

# From Charity to Governance: Islamic NGOs and Education in Somalia

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**Abstract:** What would fill the vacuum that arose after the collapse of the official Somali state apparatus during the 1990s? This paper attempts to answer this question and suggests that Islamic institutions played their part in exercising local governance as a substitute to the fragile government structures. In doing so, the paper looks at the role of Islamic NGOs and charities in providing education services in the midst of a chronic absence of effective state institutions, and reports on the case of FPENS, a Somali network of Islamic charities, which operates in the education sector.

The paper concludes that, despite of common perception, the Somali charitable sector enjoys a structured organisation and is able to mobilise local and foreign funds to address emergency responses and stimulate the development of a private social welfare system.

**Keywords:** Islamic NGOs, FPENS, Somali, charity.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper attempts to shed some light on the hitherto neglected role of Islamic institutions in the provision of basic social services in Somalia. The paper focuses, in particular, on the role of Islamic NGOs and charities in providing education services<sup>1</sup> in the chronic absence of effective state institutions. To this purpose, the case of FPENS, the Formal Private Education Network in Somalia, an umbrella organisation of various Islamic charities working in the education sector, is analysed and described.

In unveiling the role of the Islamic charitable sector in exercising governance functions and in spurring development processes in Somalia, this paper uses the religion and development nexus as a theoretical framework. This provides necessary incentive for reconsidering the label of 'collapsed state' given to Somalia in the failed states debate.

It is important to note that this paper refers mainly to the central-southern regions of Somalia and considers Mogadishu the epicentre of the charitable sector phenomenon. The north-western side of the country, corresponding to Somaliland, and to some extent the north eastern side, corresponding to Puntland, are not included in the present research, despite the fact that some of the interviewed charities claim to operate also in the mentioned zones.

The methodology for the research relies mainly on interviews with key informants conducted in Nairobi in 2008 and in Italy in 2009. Key informants were identified among various stakeholders (from managers, to end-users) that are in

involved in the Islamic charitable sector in Somalia. The former President of the Formal Private Education Network in Somalia (FPENS)<sup>2</sup> network has been interviewed extensively and his opinions and views represent the bulk of the information provided in the case study paragraph. His statements have been verified and crosschecked by interviews in Italy with former students of the FPENS's supported schools during their migration trajectory to safe countries. In addition to this, various workers and representatives of Islamic charities in Somalia were interviewed.

Thanks to the patience and dedication of the interviewees, who described the Islamic principles and values and their application to the Somali context, I have improved my understanding of the functioning modalities of the charitable sector. This understanding has been complemented by an extensive literature review<sup>3</sup> on the charitable sector and its Islamic theological background in various Muslim countries. In addition to the above-mentioned methods, this paper also greatly benefitted from early field observations, which I obtained during my previous experience as a humanitarian and development aid worker. In this position, I was engaged in the education sector in Somalia from 2003 to the end of 2006.<sup>4</sup> During this period, I enjoyed access to the international cooperation programme and benefitted from the security procedures that were quite liberal at the time. The security situation deteriorated after 2007 to the extent that access to central southern locations for researchers and workers was either denied or strongly discouraged by the various embassies.

Such unfortunate circumstances were not, for me, sufficient reason to abandon the research activities on this fasci-

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<sup>1</sup>This paper focuses on the education sector and will not address other social services provided by religious institutions in Somalia.

<sup>2</sup>The FPENS is an umbrella organisation which includes the Islamic charities that are active in the education sector in Somalia.

<sup>3</sup>The literature review would have been furthermore impossible without the fellowship offered by the Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM) in 2008 in the Netherlands.

<sup>4</sup>This paper is part of a larger doctoral study on Islamic NGOs in Somalia, conducted at University L'Orientale of Naples.

nating and cryptic country. I therefore developed a new kind of “distance-learning” methodology, which involved the extension of the notion of “field research” to reach those places where the Somali population lived and still live. This technique allowed me to exploit the geographical and emotional proximity of the informants to their motherland and to take advantage of the opportunities I had to interact with them.

Islamic charities and NGOs are formal or informal<sup>5</sup> non-governmental organisations that carry out voluntary aid work on the basis of their Islamic faith, while using Islamic charitable funds.<sup>6</sup> Many scholars<sup>7</sup> agree about the distinction of three categories of Islamic charities: those headquartered in Muslim-majority countries (such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait) that operate internationally; those headquartered in Western countries (such as UK, France, and Canada) that operate internationally; and those local Islamic charities which perform at a national level. This paper adopts this distinction in the following historical overview of the growth of Islamic NGOs in Somalia. It should be noted, however, that the ongoing indigenisation process of foreign Islamic NGOs in Somalia could make the provided distinctions appear outdated. The term Islamic NGOs and charities are used interchangeably, on the basis of their common ground in their religious motives and use of charitable funds.

The use of the notion of governance mentioned in the title is instrumental to describe the capacity to exercise “power and authority, formal or informal, local or national, [...] used by clan elders, government authorities, local administrators, NGOs, political, professional and social organisations, to manage or govern a society, group, region or state” [1].<sup>8</sup> In a wider sense, this notion includes the power and authority exercised by religious institutions, in this case by a group of Islamic NGOs and charities, to govern the education sector in Somalia as a *de facto* substitute for the Ministry of Education.

