Across much of Europe, the rationing of food - seen at its most obvious in the ubiquitous bread queue - has now become part of everyday life. In countries such as India, long used to facing food shortages, systems have been created to ensure that those most in need receive the basic supplies required to sustain life. Can the States of Europe, newly-beset by disaster, learn something from their neighbours in the south?
Armenia, 1993. Ian Berry /Magnum

for viable communities and societies.

To take one component of alternative development - equity - and outline a parallel process applicable to disaster situations can provide useful insights. It is frequently assumed that disaster "victims" are totally dependent on external relief for their survival. Affected people's contributions are often overlooked, especially in popular media, but also among some relief agencies.

For example, Bangladesh flood victims normally receive support from families and other community members to cope; less than 12% receive local or national governmental support. Ethiopian refugees in Sudan enhanced their solidarity by offering one another small loans; borrowers are not expected to pay interest, but reciprocal expectations are reinforced. In Darfur, Sudan, coping with famine conditions in the mid-1980s, food aid provided just 10% of people's needs Even on the basis by which outsiders most frequently judge their contributions to disasters - material assistance - their role is but part of a larger whole that has already begun within communities themselves.

The issue of equity is also important in accessing wisdom, knowledge and experience. Outsiders' perceptions - of helpless victims - create a self-imposed blurred screen that distorts the character and contributions of those victims. Disaster victims can make major contributions in both planning for and implementing relief responses. They bring a knowledge of survival and resilience within a long-term context of disaster.

Much is already known about disaster response at the community level; it is the daily reality for hundreds of millions of people. The most comprehensive and effective planning tool for disaster prevention currently exists. Indigenous knowledge and structures are untapped; they contribute to cost-effective, sustainable and equitable disaster-prevention. The mechanisms by which communities, vulnerable groups and others interpret the disaster and outline short- and longer-term responses are readily available. Those mechanisms will best be served as national and international relief responses relate to communities on the basis of mutual respect and equitable contributions.

There remain a number of outstanding issues about reducing the impact of disasters through building on the strengths of CBOs and NGOs. These include: sovereignty, accountability and basic human rights not only of but within nation-States; oppression of people within CBOs to deny space for their creative initiatives; and the absence of assumed precedent among international organisations for building on community-based solutions to disaster mitigation. Each of these issues is in a state of change.

Within the disaster-response communities the knowledge currently exists to pinpoint likely areas of quick-onset disasters. With that prior knowledge, disaster planners can work with indigenous NGOs and CBOs to design mitigation and preparedness programmes. Kofi Awoonor of Ghana says it well: "Recognise the humanity, the resilience, and the boundless courage of the victims of disasters, many of whom live below all imaginable standards of survival [and] eke out a precarious existence from harsh, unfriendly terrain..."

In the context of militarised crises, such as Somalia, the prior and ongoing efforts of indigenous NGOs to facilitate conflict resolution and identify key groups will remain important. That process offers one of the most tangible ways to build on local knowledge, processes and structures. As the "Humanitarianism and War Project" has shown, external support for internal peace initiatives can reinforce the dynamics being generated in problem solving towards peace.

Reversing the accumulation of disasters and their impacts is underway in communities of vulnerable people. Disaster-response organisations and international development agencies must catch up with this reality, to learn with and from those communities.

Focus 4: Making peace in Somaliland

In the Sanaag Region of the self-proclaimed "Republic of Somaliland", valuable work is being undertaken by traditional local structures to establish and maintain peace, according to a recent study commissioned from Dr. Ahmed Yusuf Farah by the UK- based international agency ACTIONAID.

Despite the pressure under which clan and lineage systems came during the Barre regime, lineage elders are thriving. The return to tried and tested systems of governance which has been occurring in the north, with minimal levels of external support, has enabled Somalis to break the momentum of war and opportunistic plunder.

