Caafimaad+ and IDS
Discussion Note 1
February 2025

Humanitarian Access in Somalia - For whom? For what? How?

This is the first of a series of discussion notes from a group of ECHO-supported humanitarian organisations that are finding new ways to address the quandaries of access in south-central Somalia. In this note, the Caafimaad Plus Consortium and the Institute of Development Studies (UK) share some of our key learnings from working on the issue for just over a year, comprising a 6-month pilot of community reflection in contested rural areas, and a process of building an expanded initiative with partners.[1]

We have identified three important factors for organisations in reasserting and revitalising the humanitarian principle of access, as follows:

1. Renewing our sense of purpose: Reasserting how core humanitarian principles can be practiced in today's long-running complex emergencies.

2. Reconfiguring Operations: Working in new ways with community, adjusting operations inside our organisations, and negotiating with key players.

3. Sustaining the innovation: Embedding successes at the local level, broadening alliances between agencies and changing the language used to describe and negotiate access.

This note does not suggest it has all the answers to the access quandaries that humanitarians face in Somalia, or more broadly. Nonetheless it proposes a possible answer based on two important sources: the experience of humanitarian workers when they find room to be innovative; and a glimpse of what some of the most under-served communities are doing.

1. Renewing Our Sense of Purpose

Today's complex emergencies mean greatly impeded humanitarian access. As a result, many humanitarians feel that they have lost connection with the people they aim to assist.[2] Now some organisations in Somalia are trying a new approach that builds from the ground to reassert humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence to which we are committed, and drawing on values of courage (willingness to change) and solidarity (commitment to working collectively). We are finding that when we return to these principles, we are galvanised to act, and we are furnished with a good argument against staying with an unsatisfactory status quo.

A Definition of Access

During the pilot we learned from rural women and men, young and old, of different livelihoods, statuses and clans, who were debating their situation and exploring how they were managing difficulties and building strengths. We realised that to think of access as 'our ability to access them, when we choose' was wrong. Access, according to the Merriam Webster dictionary, is 'permission, liberty, or ability to enter, approach, or pass to and from a place or to approach or communicate with people'.[3] It means 'we have access to each other'. It is another way of saying social inclusion: 'the ability of individuals and groups to participate in and benefit from public goods, networks, and community spaces. It means people can interact with others

and be included without barriers of discrimination, economic limitation, or physical inaccessibility.'[4]

Humanitarian agencies in south-central Somalia have found themselves working to a narrower definition of access. They tend to be confined to the larger towns and giving assistance at limited distribution points. In discussions with directors of agencies, we hear frustration with the way in which a centralised and politicised aid architecture has helped impede, rather than promote, humanitarian purposes. While the aid structure facilitates resources, security and formal permission to operate, it can curtail freedom of movement and permission to enter places. Furthermore, being part of the structure has diverted organisational attention from participating with people, their networks and community spaces. In other words, many humanitarian agencies have found themselves making a trade-off between their principles of humanity and neutrality on the one hand, and on the other hand, a principle of consent to operate given by government authorities and of safety as directed by internal protocols or agencies such as UNDSS.[5] With escalating unmet needs, humanitarian agencies have become energetic fundraisers, conscious of their visibility and brand. They have also become hierarchical, with each level of operation looking upward to those above it for direction and approbation. Bureaucracies have become dense with formats and procedures, all of which severely constrains the ability to innovate.

Access doesn't mean we have access to you, when we choose it. It means we have access to each other.

The Somali way

If we turn our attention away from the dilemmas of the aid agencies and towards the citizens of Somalia, especially those living in the rural areas who have been excluded from much of the humanitarian assistance that pours into the country, the pilot showed how Somali people maintain a high degree of access to one another across lines of war, and politics. We learned how women and men move relatively freely and mostly safely across the country. We heard how people are participating, communicating, and organising themselves to provide for basic needs and sort out difficulties across communities.