## THE CHARITABLE SECTOR IN SOMALIA: ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

Before the collapse of the state in Somalia, the Islamic charitable sector was strongly linked to the variety of Islamic movements that promote different Islamic ideologies; this link still persists as many charitable activities in Somalia revolve around reputed religious leaders and their related Mosques. This phenomenon is, however, complemented by the presence of more structured Islamic organisations or NGOs.

The all-Muslim population of Somalia adheres to a variety of Islamic ideologies. Somalis are Sunnis, mainly adherents to the Shafi’ite religious-juridical school. Sufism, or popular Islam, is traditionally practiced in Somalia<sup>9</sup>, although it is being challenged by revivalist movements linked to the Muslim Brotherhoods that appeared in Somalia already during the 1980s; by Wahabi movements from Saudi Arabia that spread mainly during the 1990s; and, more recently, by Jihadi movements. Over time, these various movements have created political organisations and some of them have charitable branches or charitable organisations that are ideologically affiliated to them but not directly involved in politics. Political organisations linked to the Sufi orders include Majma Ulimadda Islaamka ee Soomaaliya (The Assembly of Islamic Scholars of Somalia) and Ahlu Sunnah wal Jama’a [2]. Among the movements linked to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhoods the most prominent is Harakat Al Islah [3, 4], with many affiliated charities. Wahabi political organisations are various, but most of them originate from Al Ittihad al Islam, often described as a neo-salafist organisation with both militant and charitable branches. Some of the members of these organisations formed the armed branch of Union of Islamic Courts that ruled the Southern regions of Somalia during 2006 but have then become autonomous under the name Harakat Al Shaabaab al Mujahiddin. This movement espouses a Jihadist approach.

With regard to the political involvement of Islamic charitable organisations, Wiktorowicz and Farouki’s view of Islamic NGOs’ political activism is highly relevant. These authors have observed that the activities of Islamic NGOs have political implications because they challenge cultural codes and institutions, although their approach is often framed in terms of religious obligations of charity [5]. In this sense, one of the earliest examples of Islamic NGOs in Somalia is probably the Somali Islamic League (1952) that was established in Mogadishu during the Italian protectorate. Among its objectives were: the propagation of Islamic values, the use of Arabic in education and of the Arabic script for the Somali language, the establishment of formal Arabic schools and the creation of a lobby for the supremacy of Islamic law over Somali secular law. The Somali Islamic League was involved in the education sector, and promoted cultural exchange and scholarship programs funded by Egypt [6].

Soon after the country’s independence (1960-1969), a number of Islamic organisations started to spring up as a consequence of the establishment of a multi-party political system. The freedom of association and the scramble for political power during the 1969 elections resulted however, in considerable political turmoil with more than 60 parties, mostly lineage-based, competing for the 123 seats of the National assembly [7]. The winning government, led by Ibrahim Egal, was soon overthrown by General Mohamed Siad Barre and his Somali Revolutionary Socialist Party. This coup d’état initiated a military regime and the end of political and civil freedoms. Siad Barre’s political project brought the country close to the former Soviet block and entailed a radical transformation of Somali society towards a

<sup>5</sup>By ‘formally organised’ the author means those people grouped under an organisation that might be an NGO or a CBO and by ‘informally organized’ the author refers to a group of people that occasionally volunteer on an ad hoc aid basis under the leadership of a person that in the Somali context is usually a Sheikh.

<sup>6</sup>This preliminary definition has been elaborated by the author and is subject to possible further adjustments as a consequence of the validation process.

<sup>7</sup>These are the scholars that contributed to Alterman J, Von Hippel K, Eds. *Understanding Islamic Charities*. Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2007. Among them are Jonathan Benthall (University College London) and A. Nizar Hamzeh (American University of Kuwait).

<sup>8</sup>This broad definition of governance, as applied to the Somali context, is given by SACB (Somalia Aid Coordination Body). *Strategy on Governance*. Mogadishu: The Governance Working Group, 2000. Since 2006 the SACB is called the Somali Support Secretariat (SSS). It is a Forum that gathers all the main development actors in Somalia, including NGOs, UN agencies and donor representatives. Recently, a few Somali-based Islamic NGOs have started to make an effort to attend the SSS coordination meetings, which are still held in Nairobi for security reasons.

<sup>9</sup>For a complete description of traditional Islam in Somalia see I.M. Lewis, 1998, *Saints and Somalis. Popular Islam in a Clan-based Society*. London: Haan Publishing.

unitary, secular, modern nation state. The country's clan system was outlawed, religious leaders were delegitimised, political parties and associations, including the Islamic ones, were banned.

The subsequent restrictions and enforced repression generated grievances that forced Islamic organisations to go underground. In many cases, the organisations were led by young and educated Somalis who returned from Arab countries, after they had been in contact with new theological interpretations of the Islam and Islam-related political ideologies. Among these organisations there were: the 'Association of the helpers of the Religion' (*Jamiyatu Ansaru Addin*), the "Association of religions' protectors" (*Jamiyatu Himati Addin*), the "Association of the helpers of the Prophet Sunna" (*Jamiyatu Ansaru al Sunna Al-Muhamadiyah*), the "Organisation of Islamic Revival" (*Munadamatu Al-Nahda Al-Islamiya*), "The Family of Islam" (*Ahlulu Islam*) and "The Islamic Youth Unity" (*Wahdat Al-Shabab Al Islami*). All these Islamic organisations had a common goal: the defence of Islam within Somali political and social life.