Peace agreements have been made in Sanaag, with the process led by groups of elders, known as Akils, the Councils of Elders or Guurti, paramount heads and religious leaders. Adjustments have been made to the penalty code to enable improvements in security and actions against banditry, women have had a key role in peace-making, and traditional poetry has been a powerful medium for encouraging peace-making.

The policy implications are clear: local peace-making initiatives should be encouraged, and external assistance should be handled carefully to preserve the self-help effort of local initiatives.

Local peace processes are not likely to be a panacea, but the establishment of modern political structures must take into account the moral authority of the elders and the progress so far achieved in establishing local level peace agreements.

The severity of the government assault on "Somaliland" before Barre's departure, and the disruptive legacy of the 1977-78 war with Ethiopia, have thrown the clans of Somaliland back on their own cultural and institutional resources in order to tackle the disorder that prevailed after January 1991. A key to the visible progress in the north has been the spontaneous adoption by the general public of a bottom-up approach to the restoration of peace and stability, involving representative authorities and institutions at all levels of society in Somaliland, a former British protectorate accounting for roughly one-third of Somalia.

Traditional leaders

Under Siad Barre, a system of divide and rule, formulated and implemented by the centralised State, undermined the ability of traditional leaders in Somalia to settle local disputes and keep the peace. Through a system of incentives, Barre drew many such leaders into the regime, just as colonialism had wooed them in the past. However, their association with the regime diminished their standing among their own communities. The Barre government, meanwhile, sought to impose a homogeneous "modernity" on the culture of clan and lineage. References to one's clan or common ancestor were strenuously discouraged. The regime officially outlawed one of the key traditional judicial instruments in Somalia: the collective compensation, known as Dia, by lineage groups in case of misconduct by their members. By the mid-1970s the regime claimed that it had abolished the clan system throughout Somalia.

Clan structures

During the civil war, the authority of clan elders was actually strengthened in the north. The guerrillas who fought Barre's regime were drawn from northern sub-clans and clan militias within the Somali National Movement. This returned traditional figures to prominence.

In a period of turmoil and uncertainty, and in the absence of legitimate state institutions, clans and sub-clans have had recourse to their own traditional structures. Particular emphasis has been given to the appointment of sultans - a secular political office, sanctioned by religion. There are now more than twice the number of sultans in Somaliland than at independence in 1960. The mediating authority of Akils, or heads of Dia-paying lineage groups - an office abolished in the early 1970s - is now firmly re-established and its functions have expanded into the vacuum left by the collapse of the Barre administration. The lineage elders, who led smaller units within the clan, also have an important role, despite a period of eclipse under the Barre regime.

All clans in Somaliland and some of the larger sub-clans now have their own Supreme Council of Elders, known as Guurti. These fulfil a dual role as legislature and executive, with responsibility for everyday questions arising within the clan and also for arbitration between different clans. In April 1992, for instance, the Gaadabursi clan, whose celebrated dynasty of sultans was disrupted during the 1950s, reinstated its paramount head, or Ugaas, and sent peace delegations to reconcile warring groups within the clan. The elders called for an assembly which would deliberate on the restoration of peace and prospects for the future.

It is not clear to what extent the traditional elders are acting with equal responsibility in the south. A recent report - "Land Tenure, The Creation of Famine and The Prospects For Peace in Somalia" by Africa Rights - on land tenure in the Juba and Shebelle regions of the south, for example, emphasises how some clan elders have enriched themselves by asserting title to land traditionally held by minority groups. Others hold documents issued by Barre's government, which they claim proves their entitlement. Until the land is-

sue is resolved at the local level, an equivalent peacemaking process cannot begin satisfactorily.

While north and south alike are plagued by freelance banditry, the goal of international recognition gives added impetus to a genuine and popular wish for peace. Somaliland, moreover, is spared the existence of influential "warlords" locked in a desperate struggle for power - this has been a major obstacle to peace in the south. It is also clear that the concentration of aid resources in any one place, such as Mogadishu in the south and, to a lesser extent, Berbera in the north, has been a potent stimulus to conflict in those areas.

