

# Conflict and stability in the Somali Region of Ethiopia

## Does education matter?

Simon Richards on behalf of the Feinstein Center

### Introduction

For many generations, those living in the arid and semi-arid lowlands of the Somali Region of Southern Ethiopia have been beset by competition and conflict between different groups. Contributing factors include the legacies of European colonialism and boundary formations, as well as the geo-politics of the Cold War, all of which led to populations of Somalis living outside of Somalia – in Ethiopia, Kenya and Djibouti.

The predominant livelihoods of pastoralism and agro-pastoralism have been affected by trends such as land enclosure, commercial use of land and the changing political environment. Inter-tribe and clan dynamics are chronic and long-lived, and in recent times have continued with sporadic events and explosive violence as well as incidents such as cattle raiding. The needs of the region have not been well represented within the national policy arena – poverty is rife and is coupled with some of the lowest national levels of education and enrolment.



### The BRIDGES project

'Building Relationships through Innovative Delivery of Growing Education Services' (BRIDGES) is a 12-month project funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and is implemented by Save the Children UK, Islamic Relief and Mercy Corps in the Somali Region of Ethiopia. The purpose of the programme is to strengthen the capability and commitment of state and non-state actors in the Somali Region to promote peace, security and development through the delivery of quality education. An important aspect of the project is to generate lessons that might influence future strategies for peacebuilding and improved education in the region, and to this end, additional analytical support is provided by the Feinstein International Center (Tufts University, Massachusetts, USA).

### The conflict drivers and dynamics in the Somali Region of Ethiopia

One aspect of the support has been a series of conflict analyses in the Somali Region that focus on the causes of conflict in the Afdher and Shinile zones and how improved education could contribute to its reduction. The drivers of conflict are constantly evolving and changing, but are encapsulated in three basic types that occur primarily in the Afdher and Shinile zones:

1. Inter-clan/ethnic conflicts
  - Those with international regional dynamics
  - Those with inter-regional Ethiopian dynamics
  - Those within the Somali Region
2. Intra-clan
3. State versus insurgents

The main causes that drive these conflicts are diverse and multifaceted, and fall into three main groups: political and governance concerns; economic and environmental concerns; and socio-cultural concerns. While all three types of conflict are found in both zones, the situation is far more serious in Shinile Zone. There, the levels and intensity of violence have been more severe and relate to complex political dynamics, long-running territorial issues and a relatively homogenous clan composition.

### Education – a key development priority

There is no doubt that education plays a critical role in addressing the development needs of the Somali Region of Ethiopia, and that

it is a much-needed service at this time. Experience from around the world has clearly demonstrated that education, especially at the basic and primary school level, plays a critical and long-term role in societal transformation and development. However, although education is rightly considered a development priority by all stakeholders – from the community level right up to senior government – and is supported by the donors, there are often a number of assumptions, or ‘extrapolations’, in the overall power of education to address the diverse issues besetting the region that could be considered ‘leaps of faith’.

### **The current relationship between education, service provision and conflict**

Interestingly, despite the high prevalence of conflict in the region, its direct impact on education provision has not been as significant as might be expected, with few examples encountered where schools have been directly affected. Nevertheless, the different conflicts still do have major consequences for families and for the future of the education system. From the opposite perspective, it has also been found that except under special, localised conditions involving land, education is neither a primary cause of conflict nor a trigger for violence.

This suggests that, despite the belief from the communities and others that educated people do not engage in violence, and the oft-mentioned assumption that conflict actually arises from a lack of education and ‘development’, education by itself is probably not the best instrument to transform conflict. It neither addresses the structural and proximate causes of conflict, nor brings about stability in the short term. There is, in fact, a disconnect between education as currently delivered, and the three main causes of conflict in the region noted above. This is most clearly displayed by the reality that formal primary and basic education programmes do not work directly with those actively taking part in conflict (although they should). While young people do participate in the violence – local culture permits boys from the age of 15 to carry a gun – it is rare to find primary-school children actively involved in any of the different levels of conflict in Southern Ethiopia.

The assumption that fragility and stability can be directly addressed through strengthening the state’s ability to deliver services requires testing and further evidence. Improved service provision *per se* is unlikely to alter the conflict situation significantly without inputs in a range of other areas, including the need to address directly the causes of conflict.