In January 1975, the public execution of ten religious leaders who opposed a new family law led to increased political opposition and spurred many underground Islamic political organisations to move outside the Somali territory [8]. Political activists fled the country to Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Sudan in order to escape persecution. Others migrated to the rich oil-producing countries of the Gulf, where an estimated number of 150,000 to 200,000 Somalis found jobs and business opportunities [9].

Within the country, the clan-based opposition groups fragmented into armed factions, while the Islamic opposition opted for grassroots strategies and worked towards the strengthening of its underground organisational base. Among the most important Islamic political organisations, which emerged during the late 1970s, were: Al-Islah, Al-Tabliq, Al Ittihad,<sup>10</sup> and Takfir. The latter was inspired by the Wahabi school of Saudi Arabia [10]. Some of these Islamic political organisations had charitable branches or affiliated philanthropic organisations that operated at the grassroots level especially in the sectors of education and orphan care, and that served to expand networks of shared values and to proselytize.

During the mid 1970s and early 1980s, two related factors led to the proliferation of the Islamic charitable/NGO sector in Somalia. Internally, the previously mentioned underground political movements with charitable branches grew in response to growing humanitarian needs in Somalia that were a dramatic effect of the start of the war against Ethiopia in 1977, which caused a huge influx of Somali Muslim refugees from the Ogaden region into Somali territory. The absence of an adequate state response to the humanitarian crisis urged non-state actors to intervene and gave the charitable/NGO sector the opportunity to rise.

Externally, within the Islamic world, various changes in the traditional practices of compliance with religious duties

were boosting the growth and the proliferation of non-governmental Islamic organisations and charities. One of the first important changes took place in 1979, when the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) created a special fund for charitable purposes that was funded from interest (*riba*), which is considered illegitimate in the Islam [11]. The special fund within the IDB provided a considerable amount of money for the funding of charitable activities or development projects either directly or indirectly through an intermediary. NGOs, such as the International Islamic Relief Organisation (IIRO), could benefit from this practice by receiving "halalised"<sup>11</sup> or purified *riba*-funds from the bank for its activities.

Shortly after, another source of religious funds was made available for Islamic NGOs to grow. The Organisation of Islamic Conference in Jeddah delivered a fatwa on the use of *zakat* by non-governmental organisations. Before that fatwa, only state actors were entitled to collect and manage *zakat* funds. Since the late 1980s, the Islamic Solidarity Fund, which is a non-governmental actor, was entitled by the mentioned fatwa to receive and manage *zakat* donations from individuals and organisations on the condition that a special *zakat* account would be created within the NGO administration. The fatwa created a legal framework for other non-governmental organisations to collect and administer *zakat* funds, which until then was a state prerogative.

However, the freedom in the expenditure of the *zakat* charitable funds by NGOs and charities was still confined to the territory where these funds had been collected. This local character of alms expenditure gradually faded away after 1989, when the Second Symposium on *zakat* (held in Kuwait) delivered a fatwa allowing *zakat* funds to be transferred from abroad so as to achieve the legal targets [12]. This fatwa responded to the need of a growing number of Muslims living in Western countries that wished to, but could not, donate their *zakat* to their families and acquaintances in their native countries. This transnational flow of religious funds had the effect of decentralising their management from the State to non-governmental organisations that were given the authority to supervise and use religious donations. A considerable amount of money deriving both from halalised *riba*-funds and from individual *zakat* donations was available to Islamic NGOs as of the end of the 1980s. This availability of funds definitively benefitted the emergence of an International Islamic charitable sector.

Although the Islamic charitable sector was growing globally and despite the presence of a hidden Islamic political opposition to the Siad Barre dictatorship, neither Islamic political organisations nor charities played a major role in January 1991 when Siad Barre was overthrown<sup>12</sup>. The country was soon split into two: the north-western part (Somaliland) ruled by the Somali National Movement and the southern part which was divided between two factions of the United Somali Congress. Throughout the 1990s, the land

<sup>10</sup>According to Abdurahman Abdullahi (personal correspondence, October 2008) the name *Al Ittihad* (1982) was changed in 1996, after the military defeats in Kisimayo (1991), Puntland (1992), and Gedo (1995-1996) to *al-I'tisam bil kitabi wa Sunna*. The most recent name of the organisation appeared in 2008 as *Jama'at al-wifaaq al-Islaami*.

<sup>11</sup>Jonathan Benthall and Jerome Bellion Jourdan use the term "process of halalization" (making halal or legitimate) with reference to the laundering of illegitimate money generated by loan interests that by late 1970s is in use for charitable activities. Benthall J, Bellion-Jourdan J. *The Charitable Crescent. Politics of Aid in the Muslim World*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2003, pp. 42-43.

<sup>12</sup>Instead, a coalition of three major clan-based opposition movements – the Somali National Movement (SNM) from northern Somalia, the United Somali Congress (USC) and the Somali Patriotic Movement (SPM) of the southern part of the country – led a month-long insurrection in the capital that ultimately culminated in the defeat of the autocratic regime.

partition caused clan-based faction rivalries for conquering pockets of sovereignty in a predatory manner that never evolved into political stability.

The civil war caused a humanitarian crisis with huge human displacements and the death of an estimated 400,000 people. The country was literally flooded with Western humanitarian agencies that served under the military protection of the US-led UNOSOM mission in 1993. Many foreign Islamic NGOs also moved to Somalia with the same aim of rapidly providing humanitarian help. Following the withdrawal of UNOSOM in 1995, Western NGOs and UN Agencies were forced to abandon their operations in Somalia for security reasons and to relocate their regional bases to Kenya. Islamic NGOs, both foreign and local ones, were left with the difficult task of responding to local needs in the face of huge constraints [13].