Progress to peace

The mechanisms for establishing peace depend on joint community - committees formed at local level, empowered to implement agreements reached by Councils of Elders. Another local authority known as "the committee which uproots unwanted weeds from the field" is responsible for dealing with banditry and minor disturbances. This localised approach to peacekeeping began with a series of inter-clan reconciliation conferences in 1991 and gradually advanced to district, regional and "national" levels.

The authorisation of agreements at peace conferences is given by clan elders, but other traditional leaders - politicians, military officers and particularly religious men and poets - have also played a crucial role in the peace process.

Religious figures, such as sheikhs and wadaads, or Islamic scholars, take their duties as peacemakers seriously. Their authority is based on the esteem in which they are held as spiritual leaders, as distinct from Akils and sultans, whose status is more secular. Spiritual leaders are seen as ideal and neutral arbiters with allegiance to universal Islamic values that transcend clan loyalties. They do not settle disputes themselves, or sit in judgement. This is the work of elders in council. Instead, their task is to encourage rivals to make peace. To this end, independent delegations of renowned holy men have taken part in all the major peace initiatives between previously hostile clans in Somaliland.

Poetry, which is the most celebrated and respected art form in Somalia, has also been marshalled to the cause of peacemaking.

Through metaphor and allusion, oral poetry can tap the richest reserves of Somali discourse; it is widely understood and enjoyed and, like the mass media in the West, it has the power to influence opinion. In major clan reconciliations, such as the meeting of the Eastern Habar Yonis and the Dhulbahante at Daraweyne in 1992, distinguished national poets recited poems advocating peace at the inaugural and closing ceremonies.

Women have also played a significant part in peacemaking. After marriage, a woman retains her kinship ties with her father's group and - even though they are often denied - the property rights that these entail. The dual kinship role conferred by marriage has often existed across two neighbouring but warring clans, with the result that women have suffered unduly in Somalia's upheaval. It has also meant that women have taken on a new and active function as ambassadors between rival groups - the group that they married into and the group into which they were born. This is a function of their traditional role in systems of exchange.

Often, at the height of the civil war, women provided the only means of communication between rival clans, since their status allowed them to cross clan boundaries. Twenty-four days after the Dhulbahante council of elders failed to appear at the agreed site for the first peace forum, the Habar Yonis, with whom they were supposed to meet, sent a delegation of kinsmen born of Dhulbahante women, who persuaded suspicious maternal relatives among the Habar Yonis to attend.

Traditionally, women were exchanged to seal a peace treaty between two parties. A daughter was offered as a sign of trust and honour to mark the pact between giver and receiver.

Likewise, when blood has been shed, Somalis regard the gift of a marriageable partner as material and symbolic compensation for the loss of life. Such traditions have persisted in Somaliland and have strengthened some of the major peace agreements, including that of the Habar Yonis and the Isa Musa, in which each clan providing 50 eligible women for the other.

Modern technology has also been instrumental in the relative stability of Somaliland. In the past, radio communication was the monopoly of the government and international organisations. Recently, however, the elders of several bitterly-embattled clans in Somaliland have remained in constant radio contact during periods of tension, and radio links have provided vital channels for negotiation.

Peace conferences

In November 1992, some 400 delegates representing the eastern Habar Yonis and the Warsangeli met at Jiideli. By the end of the conference they had agreed that each clan would be responsible for maintaining law and order in its own territory. A joint local committee of 30 members would be responsible for settling conflicts according to the terms laid down at the conference. If more rain fell in the land of one clan, the guest community attracted by the pasture would be responsible for the protection of the lives and livestock of the host community.

