



Somalia: Bad Urbanization in the Era of Climate Change

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The Pains of losing National Heritage

The destruction of Mogadishu is a quaint, if not a whimsical, narrative of the demise of thousands of architecturally significant resources, some dating back to the founding era of the City during Muslim renaissance.

Many of the resources that are gutted down or burned to the ground are irreplaceable. Pillaging coastal resources is the last act in the ongoing destruction of Mogadishu's heritage.

Before the 1990s civil war, Mogadishu was a magnificent and dazzling city, consisting of a peaceful tapestry of neighborhoods with avant-garde boulevards connecting Italianate Baroque architecture and iconic Islamic heritage.

Its beaches running parallel to Shangani, Abdula Aziz and Xamarweyn elevated the status of this magnificent city to be the uncontested pride for Somalis and a cultural repository for Sub-Sahara Africa.

This once beautiful cosmopolitan city full of montage buildings and diverse culture that attracted Somalis and non-Somalis alike from both the interior of East Africa and from distant lands was as a matter of fact known as the "*Pearl of the Indian Ocean.*"

Sad to note, though, that much of that panoramic urban landscape is lost to the bitter civil war of the 1990s. The last vestige of grandiose landscape of Mogadishu i.e., its coastal resources, is being destroyed in real time. A case in point is a recent project the City erroneously permitted for construction on the City's shoreline; this project, below, is nothing more than a death sentence to a city that has been mortally wounded.

To make matters worse, this project, which, according to reliable sources, was permitted not too long ago, is one of many similar projects in the pipelines.



A new modern building on the edge of the water

Sources close to the Mayor office said that the current Mogadishu administration blames the permitting of this project and other similar ones on the executive branches interference in Municipal affairs.

Despite who has the final say on issuing permits, the cumulative impact of several similar projects in the pipelines will negatively alter the fabric of Lido, or in Mogadishu's vernacular, the "people's beach."

Letting out of scale and incompatible buildings encroach into the last public space of Mogadishu is an affront to the nation; it is also an expression of ignorance at best and the ultimate sign of pillaging, thus corruption, whatever is left of the country's public resources.

The pillaging of Mogadishu is happening (a) without consultation with the indigenous or residents at large of the City; and (b) because the City does not have either an urban agenda or a comprehensive strategy and local coastal plans, beyond what its officials call incessantly "bilicda magaagala," or the "looks of the City," a meaningless phrase at a time when the City needs a serious agenda.

Climate Change Danger Looms Large

Somalis are faced with the looming climate change; it could endanger the very existence of the nation's city dwellers. Unheard of hurricanes, massive flooding, and erratic currents could any day crush hard on the gates of the City. With moribund national institutions, and no mitigation plans at hand, it is imprudent if not criminal to issue permits for buildings along Mogadishu's shorelines – imprudent because these buildings are encroaching thus destroying our coastal resources, and criminal because the government decision-makers are willy-nilly exposing people to known danger.

As a planner, I always gravitate towards first identifying both current and future challenges and seek appropriate tool boxes to mitigate potential impacts. For the last two years, I have been digesting the big problem of how precarious our cities are and the danger associated with both climate change and rapid growth.

I had the honor to speak at a conference which the HERITAGE Institute organized in Djibouti in December 2017, that all Somali regions were represented. Unlike my previous public appearances, I spoke at this conference less on politics and more on the lack of sustainable plans in the era of climate change. In that speech, I argued that most Somali speaking urban dwellers live in coastal towns.

Somali urban dwellers and their institutions (financial and political) are concentrated in coastal areas. Djibouti, Zaylac, Berbera, Bossasso, Hobyo, Mogadishu, Berawa, Kismayo could be wiped out with one Tsunami.

Also, the recent flooding of Beledweyn, Jawhar, Afgooye, Dollow and Bardheere point to the intersectionality between climate change and population centers.



Beled- Weyn, Hiraan Somalia

The recent Somalia Economic Update (SEU), sponsored by World Bank showed that 70% of Somalia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is urban-based, and none of these urban areas have any resilience plans in place. In other words, the nation's economy is only one hurricane or one Tsunami away from a complete collapse.

There is a dire need for comprehensive mitigation plans relative to future disasters so we can at least safeguard the institutional and financial wellbeing of Somali people.

To that end, few days after the Djibouti conference was concluded, I, along with General Saacid, former Somali police commissioner, visited the mayor of Djibouti. The meeting was graciously arranged by Colonel Abdullahi Abdi, commander of the Police force of Djibouti. An enthusiastic young mayor, Mayor Amina, openly discussed with me the City's challenges. I availed to her my fear of how one hurricane/cyclone can literally wipe out the entire infrastructure of her city. Over 80 percent of Djibouti nationals and almost all its business and national institutions are located in the city.

At least we agreed that there is a need for future plans for the City.

Likewise, a few months earlier to my meeting the Mayor of Djibouti, I visited Mogadishu (October 2017). Part of my visit was to have a constructive meeting with the then Mayor of Mogadishu and to discuss with him the vulnerability of Mogadishu to the dangers of climate change.

To my dismay, however, the former mayor was too busy to even set aside 30 minutes to discuss real challenges and issues facing the City. With me were about 5 other Somali professionals that could have given him a free advice on many pertinent fields. It was a great opportunity missed by the then Mayor.

Unmanaged Urbanization

Somalia has both historical as well as new cities. Mogadishu is one of the oldest cities that predates colonial penetration into the African continent; its civilization is on par with cities like Timbuktu, Jenin in West Africa, and Cairo.