There were several foreign Islamic NGOs that entered Somalia during the 1990s. The Munazzamat Al Dawa al Islamiyya,<sup>13</sup> for example, had its office in Khartoum. Dawa also opened an office in Mogadishu headed by Sudanese personnel, which aimed to face the humanitarian emergency by distributing food in the capital and to the Middle Shebelle region [14]. The Africa Muslim Agency (AMA),<sup>14</sup> established in 1987 in Kuwait, started working in Mogadishu in 1993 on education, orphans' care and food distribution. The World Association of Muslim Youth (WAMY),<sup>15</sup> with its headquarters in Saudi Arabia, started under the AMA umbrella in 1991 with feeding programs in the Liboy refugee camp in Kenya. Muslim Aid,<sup>16</sup> a UK-based Organisation, began its activities in 1993 in the health, education and relief sector around Mogadishu. Mercy-USA for Aid and Development started its activities in Mogadishu North in 1993 with health, education and emergency relief operations during the UNOSOM mission.<sup>17</sup> The last NGO worth mentioning is the International Islamic Relief Organisation (IIRO), which was based in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia [15].

These foreign Islamic NGOs opened branch offices in Somalia during the 1990s. Although they were sometimes, and especially in the beginning, led by expatriate staff members, some of the Islamic NGOs gradually handed over management duties to local Somali staff, something which helped to support the indigenisation process.<sup>18</sup> These resulting 'new' Somali Islamic NGOs had a local character, both in terms of staff and operational planning, but maintained in close contact with their respective headquarters and were similarly dependent on them for their fundraising. From the early 1990s, foreign Islamic NGOs have coexisted with local charities linked to the Islamic political movements.

<sup>13</sup>With regard to the activities of Dawa in Sudan, see also De Waal A, Salam AH. Islamism, State Power and Jihad in Sudan. In: De Waal A, Ed. Islamism and its Enemies in the Horn of Africa. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2004, pp. 71-113.

<sup>14</sup>Interview with AMA representatives on 14 May 2008 in Nairobi.

<sup>15</sup>Interview with WAMY-Kenya senior officials on 9 May 2008 in Nairobi. Later with former WAMY aid workers on 10 May 2008 in Nairobi.

<sup>16</sup>Interview with a Muslim Aid Representative in Kenya and the Programme Officer in Somalia on 23 May 2008 in Nairobi.

<sup>17</sup>Mercy-USA does not define itself as an Islamic NGO, but its representative states that the Organisation has a charity component since part of its funds derive from private Islamic donations. This statement is based on an interview with a Mercy representative in August 2008 in Nairobi.

<sup>18</sup>With the exception of Mercy, which is a Somali Diaspora-led organisation based in the US and Canada.

After UNOSOM's withdrawal in 1995, the attention of donors for Somalia decreased, insecurity became rampant and the capacity of Islamic NGOs and charities to operate diminished as a consequence. Some of the organisations decided to focus their activities on specific sectors of intervention and on a reduced beneficiary coverage. The decreased sources for official funding were however balanced by a diversified fundraising strategy, which encompassed the mobilisation of both internal and external private resources.

## FUNDING MECHANISMS OF THE SOMALI ISLAMIC CHARITABLE SECTOR

Islamic charities in Somalia mainly rely on three different funding channels: private donations, public donations and funds that are raised by user fees for social service provision.

While the public channel, i.e. the Official Development Assistance extended by Arab Countries to Islamic NGOs, is very non-transparent in Somalia,<sup>19</sup> the private channel is much more "visible" and based on the concept of charity. Although the use and collection modalities of Islamic charitable funds are being recently studied in many Muslim communities, there is as of yet no specific research available on Somalia. The information provided below mainly relies on preliminary interviews conducted by the author.<sup>20</sup>

### Private Channels

In Muslim communities, and thus also in Somalia, charity is a religious prescription and a sign of piety, which is encouraged within the family and society in general. Today, private donations to Islamic Charities can originate either from abroad or from within the country. In the Muslim world, there are various ways of collecting and redistributing religious alms.<sup>21</sup> In countries where such transactions are organised at the institutional level, a real alms management system is in place for the provision of social services, such as schools and hospitals. This is not the situation in Somalia.

Interviews conducted for the present research project show that paying *zakat* in Somalia, in spite of its population's poverty and deprivation, is a widely practiced phenomenon. *Zakat* is donated individually within the extended family or clan; there is no centralised way of collection. In many other Muslim countries, in contrast, mosques, the state or charitable organisations play a central role in collecting and redistributing religious funds to the needy. *Zakat* in Somalia does not therefore represent a source of funding for Islamic charities and NGOs to the extent that voluntary charity does.

Voluntary charity (*sadaqah*) is strongly encouraged in the Muslim world by religious leaders, as a sign of individual piety. The author's interviews with Somali Muslims reveal that *sadaqah* is even more important than *zakat*, because

<sup>19</sup>Data on Arab official development assistance to Somalia (multilateral) is, for example, available only until 2002. (OECD Statistics).

<sup>20</sup>Interview conducted in 2008 with Somali people living in central southern regions of Somalia.