We were reminded that ordinary people regularly help each other, probably more often and more profoundly than any other sources of assistance. Diasporas are renowned for the volume and reliability of their support to even the most rural of communities.[6] Religious leaders and elders organise formal redistribution of local and diaspora resources in trustworthy ways. Businesspeople organise all kinds of essential services and local people and diaspora raise money to pay for access to these. Though any of these modes of support can involve discrimination of one sort or another (ethnic, political, economic, or geographic), they do not seem to be more discriminatory than aid, and they are often capable of being deliberately non-discriminatory. Our partnership has shared many examples of how diasporas have made donations to whole communities inhabited by multiple clans in 'hard to reach' areas. We also heard how individuals often solve problems for people who are not from their own group. It is certain that Somali help reaches considerably more people in more places than the heavily constrained donor-assisted aid. The Somali people's own humanitarian action makes use of Somali people's access; and we can learn from how it works.

2. Reconfiguring operations

In the light of this insight, several humanitarian organisations have been considering how to reconfigure their approaches. With ECHO support and methodological backup from IDS, the Caafimaad Plus partners have embarked on a new approach, based on recognising that access involves expanding local people's communication, connection and participation. In our inception meeting, staff members decided that they must change both what they think and what they do, and they need to make change all the way from the ground to the highest levels of the humanitarian system. It is early in the process, so there will be much more to add, but even now they have identified three areas of focus: community reflection, operational change and negotiating with key players.

Community reflection

IDS is helping the partners to train field staff to work with communities in new ways. Drawing on their own past experiences of working innovatively to overcome obstacles at times of crisis, the partners are giving community facilitators more space to innovate and draw on their own experience. They

are also thinking through how community reflection can feed into organisational learning. Fieldworkers appreciate the acknowledgement of their experience and anticipate growing opportunities to participate with their constituency. Their experience tells them that communities have impressive and much needed capacities to negotiate with authorities for access and to help define what works. In one example, a community in a contested area was struck with cholera, and the people negotiated a community-based treatment protocol with the NGO. It saved many lives. Thinking about what made this community-led initiative possible for the NGO, the partner observed that it was a willingness to be responsive and ready to listen, not dictate. So, the field staff will be learning to listen for how local people are navigating obstacles and arranging support. They will be encouraged to learn about how local entities deal with issues of accountability. They will be supported by their managers to think through how they can support community's own ways of increasing access, without telling people how they will deliver pre-packaged solutions.

Operational change

With field workers bringing in new learning about community-led access, the partner organisations foresee a need for changes to organisational systems to enable responsiveness.[7] How does an organisation with upward accountability (to head offices and sovereign governments) also deliver on egalitarian, respectful and effective relations with communities and individuals wherever they are? Learning from years of work done by agencies on reaching 'hard-to-reach' populations in need, partners will need to find ways to introduce new levels of flexibility and new approaches to accountability in a whole range of operations including management, planning, budgeting, logistics, ICT, risk assessment, MEL and human resources.[8]

Questions will also arise as to how to work well with local entities. We know that local organisations often have good community relations and fewer problems of access. In one case, a large NGO found that by working with a local organisation, mothers could support one another's nutrition at home. In previous years women had been forced to come into a camp for internally displaced people in search of nutrition support. The larger organisation needed to take care that in seeking to collaborate, it did not undermine the local entity's probity and accountability. This demanded some adjustments to how the relationship and resources were managed. Experiences like this are going to be important when considering how to act effectively if intermediaries are to play a role in access.

Negotiating with key players

During the pilot project, community discussions generated messages for administrations, aid agencies and politicians about changes they would like to see. We learned from this the importance of marketing the change process among administrations and enlightened elites. So, the third area of action asks what partner organisations can do to make connections with government, donors and other humanitarian agencies.

