Helpdesk Research Report

Promoting national identities

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Question

Identify approaches that attempt to understand and promote the generation of national identities. What constitutes them? How are they made? What incentives (or other tools) could be used to promote an overarching Somali political entity covering the various clans and regions.

Contents

1. Overview

Fragmented and competing identities, and low levels of societal cohesion, are key factors that can perpetuate state fragility. This report examines how national identity is constructed in relation to other identities, and highlights the challenges that actors face when aiming to influence and change identities.

There is a large and historic body of literature that explores the issues of identity politics, ethnicity, clanism and nationalism – much of it in peer-reviewed journal articles. While issues of identity politics are increasingly recognised as key issues in donor literature, historically, development practitioners have played a lesser role in examining this issue, due to its inherent challenges and politicised nature. While Somalia is the focus of this report, relevant examples from other countries are also provided.

The key points that emerge from this rapid report are:

- **National, ethnic and clan identities:** Each person has a variety of identities, which are generally complementary. Brown (2000) identifies three approaches to studying ethnicity (or clanism) and nationalism: the primordialist; the situational; and the constructivist.

- **Identity in Somalia:** Despite some variations, predominantly in the South, the majority of Somalis share the same ethnic group, genealogy, language, customary law, culture and religion. However, clanship and contract are fundamental for Somali political units.

- **Constructing national identities:** Fragmented and competing identities and low levels of societal cohesion are key factors that can perpetuate state fragility. The idea of constructing national identities in relation to other identities is a key part of nation-building literature. Nation-building is a long-term endogenous process and the potential role of external actors is limited.

- It is increasingly recognised that regional, ethnic or clan identities are not just obstacles, but are also key assets in building sustainable societies.

- Identifying the actors and groups that act as 'facilitators' or 'spoilers' of national identity and societal cohesion is important.

- Somalia has many of the traits of what is defined as a nation, and also of national identity. However, the failure of the central state to provide and protect the interests of the citizens, coupled with competing clan identities, among other factors, has meant that Somalis frequently do not act in the collective interest of the country, but of their different clans and sub-clans.

- **Challenges and limitations**: Much of literature emphasises the limited ability internal and external actors have to directly promote (and change) national identities. Moreover, the legitimacy external actors have to carry out initiatives with this aim is heavily contested in the literature.

- Despite these challenges, five prominent areas of methods and tools for promoting national identities are identified in the literature:

  – **Civic engagement** approaches and tools can help foster links across identity groups through forums for civic engagement (for example civic networks, trade unions, agricultural cooperatives and professional associations). Civil society organisations can provide spaces for dialogue that are inclusive of marginalised groups (e.g. women in Somalia).

  – **Cultural** approaches and tools are widely recognised as useful resources to build communication and understanding between groups – through, for example funding sports, educational, and cultural programmes (e.g. poetry in Somalia).

  – **Dialogue** approaches and tools can be useful to help understand how to foster cooperation and social cohesion between groups – encouraging wider social change by confronting myths, perceptions and stereotypes of the 'other'.

  – **Decentralisation** approaches in certain contexts can reduce group competition and facilitate the complementary existence of different identities. However, in other contexts decentralisation can undermine national identity, and can reinforce, legitimise and create new divides in societies.

- **Building inclusive institutions** across identity divides is key, especially to ensure that law and order, policing and justice approaches and tools are equitable and serve the interests of all citizens.

2. National, ethnic and clan identities

Identity is a 'relational concept' which draws distinctions 'between us and them' and fulfils emotional functions (Welsh, 1993: 66; Brown, 2000). Each person has a variety of identities – one of which is national identity. These identities are generally complementary, but in reaction to instability and changing circumstances certain identities may become more prevalent (Okamura In Smith 1993: 49; Osaghae 1994).

Brown (2000) identifies three approaches to studying ethnicity (or clanism) and nationalism (as the two concepts are linked). The first approach is the 'primordialist' perception of 'instinct'. This implies that the modern nation has descended from an ethnic community with linguistic groups as the natural community (Brown, 2000: 5).