<sup>21</sup>*Zakat* and *sadaqah* are the two main channels for alms giving in Islam. The former is a mandatory percentage that has to be paid annually according to one's own assets, while the latter consists of voluntary alms giving. *Waqf* (an inalienable Islamic endowment) are not considered in this paper, due to the absence of research on this topic with regard to the Somali society.

it is performed throughout the year and financially may considerably exceed the annual amount received through *zakat* donations.

Unlike *zakat*, *sadaqah* does not require that specific rules be respected (in terms of the amount given or its beneficiaries) and examples of *sadaqah* donations to beneficiaries, who are not part of the clan or family, were mentioned frequently during interviews and discussions with Somalis. One example of this fact is the assistance provided during the period of drought and floods in central southern parts of the country in 2006. During this period, an appeal was made by a council of 9 outstanding *ulema* (educated Muslim legal scholars) and broadcast through radio all over Somalia. In just three days time, funds were reportedly collected on a bank account and later spent to resolve the threatening situation. This money, the interviewee pointed out, had been donated for the sake of *sadaqah*. The fact that the Somali population agreed to donate to people outside their extended family or clan demonstrates that clan loyalty is not necessarily a barrier when it comes to wealth redistribution. *Sadaqah* is therefore a source of funding for Islamic charities in Somalia and its collection and redistribution to the needy is usually performed directly through charity.

### Public Channels

International charities that have their headquarters in rich Western or Arab countries receive their funds both through their headquarters and through private fundraising mechanisms. The origins of the funds sent by the headquarters may be governmental, as was the case in the Islamic Relief funds for project implementation that allegedly were contributed by the British Department for International Development (DFID) or as in the case of the World Association of Muslim Youth (WAMY) that received funds from Riyadh to run its Somali branch office.

It is important to note that in the aftermath of 9/11, US-led anti-terrorism policies have tried to limit the transnational flux of charitable funds from Muslim countries. The reason underpinning this decision was that its lack of accountability made it potentially vulnerable to misuse by terrorist groups. The result of the imposed restrictions led Saudi Arabia in 2003 to prohibit the outflow of religious funds from Islamic charities to branch offices in developing countries, including Somalia. As a consequence of these restrictions, the tracing of public funds to the externally located Islamic NGO sector has become almost impossible.

### User-Fee Fundraising Channels

While the *sadaqah* donations are mainly used by Islamic charities to address emergencies and headquarters' money is primarily used for the organisations' running costs and for the start-up of new development projects, the costs for the continuity of services is often covered by cost-sharing mechanisms. Such mechanisms imply that the social services, be it education or health related, are provided by the charity upon payment by the "user" of a contribution fee. The service is then co-funded by the charity and the user, who pays part of its cost. This system stays in use until the service can be paid entirely by the user. Holger Weiss has argued that this practice is in line with a more general

phenomenon that has particularly become more pronounced during the last three decades in the Muslim world, namely that of the private provision of social welfare [16].

Andre Le Sage, who conducted field work in Somalia in 2003-2004 to investigate the nature of Islamic charities, noted that projects are generally treated by charities as investments that need to be financially sustainable and productive. In this regard, one could say that Islamic charities in Somalia are literally promoting the creation of a private social service enterprise [17]. Le Sage has described the process as follows. First, a capable individual, for example a medical doctor or a nurse, is located by the charity organisation that wishes to invest financial resources in the start up of a medical social service. The charity then pays for the necessary infrastructure, the equipment and the initial salary of the newly hired professional, who in turn starts 'the business' by charging fees to his patients. This continues until he reaches the point of being financially independent and solvent. At this point, the charity withdraws and the cycle continues. The result is that the charity stimulates the founding of new social services, which are financially sustainable on their own and potentially able to implement pro-poor initiatives that are naturally in line with Islamic principles. Poor individuals may, in fact, be exempted from paying the service fee.

In the education sector, students of schools supported by Islamic charities do pay school fees to the charity. Le Sage reports the case of a school in Mogadishu that is supported by a charity and that charges \$8 per month per student. This fee is relatively high when compared to the tuition rates of other schools in rural areas. The amount is reinvested by the charity to appoint the best available teachers and to keep them during summer holidays when schools are closed.

The access to social services in Somalia, whether they are educational facilities, hospitals or any other form of social service, is in other words subject to payment of fees by its users. There should be, however, pro-poor instruments which generally provide free access for the needy to the necessary social services<sup>22</sup>. The FPENS network of schools works under the same logic.

### ISLAMIC CHARITIES IN SOMALIA: A CASE STUDY OF FPENS<sup>23</sup>

FPENS, the Formal Private Education Network in Somalia, is an umbrella organisation formed by Islamic charities that work in the education sector in Somalia. This case study on FPENS aims to describe the role of the Islamic charitable sector in triggering endogenous development processes. It sheds light on the way Islamic charities are organised in Somalia and provides an understanding of their normative functions and funding sources.

<sup>22</sup>These "pro-poor instruments" were mentioned by all the Islamic NGOs' referents that have been interviewed for the present research. Yet, their claims have not been verified in the field and have subsequently been challenged by two former users of the education services provided by charities in Somalia.

<sup>23</sup>The following history of FPENS has been collected in Nairobi on 6 August 2008 in my interview with Sheekh Farah Abdulkadir, who acted as the President of the FPENS until 2004. Sheekh Farah has validated the interview and the crosschecked information on FPENS reported in this paper. I have also double-checked the information in an interview, conducted in Rome on 9 September 2009, with a former student of one of FPENS' schools, who is now a refugee in Italy.

