

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	491
Land:	Somalia
Kilde:	Minority Rights Group International
Titel:	State of the Worlds Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2015 - Minorities on the margins of Mogadishu
Udgivet:	2. juli 2015
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	13. august 2015



State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2015 - Case study: Minorities on the margins of Mogadishu

Publisher [Minority Rights Group International](#)

Publication Date 2 July 2015

Cite as Minority Rights Group International, *State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2015 - Case study: Minorities on the margins of Mogadishu*, 2 July 2015, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/55a4fa2ec.html> [accessed 31 July 2015]

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by Michelle Minc

Mogadishu, one of the oldest cities in Sub-Saharan Africa, has undergone tremendous population growth over the last century. This has been accompanied by the development of informal settlements, or *obbosibo*, which have sprung up across the city with little or no planning. As far back as the 1960s, donor-financed and government-led initiatives attempted to address the issue through the construction of affordable housing. These efforts were ultimately unable to keep up with the influx of migrants to the city, however, and today many of its inhabitants live in congested conditions without access to basic housing materials or public services. Despite its troubles, Mogadishu continues to attract large numbers of new arrivals, with an annual population increase of almost 9 per cent.

Though no precise figures are available, evidence suggests that minority groups make up a disproportionate part of the population of the overcrowded and unhygienic *obbosibo* that run through the city. More often than not, minority populations have ended up in Mogadishu after being displaced by conflict, hunger or land grabbing elsewhere, usually southern Somalia. Yet their lives in the capital's informal settlements continue to be plagued by insecurity, sexual violence and discrimination, making it almost impossible for them to make ends meet. Furthermore, the forcible appropriation of their land by members of dominant clans makes returning home an unfeasible option.

Minority women and youth living in *obbosibo* are particularly vulnerable as many lack connections and extended family support. As a result, they often find themselves excluded from livelihood opportunities by majority groups. Women tend to work in informal sectors such as domestic work, where they are frequently subjected to gender-based violence or denied payment. In these harsh conditions one of the coping strategies employed by minority households is child labour, with the youngest family members sent out at an early age to earn money as herders, shoe shiners or street vendors.

With limited employment opportunities, many families living in informal settlements rely on hand-outs from international and local donors. Yet, in line with other forms of discrimination perpetrated against minorities, humanitarian aid is systematically diverted from those who need it most. The informal settlements are often run by powerbrokers who administer the camps; these so called 'gatekeepers', comprising local land-owners, government officials and businessmen, are drawn exclusively from majority clans. Together they monopolize control over those migrating to the city, requisitioning public and private property to house displaced communities – often minorities – in

return for monetary or other forms of payment. In this context, the mismanagement of humanitarian assistance continues to fuel the power of gatekeepers in the overcrowded and unprotected settlements.

Today, Mogadishu continues to grapple with the issue of *obbosibo*. But instead of constructing alternative affordable housing or attempting to tackle the unsafe living conditions in settlements, the government has embarked on a campaign of forcible evictions. Between January and December 2014, over 32,500 individuals were forcibly evicted from public and private land and buildings in Mogadishu. While no disaggregated statistics are available to identify the proportion of minority groups among the victims, the vast majority (over 90 per cent) of evictees were IDPs, who heavily originate from minority groups. Other IDPs remain at imminent risk of forced evictions. Most recently, in March 2015, Somali state security forces forcibly evicted an estimated 21,000 IDPs from informal camps in the Kahda district of Mogadishu, with security forces destroying shelters and beating those resisting orders to vacate. No adequate notification, compensation or resettlement option is provided to the communities displaced.

These evictions reflect a broader context where decisions over land, housing and other issues are routinely made by dominant groups – in this case, Mogadishu's majority-dominated local authorities – without any form of consultation with those communities, usually minorities, most affected. Despite Mogadishu's rich and diverse population, power continues to be narrowly concentrated with majority clan members. This has serious implications for the city's future. Without a concerted effort to recognize and integrate them, its marginalized minority population will remain homeless, hungry and exposed, moving from one informal settlement to the next – a situation that will not only further entrench their secondary status in Somalia, but also perpetuate the sad legacy of Mogadishu's *obbosibo* for generations to come.

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