The second approach is the 'situational' perception of interests or the modernisation approach. This implies that ethnic and national identities were 'resources employed by groups of individuals for the pursuit of their common interest' (Brown 2000: 13). Anderson (1991: 95) discusses this perspective, observing that 'national consciousness' evolved and created 'imagined communities' as a reaction to capitalism and better communication. According to this theory, ethnicity is 'voluntary, rational, situational, functional and pragmatic' (Osaghae 1994: 139).

The third approach is the constructivist perspective of ideology – this suggests that nationalist and ethnic sentiment is invented and constructed by elites to enhance state legitimacy (Brown, 2000: 20). This ideology is founded on claims of descent, constructed myths and symbolism of national heritage (Brown, 2000).

Smith defines the nation as 'a named human community occupying a homeland and having common myths and a shared history, a common public culture, a single economy and common rights and duties for all members' (2001: 13). He defines nationalism as 'an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity and identity for a population which some of its members deem to constitute an actual or potential nation' (Smith 2001: 9).

Identity in Somalia

Despite some variations, predominantly in the South, most Somalis share the same ethnic group, genealogy, language, customary law, culture and religion (Samatar 2001 in Samata 2006). For this reason, it has been argued that Somalia is a nation-state, but this is contested (Lewis 2001 in Samata 2006).

While clan-based identification and violence in Somalia has been prevalent historically, it was after the 1990-1 collapse of the state that the country fractured predominantly along clan lines (Kapteijns 2012; Lewis 2001 in Samata 2006). Kapteijns (2012) notes that post-1991 a new form of 'collective,

clan-based violence, namely that of clan cleansing, in a new political context and with a new dominant discourse' marked a 'key shift' in Somalia's clan identity. [1]

Despite possessing many characteristics of national identity, clanship and contract[2] are fundamental for Somali political units (Lewis 1961: 161; Mohamed 2007). Kaplan (2010: 90) notes that social cohesion is strong within Somali clans, but not between them. Membership of Somali clans and networks are fluid. Somali identity and tradition have never been determined by one element, but are a 'living and ongoing process resulting from multiple interactive forces' (expert comment; Samata 2009: 9).

There is some dispute over the source of clan differences. The widely cited anthropologist Lewis (in Samata 209: 52) argues that 'clans represent invisible lines of distinction within the Somali "nation" and since they are based on genealogies and descent, have a biological basis comparable to racial distinctions'. However, Samatar (2001: 56 in Samata 2006) argues that 'each Somali genealogical group does not have distinct history that distinguishes it from other Somalis', and that clanism in Somalia is 'instrumentally induced recent political practice and concept'. It is widely acknowledged in the literature that clanism is manipulated by elites to accumulate power, particularly since 1991 (Kapteijns 2012). The severity of the violence since 1991 has entrenched clan divisions (Kaplan 2010).

While clan identity is the strongest form of identity in Somalia, Somalis are somewhat divided over the future governance of the country. There are two competing visions –nationalist and federalist (Kaplan 2010).

3. Constructing and promoting national identities

Constructing national identity as part of nation building

The idea of constructing national identities in relation to other identities is a **key part of nation-building** literature. DFID defines nation-building as 'the construction of a shared sense of identity and common destiny, to overcome ethnic, sectarian or religious differences and counter alternative allegiances' (DFID 2010: 18). It is widely recognised in the literature that the relationship between **fragmented and competing identities**, social cohesion and state legitimacy are critical to understanding social and political progress in fragile states (Kaplan 2008). Kaplan (2009) argues that states that lack a common identity will fail to progress. However, external actors have neglected this factor in international development initiatives (Kaplan 2009; Lemay-Hébert 2009).

It is emphasised in the literature that **nation-building is a long-term endogenous process** and that there is a limit to the role of external actors (Haider 2012). While some literature separates the concepts of state-building and nation-building, Lemay-Hébert (2009) emphasises that they should be understood as a single process, in which local ownership and legitimacy are key issues.

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[1] See Hinds (2013) for information on Somalia's clans:
http://www.gsdrc.org/go/display&type=Helpdesk&id=949
[2] Contract (or *heer* in Somalia) is 'customary procedure founded upon contractual agreement'

Competing and complementary identities

It is increasingly recognised that regional, ethnic or clan **identities are not just obstacles, but are also key assets in building sustainable societies** (Hagg & Kagwanja 2007). People use identities as a basis for claims to citizenship and empowerment.