## Background Environment

After the civil war broke out in 1991, the still fragile Somali education sector virtually collapsed. Many students and teachers were transferred, school buildings were either completely or partially destroyed and all educational material was looted. Secondary schools and the university ceased to operate and for almost two years (1991-92) no formal education was available. In 1993, the United Nations agencies and several Western NGOs started to restore access to the education system by providing physical school infrastructure and building human capital. This occurred through a range of instruments, such as: the rehabilitation of schools, the training of teachers, the reprinting of old textbooks and the creation of a new curriculum for primary education. Islamic NGOs contributed greatly to the reconstruction of the county's education system, but their interventions did not mingle with those supplied with Western aid. Although Islamic NGOs pursued the same goals as their Western counterparts, they adopted different strategies, adhering to the creation of alternative curricula and (in most cases) choosing a different language for educational instruction.

After the departure of UNOSOM in 1995, the mandate of which had been to protect the delivery of humanitarian relief efforts and to help resolve the conflict between warring factions, rampant insecurity forced the international organisations to bring their activities to a standstill. During this time, many NGOs were induced to relocate their offices to Nairobi and to transfer their activities to safer areas. The watershed departure of UNOSOM was later also followed by a decline in support from external donors. Islamic NGOs and charities, however, continued to operate around the Mogadishu area. The number of their workforce profited from the availability of locally trained professionals, who had previously been employed by Western agencies. Since 1992, the education sector had seen a regrouping of Islamic NGOs and charities (later formally under the FPENS) that started the construction of a new Somali education system.

## FPENS: History and Main Activities

In 1999, a group of 14 charities – including the Imam Shafi, Zam Zam foundation, the United Arab Emirate Red Crescent, the Africa Muslim Agency and later the World Association of Muslim Youth (WAMY) – decided to come together in FPENS with the objective of elaborating the country's education policies and establishing a solid national education system. The new establishment hoped that it could guarantee students access to primary school courses and offer them the possibility to continue to secondary and higher forms of education.

FPENS was intended to function as an umbrella organisation of Islamic charities, both local and foreign, working in the education sector. The aim of FPENS was, and still is, to offer coordination services to schools that are affiliated to the member charities. The services offered at present include: curriculum development, the printing of books, the establishment of examination and certification systems that are recognised in both Somalia and abroad, and maintenance of external relations with foreign universities to obtain scholarships. In other words, rather than being a sort of "fund-raiser" that redistributes foreign funding to the affiliated charities, FPENS is a coordinating body, which estab-

lishes policies, monitors their correct implementation, and contributes to the quality of education provided in the affiliated schools, acting as a de facto Ministry of Education.

FPENS' functions and activities demonstrate its institutional role in the Somali education sector. In fact, during the first year of its existence, FPENS worked towards the establishment of a certification system. This entailed the organisation of a unified examination system and the appointment of an external committee to oversee the examinations for quality control. The presence of the Transitional National Government in 2000 and of the Transitional Federal Government in 2005 offered FPENS the opportunity of getting official institutional recognition from the Somali Ministry of Education to issue school certificates that were formally accepted across the country.

Subsequently, in 2000, FPENS engaged in the creation of a unified curriculum. Various FPENS members participated in the UNESCO-UNICEF curriculum elaboration process in 1996-97. According to one FPENS member, "this process was extremely slow and our participation as Somali intellectuals and experts was limited to the extent that we felt we were considered more as 'beneficiaries' than as true partners in a top-down and externally driven process. Gradually we left the UN curriculum development process and initiated our own programme that felt more in line with our own requirements".<sup>24</sup>

The resulting Somali curriculum was issued in 2000 and brought together elements from various existing curricula from Kenya, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Egypt. Although the language of instruction was Arabic for the humanities and English for scientific subjects, the Somali language was widely used by teachers to allow for better communication with their students and improve their understanding of learning materials.<sup>25</sup> The interviewed FPENS manager reported that until 2003 textbooks were produced in limited numbers and consisted of photocopies from different foreign books that were only made available to teachers. From 2003 to 2006, thanks to external financial support from the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY) and the Islamic Development Bank, the textbooks were translated into Arabic.<sup>26</sup> As a result, about 10,000 books were printed and distributed to schools associated with FPENS. Although this event marked an important change, the number of new books dwarfed when compared to the huge size of FPENS' student population, which already in 2006 had grown to around 100,000 students.

In 2006, FPENS acquired new premises in Mogadishu. This new complex hosted new network organs, a teacher training centre, a UNDP supported civil society resource

<sup>24</sup>Interview with Sheek Farah Abdulkadir, Nairobi, August 2008.

<sup>25</sup>Information was collected from an interview with a former FPENS student in Rome, September 2009.

<sup>26</sup>Before the outbreak of the civil war, the Somali system of education was based on a 2-4-4-4/5 pattern, where the primary and secondary levels were thought in Somali language, written in Latin script, while the university level was mainly thought in Italian language. From the mid-1990s onward, the FPENS promoted system of education is based on the Arab system with a 2-6-3-3-4 pattern, and it is taught in Arabic language. The old system of education still exists and is followed by international Western supported schools and SAFE umbrella schools; the first use the Somali language as medium of instruction, while the latter are moving towards the use of English language. For a good overview of the history of the Somali Education system see Cassanelli L, Abdulkadir FS. Somalia: Education in Transition. Bildhaan 2007; 7: 91-125.

centre and a library. In 2008, FPENS comprised about 70 Islamic charities of different sizes, some of which supported only a few schools, while others assisted twenty different ones. All these organisations comply with strict admission criteria that are designed to maintain the high standards set by FPENS. They also intended to exclude “those schools set up with the sole aim of grasping international humanitarian aid”.<sup>27</sup> Among the most important admission criteria are a minimum of two years of prior education and a demonstrated commitment to education.