Today, however, there are over 15 cities that qualify as urban areas; Mogadishu (population as of 2018, 2.5million), Hargeisa (500,000), Bossaaso, Beladweyn, Barawe, Garowe Galkacayo, Burco, Berbera, Marka, Ceerigavo, Qardho, Baydhabo, Borama, and others are urban centers with sizable population.

With colonialism long gone, and the 21st century in full swing, the current reality of Somalis is a far cry from the idyllic picturesque, or the “Cinderella of the British Empire” which the likes of I. M LEWIS painted – that is to say Somalia is anything but an idyllic pastoral society where life is simple and societal issues are adjudicated under a "Gob" tree. On the contrary, Somali society is rather marked by bustling city life however imperfect that may be.

That is to say, rural Somalia has given way to a rapid urbanization process in an era of progressive but devastating climate change – and that presents immense challenges to planners and policy-makers alike lest unmanaged growth can be a lot more problematic than meets the eye.

For example, at independence (July 1, 1960), Somalia had a little over 2 million residents with only one or two urban population centers (Mogadishu and Hargeisa). Mogadishu had no more than 50,000 residents as opposed to its current whopping 2.5 million, and Hargeisa was not even a city, but a little more than a colonial outpost, consisting of corrugated aluminum shacks or Somali huts. By modern standards, it was a city of an embryonic slum. Today, Hargeisa is estimated to house 500,000 inhabitants in 2018.

In the last 30 years, despite conflicts, Somalia, Mogadishu in particular, has been steadfastly traveling on a speedy urbanization course. With one of the highest birth rates per annum and large household sizes in the world, the prospect for more Somali city dwellers is a subject of immense interest to planners.

According to World Bank's rough estimates, a rate of 4.7% urbanization per annum (2005–10 estimates), with many towns, quickly growing into cities require serious policy intervention in directing such a growth. As of 2008, 37.7% of the nation's population lived in towns and cities, with the percentage rapidly increasing for Mogadishu and Kismayo, in particular.

As of today, over 65% of Somalia's population, lives in urban areas inside the country. The ratio of urban to rural dwellers in Somalia is at about 50%, very high by any standard. In the case of Ethiopia, for example, close to 85 % is rural as opposed to only 15% urban; in Uganda, close to 90% is rural, and in Kenya about 75% rural is rural.

Moreover, Mogadishu is one of the fastest urbanizing cities in the world, largely driven by its improving security situation, returnees to their original homes, and improved economic prospects. However, it is doing so without any growth management plan. Nor is there a citywide concept or comprehensive general and community plans either for Mogadishu or for other growing cities.

Why such a rapid urbanization taking place in Somali with a weaker state institutions than its neighboring African countries? The answer lies in Jamal Valli's study about the economic rationale of Somali pastoral society.

Somalis are more likely to be urbanized than other African societies, wrote Jamal Vali, a World Bank economist who studied Somalis in the 1970s. He attributed this phenomenon to the pastoral society's propensity to move to newer pastures and their susceptibility to abandon the hardships of rural lifestyle in favor of a "greener" urban areas.

By comparing the 1970s Ethiopian famine victims to Somali refugees who fled the Ethio-Somali war of 1977-1978, Valli observed two opposite behaviors between Ethiopians and Somalis. He observed that Ethiopians had stayed in refugee camps as long as the aid hand out was available. Somalis, on the contrary, quickly started entrepreneurship inside the refugee camps (Qoryooloy, for example); in due course, Somali families saved enough money to take their families out of the refugee camps and move either to cities or seek status outside the host country. By so doing, Somali families managed quickly joined the ranks of city dwellers.

There is a downside to the fast-paced post-civil war urbanization. The ratio or proportion of Somali slum dwellers is much higher than other cities in the continent. About 50 percent of Somali city dwellers live under slum conditions. This trend has been exacerbated since the demise of the Somali state.

Although migration from rural to urban areas presents itself with many opportunities, such as access to pot water, expanded health sector, education, and better digital connection, squatter settlers are faced with social, political and environmental problems. It is not the growth in and itself, therefore, that is bad. Rather, it is the absence of tangible government services in Somalia's cities in an era of fast growth that presents to us serious challenges.

Given a fast-paced growth in the face of real climate change, Somalia indeed needs resilience plans and programs that can be implemented. The World Bank and other donors have earmarked significant resources towards what is called "Somalia's Urban Resilience Project (SURP). [On September 6, 2018, the World Bank just advertised](#) its latest Flagship SURP for Mogadishu to the tune of \$9 million. At a close scrutiny, this fund, largely an interest-accruing loan, is being spent while three prerequisites are not in place:

- (1) The City of Mogadishu has no Municipal Administrative Charter to govern its financial management or Capital Improvement Plan (CIP).
- (2) There are no comprehensive Citywide long and short-term land use plans to guide growth; and
- (3) The World Bank funded SURP, a flow up to a previously German- government-funded SURP, has no resilience plan in place despite the nomenclature of the flagship program throwing in casually the concept of a Resilience Plan into its thin document.

One may wonder what resilience programs World Bank "experts" have in mind. None of the three-pager customary documents the Bank bureaucrats give to Somali officials provide no details beyond misused terminologies such as "resilience,;" or "sustainable."

Recommendations

1. Create a democratic system for Mogadishu, where the Mayor of the city and the Governor of Banadir region is independent of the executive office with its own constitutional powers to make decisions independent of the Prime Minister's office.
2. Establish Planning office to draft comprehensive urban strategies, resilience and mitigation programs that can be implemented both in Mogadishu and in other fast-growing cities of the country.

3. Issue a cease and desist letter relative to all projects that are encroaching the shorelines of Mogadishu and begin drafting a coastal plan, or at least guidelines, for the preservation and protection of coastal resources and public beach fronts for the greater good.

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