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Somalia's factional politics creates a strong incentive for maintaining restricted access. Political elites are benefiting considerably from the current system. But shifting attitudes and priorities among donors may now change the calculus, and we have already begun to see how humanitarian agencies can make stronger challenges to the status quo when they work collectively. Yet, within the aid sector arguments pull in different directions. With reductions in aid resources, agencies may feel obliged to think about protecting their market share so they can continue their vital work. At the same time there are moves by several organisations to respond to criticisms of humanitarian performance, both in Somalia and in similar emergencies elsewhere in the world.

The UN OCHA Flagship Initiative, for which IDS is separately supporting the learning component, is a good example. An initiative of the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator and Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs, it aims to generate a visible operational shift towards stronger community engagement and a people-centred response, including piloting new context-specific coordination and financing structures that are based on affected peoples' needs and capacities.[9] As the Flagship rolls out in Somalia, it offers potential for system-wide change including on the question of access. The ECHO/Caafimaad Plus innovation is producing new

thinking and organisational capacity on the ground and is already interfacing with the Flagship. Our recent experience with this collaboration suggests there is much goodwill and possibly some differences of method, for instance on how to give leadership to community in deciding topics of discussion.

3. Sustaining Innovation

Here we add some suggestions from the organisational change field that may be helpful in sustaining and growing the innovation that has been started: embedding collaboration in the community, broadening networks, and changing the language of access.[10]

Local staff have responded enthusiastically to activities that embed collaboration with communities. The pilot showed how facilitation can help strengthen community-to-community connections and broaden their networks to encompass more and more allies in authorities, civil society, business and the diaspora. As citizens use these linkages to strengthen the weight of their argument for equal rights to welfare, services and other basic needs, humanitarian agencies will find it easier to argue for access.

The innovation process has already begun to create a ripple of change within the partner organisations and has spread into discussions with the UN OCHA Flagship and with others in the international community. Accompanying all of this we know we need to foster a new, clear, language of access, derived from the perspective of Somali communities and voiced by Somalis themselves. And it will need to be repeated over and over. Without new words to describe what we mean, it will be all too easy to fall back into a narrow definition and the initiative might falter.

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And one last caveat: we must do all the above as well as we can, because there is a danger that in trying to do the right thing, we end up doing harm. We need to be aware of our capacity to undermine the delicate arrangements that communities are using for mutual support and welfare; or to tempt local entities into our narrower zone of access, rather than backing them to be stronger at what they already do for communities everywhere. In short, we need to manage all the risks involved in the initiative with great care. This means continuous review and reflection so that we can bring about the return to principles that we are looking for.

What's next?

The title of this note has three questions: Who is access for? What is it for? How can it be done? The answers: It's for all those in most in need wherever they are. It's to promote the ability of people to participate, benefit from and influence the services to which they have a right. It means listening to and supporting people on the ground to change their relations with us and other key actors. Of all the lessons that we have learned so far, perhaps the biggest one is the need to put in place mechanisms that allow us all to listen, understand and adapt.

Notes

1. Funding for this work has come from FCDO XCEPT Research Programme and ECHO respectively.
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3. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/access
4. Leaving no one behind: The imperative of inclusive development. United Nations, 2007.
5. Inter-agency humanitarian evaluation of the response to the humanitarian crisis in Somalia. GPPi 2024 and Somali capacities to respond to crisis are changing; how are humanitarian actors responding? Humanitarian Outcomes, 2023.
6. Danish Institute for International Studies 2024. https://www.diis.dk/en/research/diaspora-aid-is-crucial-emergency-relief-in-the-somali-regions.
7. Dombrowski et al,. Elements of Innovative Cultures. Knowledge and Process Management, 2007.
8. E.g. Enabling operations and programmes for hard-to-reach (H2R) populations: Global Logistics/ Global Access and H2R; Norwegian Refugee Council, 2022; and Toward local humanitarian engagement: Reflections on engaging local partners in hard-to-reach areas, Norwegian Refugee Council, 2024.
9. https://www.unocha.org/flagship-initiative
10. Pel, Wittmayer and Jørgensen, Unpacking the social innovation ecosystem. Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research, 2020.

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