### FPENS’ Organisational Structure

The organisational structure of FPENS in 2008 comprised a General Assembly and an Executive Committee. The latter has been complemented by an Advisory Body since 2004. The General Assembly originally contained two representatives of each member charity. In 2006, as FPENS membership increased, admittance to the General Assembly was limited to one individual per member. Today the General Assembly is composed of 70 members, who are chosen by the member charities and represent the most experienced and educated charity representatives.

The General Assembly has among its tasks: the establishment of the Network’s guidelines, the voting on the approval or rejection of education policies by the various internal working groups, the approval of the annual budget and also the election of members of the Executive Committee. The charities represented in the General Assembly have adopted a “one man, one vote” decision making mechanism that provides all charities with equal influence, irrespective of the size of their membership. It meets once a year.

The Executive Committee was originally composed of five members, but has increased to ten in 2008. The Committee has been led by the Chair (Bashir Yusuf) and the Vice-Chairman. The Executive Committee members work on a part-time basis since they are all engaged in other jobs that are independent from their responsibilities at the Network’s governing body. The daily activities are carried out by the Executive Committee Secretariat and by internal units appointed to specific roles.<sup>28</sup>

In 2004 FPENS decided to equip the organisational structure with a third organ, the Advisory Board, with the purpose of facilitating the decision making process between the General Assembly and the Executive Committee. The Advisory Board consists of ten members who are elected by the General Assembly with the task of advising the Executive Committee on issues that require urgent attention and can thus not wait to be discussed at the Committee’s annual meeting. The General Assembly, in other words, delegates the tasks of regulating urgent issues to the Advisory Board. The need to temporarily modify the school calendar for security reasons, as was the case during the presence of Ethiopian troops in Mogadishu, could for example be delegated to the Board.

### FPENS’ Financial Resources

FPENS’ financial resources are collected from member organisations and paid-up service fees. Every charity organi-

sation pays a one-off fee to join the network that, in 2008, was set at the equivalent of US\$ 200. The monthly fees correspond to US\$ 2 per school class and are paid by all charities. On the basis of the number of classes organised by all Islamic charities in the FPENS network, which amounted to about 2000 in 2008, it is possible to estimate the monthly income of the network at around US\$ 4,000 per month. This money is used to cover the network’s running costs. The remainder of the money is reinvested in the organisation and meant, for example, to help stock the FPENS’ library or the resource centre in Mogadishu, both of which are available to teachers for in-service training.

The other sources of income derive from the services that FPENS offers to the students of the member charities. The granting of annual exam certifications is one of the services provided by the network. The FPENS committee oversees the examination procedures and provides certificates to successful students for the fee of US\$ 10 per certificate. According to one of FPENS’ managers, there are approximately 4,000 to 5,000 graduates per year, which comes down to an additional annual income of roughly US\$ 50,000.

The network’s activities are structured as projects. This means that teacher training activities are considered to be projects in the same way as the reconsideration and modification of primary school textbooks are. Each project has its own budget, which is paid for by the charities that comprise the network. The charities are called to pay their non-recurring share until the budget is covered.

In addition to this, FPENS is connected with universities located in African countries like Sudan, Egypt and Kenya, Arab countries like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and is developing strong relationships with the University of Malaysia. All these universities offer fellowships to the best performing Somali students of FPENS-affiliated schools. Thanks to this network, FPENS’ students can continue their education career abroad, as their school certificate is internationally recognised.

A former FPENS President specified that the organisation is not funded by Arab countries. The network is, in fact, entirely self-funding, which might not be the case for the individual charities of which the FPENS consists of. These organisations are instead mainly funded by private donations from Arab countries or countries where they are headquartered. The Africa Muslim Agency (AMA)<sup>29</sup> is a typical example of a ‘donation cycle’. AMA headquarters, which are based in Kuwait, first receive funds from the Kuwaiti government and private donors. The headquarters then sends the money to branch offices around the world, including the Somali office.<sup>30</sup> The funds are used to cover the office’s running costs and help the start-up of new projects.<sup>31</sup> AMA also pays its FPENS membership and project fees, which enables it to benefit from FPENS’ services. It can thus be argued that

<sup>27</sup>Interview with Sheek Farah Abdulkadir, Nairobi, August 2008.

<sup>28</sup>These units include the public relations unit, the curriculum development unit, the exam certification unit and the finance unit. The latter comprises an accountant and a cashier, who can access the FPENS bank account at Dahabshil (an international funds transfer company which is dedicated to Somali expatriates).

<sup>29</sup>The Africa Muslim Agency (AMA) is an Islamic NGO based in Kuwait.

<sup>30</sup>Interview with a former AMA volunteer during the refugee emergency response in Liboy in 1991. Nairobi, 10 May 2008.