For example, Kaplan (2009) observes that while clan loyalties have undermined Somalia's national identity and central government, these loyalties also provide a basis to help rebuild trust, solidarity, cohesion and identities from the bottom up (Kaplan 2010).

Identifying the spoilers and facilitators

Recognising the actors and groups that act as facilitators or spoilers of national identity and societal cohesion is important. In terms of the spoilers, the role of elites in manipulating identity is well referenced (Samata 2006). For some political and clan-based elites, accentuating divisions of 'us and them' are key to maintaining power.

In terms of facilitators, Kapteijns (2012) notes that poets and singers can facilitate ideas of the Somali nation and Somali citizens (see below). Community elders have also been identified by NGOs and aid agencies as facilitators.

Acting in the interest of the national collective, and not the group

As the above section illustrates, Somalia has many of the traits of what is defined as a nation, and also of national identity. However, the failure of the central state to provide and protect the interests of the citizens, coupled with competing clan identities, among other factors, has meant that Somalis frequently do not act in the collective interest of the country, but act in the interest of their different clans and sub-clans. Low social cohesion and low levels of trust in societies impact negatively on perceptions of the political community and on civic action – thus undermining more abstract identities of the community or the nation (Haider 2012).

In this vein, the next section highlights initiatives that promote national identities and that promote action in pursuit of that collective national interest, rather than the group interest. These types of actions are varied, and some could also be defined as actions promoting civic engagement, national reconciliation, and collective action. For brevity, five areas of initiatives are explored below – three areas target informal structures in what could be called a bottom-up approach (civic engagement, cultural and dialogue approaches and tools); while the final two areas target formal structures in a top-down way (decentralisation and building inclusive justice institutions). Due to time constraints, this list of approaches and tools is not comprehensive, but indicative and representative of the literature reviewed for this report.

4. Approaches and tools

Challenges and limitations

Before exploring approaches and tools that have been used to construct identities, it is important to note the contested nature of this area. Much of literature emphasises the limited ability of internal and external actors to directly promote (and change) national identities. Moreover, the legitimacy external actors have to carry out initiatives with this aim is heavily contested (Lemay-Hébert 2009; Kaplan 2009).

In the Somali context, Kaplan (2009) notes that since 1991, the 'international community has launched at least fourteen peace initiatives in Somalia and spent more than [US]$8 billion on efforts to create a strong state. All have failed'. Kaplan (2010: 88) argues that in Somalia 'attempts to impose a centralized governing structure have severed the state from society'.

Kaplan (2010: 89) criticises the international community for its role in this, saying that 'its unimaginative approach to state-building seriously misreads the Somali socio-political context, showing little understanding for how a top-down strategy impacts the state's fluid, fragmented, and decentralized clan structures. To make matters worse, the mistakes of the past are constantly being repeated, thanks to weak institutional memory (made worse by high turnover in embassies, aid agencies, and international organizations within the region); an unimaginative, uncritical, and template-driven approach to state-building; and a lack of accountability on the part of external donors, defence agencies, and aid organizations for the consequences of their failed policies'.

Civic engagement approaches and tools

Forums for civic engagement – for example civic networks, trade unions, agricultural cooperatives and professional associations – can help foster links across identity groups (Haider 2012). Weissmann (2005) identifies that **informal social networks in Northeast Asia** are considered to have contributed to the absence of violent conflict in a volatile context. According to Weissmann (2005), these networks provide connections between divided communities, facilitate understanding of the 'other', and have helped build trust and long-term relationships.

Comparative case studies of Cambodia and Rwanda by Colletta and Cullen (2000: 4) examine the relationship between social capital, social cohesion and violent conflict, and argue that the more state responsiveness and cross-cutting network relations intersect, the more likely society will have the inclusion and cohesiveness necessary to mediate conflict and prevent violence.