### **How education can be reshaped to address long-term conflict environments**

The education sector in the Somali Region is rightly concentrating on the basic and primary level, and this approach should continue to support improved delivery and, more specifically, improved quality at this level in line with the BRIDGES project objectives. However, the sector should also adopt a two-pronged approach: firstly, to incorporate a serious conflict-sensitive method to its work aimed at effective education delivery ‘in conflict’ environments; and secondly, its methodologies should incorporate a long-term plan and theory of change to address issues that work ‘on conflict’. There needs to be more explicit linkages with livelihoods and the employment sector, as well as relevance to the people’s different ways of life.

### **Conflict-sensitive programming**

Conflict-sensitive programming approaches are well developed and accepted within the development sector. Consequently, these should be applied to all education and service delivery work in the Somali Region aimed at effective delivery ‘in conflict’ environments. Key aspects of relevance to this environment include:

**Working on both sides of a conflict** – particularly across regional boundaries (for example, Afar and Somali Region as well as Oromiya) – and ensure equitable distribution of resources and inputs.

**Conducting ‘micro-conflict analysis’** to each kebele<sup>1</sup> and school situation to understand the extent to which trauma and conflict need to be addressed or factored into delivery arrangements. For example, could schools be used as safe havens and areas of agreed non-violence by all parties? Or if trauma is significant, could ‘community-based, psychosocial pedagogy’ methods be investigated to help healing and counter the normalisation of violence?

#### **Reducing risk and impact on children and schools.**

A practical example could be to avoid building education facilities on contested land. It could also include assisting the community to undertake a ‘risk-mapping’ exercise in terms of conflict. For example, are there conflict ‘hot spots’ that schooling should avoid, such as water points, salt licks, etc? Where are their usual grazing lands, and dry and wet season mobility routes? Where is it appropriate to site a school? Where is the school going to move if an incident occurs?

The use of ‘conflict preparedness’ plans for schools that are most vulnerable to the impact of conflict could be useful tools in these cases. In some situations, there may also be the potential for making schools and their management committees part of the early warning system. Similarly, where violent conflict has taken place, when and how is it best to relaunch education in a way that addresses the trauma?

**For pastoralist communities living in disputed territory,** ensure that schools continue to be mobile, flexible and informal. Rather than create permanent physical structures for Alternative Basic Education (ABE), upgrade the school and the opportunities it offers through the provision of improved ‘school kits’ (materials and methodologies).

### **Commitment to long-term change**

Education can play a number of roles aimed at broader societal change that could impact on conflict in the long term but that require many years of continued support. Good governance is often at the heart of addressing conflict, no matter what its causes. Improving accountability and transparency in the sector and engaging the community in school governance is one thread that could have a knock-on effect on other areas of society. There should also be debate around what constitutes a ‘good education’ in the region, and this requires components of non-formal education involving women, elders, imams and other key community leaders, as well as schoolchildren.

In particular, there needs to be a closer link between the perceived relevance of education and the improvement of livelihoods and associated skills, in other words, ‘education for life’. Communities



often relate the raised expectations and consequent frustrations of their youth (and therefore the potential for them to direct their energies into negative behaviours affecting society) when nothing appears to have been gained from achieving a basic education.

## Conclusion and recommendations

While there is no underestimating the logistical and practical difficulties of operating in this complex environment, there is a unique opportunity for thoughtful practitioners in the delivery of education programmes, such as Save the Children and other agencies, to invest more deeply in and test the efficacy of a number of pilot approaches. If supported over the long term, these could add substantial value to the learning and understanding of the role of education in addressing conflict. Examples of such initiatives could be:

- To identify possible opportunities to pilot the use of early childhood education in tackling tolerance and the ethnic dimension of conflict in the Somali Region.

- To consider the application of experiential methods of learning that are based on behaviour change models to address conflict. There has been some experience, but little formal learning, elsewhere from the use of 'peace clubs' in schools, art and music, as well as shared livelihood generation that cuts across conflict divides.
- To develop and test messages of tolerance and respect for diverse views and perspectives rooted in the different cultures found in Southern Ethiopia, as well as in their heritage of proverbs, song and shared histories.

In conclusion, the BRIDGES project has made a strong start to what is clearly going to be a long journey in Southern Ethiopia. There are many different activities and ideas being implemented within this ambitious piece of work, and the mix of stakeholders is suited to the development of maximum learning from such a programme. For this to take place, however, there needs to be a demonstrated commitment to providing long-term support, a willingness to accept the possibility of failure, and the desire to add to the knowledge and experience base of how the education sector can more actively address conflict rather than simply operate within it.

### Endnote

- 1 The smallest administrative unit of Ethiopia, consisting of at least 500 families, or the equivalent of 3,500 to 4,000 people.

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