<sup>31</sup>Reportedly, this was true until 2001. Since then, the headquarters in Arab countries have progressively stopped to send money to their foreign branch offices (based on an interview with the AMA staff in Nairobi on 14 May 2008). However, underground procedures have been put in place, through private donations urged through the media and the Mosques and delivered directly to the bank accounts of the branch offices in Somalia (information based on an interview with a Muslim private donor in Nairobi on 14 May 2008).

although officially the FPENS does not receive funds from the Saudi, Kuwaiti, Egyptian or Sudanese governments, private funds instead find their way indirectly from these countries through the channelling of individual charity donations. The fellowships provided by these organisations also go directly to the students and thus bypass the accounts of the FPENS.

## CONCLUSIONS

The most important finding about the Islamic charitable sector in Somalia concerns the capacity of the sector to behave as a consolidated institution in a stateless environment, acting as a substitute of the state in specific social domains, such as education. Rather than acting as a loose group of philanthropic organisations, Islamic charities working in education have opted to network; through networking, they are able to play a political role by acting as an institutional referent in an environment where governmental institutions are purely nominal and fail to exercise any effective functional role.

FPENS does play this institutional role with regard to the education sector, and this is visible in the network's engagement in the curriculum development process, the modification of the school calendar and the certification procedures that allow Somali students to access foreign education facilities. These activities clearly suggest that a well structured network of Islamic charities has replaced the role of the Ministry of Education in central southern Somalia by establishing basic rules and regulations for a new education system.

Through FPENS, Islamic charities also play a political role according to Wiktorowicz and Farouki's interpretation of Muslim politics, described as "struggles over the proper role of Islam in society and its relative significance *vis-à-vis* other cultural codes and values" [18]. In Somalia, these other values and codes could be the ones promoted by international organisations in UN-supported schools, or simply the type of secular education that was promoted by Siad Barre. In fact, FPENS, through its networked charities, is promoting an "Arabised" education system, the long-term impact of which on Somali culture is difficult to estimate. The increased number of FPENS affiliated schools over the last years suggests that FPENS' effort is well appreciated by the Somali population. However, this appreciation may derive also from the fact that the quality of FPENS' schools is generally considered above average in Somalia, as confirmed by many Somalis who have informally contributed to this research. Without doubt, the FPENS curriculum and a good knowledge of the Arab language are two important assets for young Somalis who wish to develop business activities with the neighbouring Arab world or who have ambitions to go to university. One might consider that there are few other opportunities for well-off youth in Somalia and this surely contributes to FPENS' success over the last years.

The second important finding on the Islamic charitable sector in Somalia relates to its capacity to mobilise local and foreign funds to perform its activities at high professional standards. The FPENS case study suggests that the Somali charitable sector enjoys a structured organisation and a high degree of professionalism with regard to its methodologies and approaches to education. With regard to its capacity to

mobilise funds, rough calculations based on the conducted interviews suggest that FPENS' annual budget, which is meant to sustain and maintain the limited education system in Somalia, amounts to approximately US\$ 100,000. This contribution is provided by the Somali society at large in exchange for a social service; it is a sort of social contract, which establishes a relationship between Islamic charities on the one hand and the Somali people on the other. This relationship is similar to the one established by the population of a State and its governmental institutions that collect taxes in exchange of a welfare system.

The insight provided on the charitable sector's private funding mechanism suggests that Islamic charities are stimulating the development of a private social welfare system, probably with pro-poor sensitiveness that derives from the religious background. Further research on this topic and new evidence-based case studies are needed in order to enhance our understanding of its potential impact on the social welfare development policies that are currently promoted in the country by the international community.

The third important finding of this research is related to the Islamic charitable sector's role in providing basic social services to the population in a highly dangerous fragile state setting. Though access to conflict-prone areas may be difficult for all NGOs, no matter whether they are western, Christian or Islamic ones, the Somali case demonstrates that there is a way to operate and possibly prosper in a conflict environment. On the same note, a former student of the Mogadishu University told the author that Mogadishu was not equally unsafe every day and that students used to meet and have courses in private houses instead of an the university premises during the most dangerous months. The promoters of the Mogadishu University themselves<sup>32</sup> had visited the Palestinian Territories in order to learn how to establish a University in a conflict prone environment<sup>33</sup>. Obviously, not all Islamic charities and NGOs are able to access all conflict areas in Somalia: their capacity depends on various variables, such as the presence of a widely known and respected representative, clan lines, Islamic ideological affiliations, and their ability to negotiate their presence with the factions that rule the area from time to time<sup>34</sup>.

Many Islamic charities have learned how to operate in Somalia despite the volatile security situation, as the FPENS experience demonstrates. Western actors need this expertise and this should induce them to search for collaboration with the Islamic charitable sector. The necessary prerequisite for collaboration between Islamic charities/NGOs and western agencies, however, is mutual knowledge and trust. In this regard, independent and quality research can help unveiling some of the grey areas that exist among development actors – the ambition of this paper goes in this direction. In particular, the position of existing Islamic NGOs and charitable organisations *vis-à-vis* important western development principles such as human rights, humanitarian principles and the Millennium Development Goals still needs to be clarified, as

<sup>32</sup>Promoters of Mogadishu University are strongly related to the Al-Islah movement that is linked to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.

<sup>33</sup>Interview with Badiyow, August 2008.

<sup>34</sup>At present, for instance, no NGO, neither western nor Islamic, can access Al Shabab controlled areas.

is the understanding of “development” for these organisations.

Finally, this study concludes that Islamic charities in Somalia are playing their part in filling the void that exists in the governance of the country. This should invite the international community to reflect on the religion-development nexus and in particular on its Islamic variation and to reconsider the very notion of ‘fragility’ with regard to Somalia and its policy implications.

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