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Fishermen or Pirates? Somalia's Registration Programme in Focus

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The Somali fishermen's registration programme was lauched to help Somalia's fisheries management and to secure its waters against piracy. Though commendable, the programme has yielded serious problems.

Following the end of the civil war, the fisheries sector re-emerged as an important economic activity in Somalia, evidenced by the increase in the number of artisanal fishermen operating in the Puntland, Galmudug, and Somaliland regions. The exact number of these fishermen is unknown since neither the respective Ministries of Fisheries nor the District Fishing Associations register Somalis who fish. The lack of information on the number of fishermen, fishing fleet, services, the state of marine resources, and landings reduces the ability of decision makers to make informed decisions regarding the establishment of a robust fisheries management structure in Somalia.

In support of the various Ministries, the United Nations Food & Agriculture Organization (FAO) is involved in projects to improve the understanding of Somalia's fisheries sector. One of these activities is the development of a biometrics-based, artisanal fishermen -specific, registration system (Biometric Information Technology System or BITS) for the Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources in Puntland, Galmudug, and Somaliland.

The data collected using BITS is expected to help formulate a more nuanced understanding of fishermen livelihoods in Somalia—which is necessary for effective fisheries management at the regional and national levels. The information can also prove useful for the government and international naval

forces in the attempt to secure Somali waters against piracy and enable *legitimate* fishermen to operate more freely at sea.

Piracy and Somalia

Somali piracy and illegal, unreported, and underreported (IUU) fishing are two issues that have long been entangled in rhetoric and practice. According to the grand narrative of Somali piracy, without a government to police the coastline or prosecute offenders, Somali waters and resources were vulnerable to foreign illegal fishers. In order to protect their livelihoods, Somali fishermen took up arms against the illegal fishers as a form of retribution and/or taxation for plundering their fish and natural resources (see also Hansen, 2011; Bueger, 2013; Gilmer 2016).

More than a decade after the perceived beginnings of Somali piracy, the grand narrative is still invoked by pirates and members of the Somali public. As artisanal fishermen, pirates, and foreign illegal fishers continue to operate within the same vast maritime spaces, inevitably, accusations of mistaken arrests began to emerge. Coastal communities claimed their fishermen were being picked up by foreign navies. Piracy prisoners held in foreign prisons maintained they were innocent fishermen who were mistaken as pirates. These stories not only raised questions of possible injustices, but they also spotlighted the issue that other than the members of Somalia's coastal communities and local fishing organizations, no one could say for certain (or prove) who was or was not a pirate/fishermen/illegal fisher.

Establishing a system for identifying Somalia's maritime community, and sharing that information with international naval forces, was imagined as a

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starting point for more objective monitoring of Somalia's waters (i.e., protecting against further potential injustices).

The Somalia fishermen's registration programme

From 2013 to 2015, FAO utilized the BITS while conducting the Somalia fishermen's registration programme (hereinafter referred to as the registration programme). The program is/was funded by the Trust Fund to Support the Initiatives of States to Counter Piracy off the Coast of Somalia of The Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS). Collectively, the registration program consisted of three Trust Fund to Support Initiatives of States to Counter Piracy off the Coast of Somalia projects: Project #55 Fishermen Identification Database System; Project #69 Galmudug and Jubbaland Fishermen Fleet Registration; Project #70 "Somaliland" Fishermen and Fleet Registration.

Via field officers, the Ministries collected basic information about more than 5,000 fishermen from all associations within Puntland, Galmudug, and Somaliland during face-to-face structured interviews. This data was entered into a database held by the Ministries. In 2016, a data analysis workshop was conducted in Bossaso, Somalia to "ground truth" the collected data and to discuss the overall successes and challenges of the registration program. Discussions revealed how the registration program became part of a broader struggle over the power to (re)construct the identities of people, labor niches, and maritime spaces of Somalia.

The registration programme helped shift the site for identifying *legitimate* fishermen from at sea to onshore in Somalia at the various fishing landing sites where the registration exercises took place.

Consequently, landing sites became the new key political sites in the struggle to define and identify *legitimate* fishermen. More specifically, the process of submitting/entering an individual's data into the BITS was overseen by the heads of the local fishing associations.

By discouraging the field officers from registering the data of pastoralists and pirates, the heads of the local fishing associations helped create a new group of maritime "others". These "others" are considered potential criminals (i.e., pirates or illegal fishers) nand will not be afforded the same freedoms of mobilities at sea as *legitimate* fishermen. Indeed, by not having their data registered, these individuals were also rendered ineligible for future development programming geared towards registered fishermen.

The data linked to those labeled legitimate fishermen is used to design future fisheries sector development programming. Those labeled legitimate fishermen become a target group for future FAO- or other agency-facilitated fisheries development projects. Maritime others, however, are left out of this development target group. As a result, the heads of the local fishing associations not only reshaped future development to exclude pirates (former or current) and pastoralists, but they may also have contributed to a future increase in piracy activity by pushing certain maritime "others" back out to sea without the occupational legitimacy/protections provided by a fishermen identification card (See Gilmer, 2017).

Because *who* they are and *what* they are doing in maritime space remains an unknown, they must remain under the watchful eye of law enforcement. Although some individuals do, indeed, return to the sea with the intent to commit crimes, most do not. Thus, this reveals the paradox that the programme that set out to simultaneously develop and decriminalize Somali

fishermen has only effectively displaced the criminalization onto a more specific maritime population of Somalis.

Beyond the politics of submitting/entering data, the process of distributing fishermen identification cards also played an important role in reshaping future geographies of development and mobilizing certain bodies. In Puntland, government officials utilized the distribution of fishermen identification cards as leverage to bargain with FAO representatives for future planning meetings in Somalia. By securing these future planning meetings, Puntland officials were also able to secure future patronage in exchange for all-expenses-paid trips for the heads of the local fishing associations.

The future planning meetings were also relocated from the coastline to the inland city of Garowe to maximize the FAO-provided daily service allowance each attendee (i.e., head of the local fishing association) would receive. However, moving the meetings away from the coastline greatly diminishes the likelihood that fishermen will be able to participate in any of the meetings. Thus, the fishermen and their respective communities remain on the margins of development planning for Somalia's fisheries sector.

Conclusion

The Somali fishermen registration programme is commendable in that it is the first cross-regional attempt to collect data on Somalia's artisanal fishermen and fishing livelihoods since prior to the Somalia civil war. FAO will continue to support the Ministries but the expectation at this point is that the Ministries continue to register fishermen and collect basic information. Furthermore, FAO in partnership with the Ministries, will roll out additional information systems, such as the landing site and sale system, and vessel registration system.

These initiatives will add to the information gained from the Somalia fishermen's registration program and continue to develop the knowledge of the fishing sector in Puntland, Galmudug, and Somaliland. However, it is also imperative to analyze the processes involved in these data collection projects to understand the politics of identity as they play out at various sites. These politics and local struggles play a key role in shaping the institutionalization of Somalia's maritime identities and broader access to future fisheries development aid.

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