In Somalia, **civil society organisations** have been recognised as providing spaces for dialogue that are inclusive of marginalised groups, especially women (Abdulle 2008). Research by Luckham, Moncrieffe and Harris (2006) identifies three country case studies where dialogue between the state and CSOs helped build positive links between different identity groups and the state to reduce identity-related exclusions. Luckham et al. (2006) do, however, warn that external support to civil society can undermine legitimacy.

Cultural approaches and tools

The literature also widely recognises culture as a useful resource to build communication and understanding between groups – through, for example sports, educational and cultural programmes (Kaplan 2009). It is also often a **less politically sensitive area where external actors can add value**. Haider (2012) notes that recognising cultural diversity as a positive and enriching factor can contribute to the de-politicisation of identity and the promotion of coexistence.

Poetry in Somalia

Lidwien (1991) identifies **poetry, popular songs, and Somali cultural production** as having played an important role in promoting national culture from the 1950s (until the clan cleansing campaign of 1991-1992 and the collapse of the state). Somali poets and singers often write unifying songs that address all Somalis as a national collective (Lidwien 1991). Lidwien (1991) notes that the same tools can be used to divide, so it is **important not to use this culture out of context**, or to see it as a 'miracle tool'.

Sport

Höglund and Sundberg (2008) analyse the processes through which sport can promote reconciliation in divided countries through a case study of South Africa. The linking of sport to South Africa's national development plan was a country-driven initiative made after South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994, and supported by local and international NGOs. Initiatives included: hosting high-level international games to foster an idea of national unity; and funding grassroots sports facilities to bring together previously divided communities.

Höglund and Sundberg (2008: 813) note that communal sports activities can help to overcome conflict identities by 'harmonising group relationships and restoring positive, co-operative interaction and crisscrossing loyalties spanning the in-group/out-group divide. The possibility of creating a new and inclusive social identity also exists'. Funding sports initiatives has increased in popularity in disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration processes, and refugee camps (Höglund & Sundberg 2008). However, the article also recognises that sports events can lead to conflict – e.g. the 1960s Football War between El Salvador and Honduras (Höglund & Sundberg 2008).

Creating national symbols

Höglund and Sundberg (2008) identify that post-apartheid South Africa invested in the creation and recreation of national symbols with new notes and coins, and a new national flag and anthem. The term 'Rainbow Nation', coined by South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu, supported these symbols of unity, as did Nelson Mandela's famous wearing of the Springbok sports jersey.

Dialogue approaches and tools

Theories and methods of conflict[3] transformation can be useful to help understand how to foster cooperation and social cohesion between groups. Conflict transformation approaches focus on encouraging wider social change by 'confronting myths, perceptions and stereotypes of the 'other'; and developing and entrenching tolerance and respect for the 'other'' (Haider 2012). A key point raised by Hagg and Kagwanja (2007) is that identities should be reconceptualised as assets and not obstacles to conflict resolution.

Saunders (2009) focuses on the definition and practice of dialogue as a process to transform relationships – with emphasis on 'relating' rather than problem-solving. Dialogue differs from other communication processes in the following ways (Saunders 2009):

- Negotiation requires parties ready to reach agreement. Alternatively, dialogue can help parties not ready to negotiate, but who want to change a conflictual relationship.

- Dialogue can change relationships in ways that create new grounds for mutual respect and collaboration, rather than negotiating over territory, goods or rights.

- Dialogue seeks to allow the emergence of new content, common to both parties, rather than allow one party to prevail over another.

- A space is created that allows diverse elements of the conflict to be presented over time, and explored in a safe environment, which if otherwise examined might lead to open violence.

Dialogue guided by the Transcend Method.

In a widely cited UN Disaster Management Training Programme publication, Galtung (2000) provides a training manual for the so-called 'Transcend Method', which puts dialogue across and between groups at the centre of its conflict transformation approach. The approach is made up of three steps:

'(1) Dialogue with all conflict parties (both direct and indirect) separately, explore their goals and fears and earn their confidence.

(2) Distinguish between legitimate goals, which affirm human needs, and illegitimate goals that violate human needs. Whatever we demand from other parties, we must be willing to grant to others. For example, self-determination is a legitimate goal, ruling over others is not.

