avoid price deterioration through reduced food production. They also were concerned not to create tensions with traders.

Security problems were continuous by 1993. All values were exposed to robberies, including cars, communication equipment, stocks and warehouses. When the situation became intolerable, the ICRC moved to Nairobi, leaving the work to the local Red Crescent or local Somalis under ICRC contract. Distribution was also organised through existing commercial networks. The traders could do the transport much more efficiently and care for safety by themselves.

The ICRC says it worked through local elders, but also coordinated with politicians, including the warlords where necessary. It kept links with the UN, but took care to coordinate with them - not to be coordinated by them. It was difficult to have neutrality accepted. It demanded efforts in networking and talking to all sides. Neutrality had to be proven by actions. Coordination was done only to avoid duplication and to close gaps. Keeping independent to protect neutrality was a major concern of ICRC.

Receivers: The Red Cross distributed directly to the beneficiaries, and ICRC had its own specialists in the field assess the needs, on the basis of information from field officers. Expert staff checked the information on the spot and decided on needs.

ICRC holds that aid should not be used to support political or administrative reconstruction. The goal of aid is only to offer relief for the needs of people affected. There is a big debate going on whether aid can prolong a conflict. However, one can not just let people die to shorten the conflict. One has to be careful about the way one is operating, to make sure food is going to the civil population, not to soldiers. The aim is not to achieve peace, but to show humanitarian solidarity in case of emergencies. This work necessarily implies many disappointments and few successes.

The International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC),
Genève:

The interview came at an extremely difficult time, - the hostage crisis in Mogadishu was going on. I was advised to talk to Jan Håkonsen from the Norwegian Red Cross, and take his answers for the IFRC's: "...he is our best reference..."