Elders have also decreed that responsibility for paying damages for the actions of armed groups should be directly shouldered by the families of persistent offenders,

rather than, as normally, extend to the whole Dia-paying group. If an armed robber is unable to pay compensation, the burden falls upon his father and brothers There are many instances of crimes committed by younger men being dealt with by clan elders. In some cases, persistent offenders have been executed by their own kin.

The various inter-clan peace conferences in the north of Somalia culminated in the Boroma national conference at which a national (Somaliland) peace charter was agreed and basic provisions for law and order were formulated during four months of discussion.

Following the collapse of the SNM regime, a new government was appointed by the elders. This was politically the most telling achievement to date of northern local-level clan democracy.

The Boroma conference received international support, but all of the other successful clan conferences in the north have been financed by community self-help, in marked contrast to the high profile UN forums in the south of the country and abroad, which have failed, so far, to produce a plausible settlement. Perhaps his accounts for the caution expressed by the Eastern Alliance Elders in Garadag in 1992 against a unilateral UN military intervention in the north "without the consent of the leaders of local clans".

Next steps

The efforts of clan leaders in northern Somalia over the past two years to bring about peace have raised popular hopes for positive change. The moral status and customary skills of the elders are a vital component in tackling the many problems that prevail in Somaliland. The participation of lineage leaders enables the representation of local groups in the administration to be balanced, ensures the equitable distribution of political and economic resources and allows for more effective demobilisation of armed groups. This participation must not be allowed to be marginalised as modern State and professional infrastructure develops The task of reconstructing basic services should start at the district level rather than from the top downwards. This approach is attuned to the decentralised system of governance which is enshrined in the interim national charter for Somaliland formulated by the elders at the Boroma conference.

But the traditional structures on their own are not a complete panacea for the problems that are faced, especially in a society of warrior nomadic pastoralists. Traditional peacemaking is sturdy, but it is also slow and cumbersome and will always benefit from logistical assistance. The initiatives in the north need to be supported. Such external support, however, needs to recognise the sensitivity of the recovery process. While much has been achieved in terms of restraining freelance banditry and inter-clan strife, the security situation remains delicate, which in turn suggests pitfalls for any hasty attempt at a programme of comprehensive reconstruction. For the time being, external assistance must supplement rather than overwhelm the kinds of local grassroots initiatives that already exist To do so it will have to be timely and discerning, and acknowledge the progress which an alliance of popular will and traditional leadership has already achieved in northern Somalia.

Conclusions

Traditional systems of governance rely primarily on the moral authority of lineage and clan leaders. The power of such systems to prevent the occurrence of crime and violence remains limited. Northern elders describe their functions as upholders of law and order in such modest terms as dab damin, literally "fire extinguishing". The guarantees that these systems attempt to provide should not be under-estimated, however. They are the basis of an emerging stability in the north. Their success depends on the support and trust of pastoral communities, which can only be won by anchoring the peace effort firmly within the existing social order.

It is now common for the herds of different clans to graze together in common border areas. This is remarkable progress, but it is largely unknown outside Somaliland. Successes of this kind have come about despite, not because of, outside intervention in Somalia. They provide ample evidence of the effectiveness of peace initiatives taken by and through institutions that have survived more than 20 years of harsh centralised government and a bitter civil war. There are valuable lessons to be learned from the successes within Somaliland and hopes that there can be more support for traditional peace-keeping mechanisms in other parts of the country.

In the troubled south, meanwhile, the UN has facilitated peace moves outside Mogadishu and is currently promoting the formation of local and district councils. Such initiatives can only win popular backing and work effectively if they take into account the dynamics and aspirations of people at all levels of the community, including minority groups in the south. Here the full representation and cooperation of traditional local leaders is crucial

This is an edited version of "The Roots of Reconciliation", based on "Peacemaking Endeavours of Contemporary Lineage Leaders: A Survey of Grassroots Peace Conferences in North-west Somalia/ Somaliland", researched by Dr Ahmed Yusuf Farah and commissioned by ACTIONAID