(3) Bridge the gap between all legitimate but seemingly contradictory goals through solutions that embody creativity, empathy and nonviolence, building a new reality'.[4]

Decentralisation approaches

The literature widely recognises decentralisation as a key policy approach that can be pursued in fragmented countries. In certain contexts this can reduce group competition (and conflict) for

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[3] As the name of this theory suggests, this method focuses on conflict, however it is also applicable to other situations without conflict.
[4] See: http://www.galtung-institut.de/welcome/johan-galtung/

central state resources, resolve grievances and can improve accountability and legitimacy of governance structures. In divided societies, it can provide a way to 'go with the grain', to reduce the risks of conflict and succession, and to facilitate the mutual and complementary existence of different identities. However, in other contexts decentralisation can undermine national identity, and can reinforce, legitimise and create new divides in societies (Haider 2012). External actors can support countries pursuing a decentralisation approach.

Brancati (2006) recognises that a significant body of literature argues that decentralisation is successful in reducing ethnic conflict and secession in democracies. However, Brancati's (2006: 652) research, based on statistical analysis of thirty democracies from 1985 to 2000, highlights that decentralisation has been more successful in reducing ethnic conflict and secessionism in some countries (e.g. Belgium, India and Spain), but less so in others (e.g. Nigeria, Indonesia, and the former Yugoslavia). In the latter contexts, Brancati (2006) warns that decentralisation can indirectly increase ethnic conflict and secessionism by encouraging the growth of regional parties (also supported by Diprose & Ukiwo 2008). While Brancati's (2006) research is based on democracies, its findings can be applied to other contexts.

Somalia

In the Somali context, Kaplan (2010: 89) argues that the **international community should work directly with clans to help them build a series of regional governments**, like those in Somaliland and Puntland. Kaplan (2010: 90) explains that the central state would still play a crucial, but limited role – it could 'manage a common currency, offer a structure for negotiating clan disagreements (especially over land and resources), and provide a platform for clan representatives to work together to reach consensus on major foreign policy issues and national infrastructure projects. Outsiders could play a long-term role as arbitrators and underwriters to ensure that the most toxic interclan relationships do not poison the few national-level institutions'. Meanwhile, the regional governments could provide delivery of essential services, justice services and create formal governing bodies (Kaplan 2010).

Somaliland

Compared to Somalia and Puntland, Somaliland has been the most successful in achieving greater cohesion, legitimacy, stability, economic development, and governance institutions (Kaplan 2010). Kaplan (2010: 83) argues that this is due to Somaliland **integrating traditional ways of governance within a modern state apparatus**. This includes customary norms, values, and relationships – such as traditional Somali concepts of governance by consultation and consent. Renders and Terlinden (2010: 730) note that when Somaliland declared independence from Somalia in May 1991, 'the move called for a national identity across clan lines'.

Indonesia

Diprose (2007) examines two districts of the Central Sulawesi area of Indonesia, and finds that decentralisation has had both positive and negative indirect impacts on identity-based conflict dynamics. Diprose (2007) notes that decentralisation has wide support from the population, and indeed was enacted due to public demand. At the same time, decentralisation has changed local politics and competition for resources by changing population demographics (e.g. by changing

district sizes), and by increasing local participation in decision-making through direct elections (Diprose 2007).

When considering decentralisation, key issues to consider are (Kaplan 2010; Diprose & Ukiwo 2008; Diprose 2007):

- How to design an equitable system to share national resources and revenues;
- How to address inequalities between groups and ensure rights for minorities;
- How to design dispute mechanisms.

Inclusive institutions

National institutions need to be inclusive and offer more to citizens than the already established ethnic or clan-based institutions. If formal institutions are highly partial (to one group over others) – often because they are simply highly ineffective – they will not win the loyalty of those who are excluded. Therefore countries with weak institutions and unstable environments (such as Somalia) face many hurdles to building an overreaching identity (expert comment).

Law and order, policing and justice approaches and tools.

Research by Luckham et al. (2006: 21), based on four case studies, found that corrupt or inefficient public security institutions were an important factor in identity-based violence. External actors can support national reforms of law and order, policing or justice systems to help tackle identity based corruption, and to provide services to typically excluded groups (Luckham, et al. 2006).

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