

# Role of Gatekeepers in Somalia

Learning Brief / RoadMap

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# Introduction

This Learning Brief/RoadMap is based on a study on the Role of Gatekeepers in Somalia, conducted for the Somali Cash Consortium (SCC) and the Building Resilience in Somalia Consortium (BRiCS). It draws on fieldwork, a literature review and the experiences of the authors.

The purpose of this brief is to provide preliminary guidance and direction concerning the issue of 'gatekeepers' in Somalia. It is not a manual, to be used prescriptively, and its application and utility will vary depending on an organisation's existing internal, organisational culture and programming modalities. The brief accompanies a 'Roundtable Reflections' memo, an infographic one-page summary, and a Final Report of the overall study.

## **What do we mean by gatekeepers?**

The term 'gatekeeper' means different things to different people. In the context of humanitarian crises in Somalia it is most closely associated with an individual who is considered the manager of an IDP camp, but a gatekeeper is not limited to displaced populations and camps and can be considered any actor that attempts to control or manipulate aid resources. Whether in an IDP context or not, gatekeepers typically act within a chain or network of actors that may all be considered gatekeepers involved in the management and/or control of aid resources.

In this study, our findings highlight two types of gatekeepers, one is the camp manager or camp owner (displaced people often use the word 'owner'), in what we identify as an IDP business model, primarily associated with major IDP settings, such as Mogadishu and Baidoa. This type of gatekeeper acts as an interlocuter between displaced people and other actors in the gatekeeping chain including but not limited to local authorities, aid agencies staff and other influential people. The second type of gatekeeper, that we associate with all other programming contexts (and specifically not the IDP business model), can be any individual or a combination of actors working together, that control or influence the distribution of aid resources. In some cases, for example, a powerful District Commissioner might be the primary gatekeeper, in other cases the implementing NGO or contracting UN agency may be the primary gatekeeper (through specific staff). Local elders may also be important in these gatekeeping dynamics. The behaviour of these gatekeepers may change over time as local authorities, agency staff and other actors change.

# Control of and access to aid information

Many forms of research and information gathering in Somalia, particularly concerning the aid sector, have become incorporated into, or affected by a deeply entrenched political economy concerning data and information. In other words, there is a high risk that data/information collection is being influenced or manipulated at different points in management systems, including by beneficiaries themselves, by third-party contractors or from within implementing organisations. The implication of this is that our understanding of Somalia, the local contexts within which we work, and the relative effectiveness of aid programmes may all be compromised by these practices from assessments to post-distribution monitoring and evaluations. A recent discussion paper, for example, points out that 'At each link [in the contracting chain], pretty much everyone is incentivised to report positive information and to not report or deny negative information'.<sup>2</sup> In the study that informs this learning brief, IDPs themselves, when explaining some of the more hidden practices in the taxation of aid, stated that, 'we have been forced to say what we've been hiding for a long time'.<sup>3</sup>

## Guidance:

Given the concerns raised around potential manipulation of information, the following points are suggested for senior management to consider and act upon:

### a) Review your data/information collection systems and partnerships.

Factors and questions to inform this include:

- Are these systems incentivized to report success and hide problems?
- Are these systems set up to provide support towards solutions rather than penalising those who report issues?
  - This applies within agencies as well as throughout the partnership chain, from local agencies reporting to their international partners and from international agencies reporting to their donors.
- What are the risks that collusive relationships exist within your organisation or with partners, that affect the flow of accurate information?
- What is the quality and balance of qualitative and quantitative data collection in your systems?
  - Qualitative and quantitative methods and data are both useful; they can answer different questions, and each have their respective strengths and weaknesses.
  - Over-reliance on quantitative data and methods can obscure
- What are the constraints to collecting good quality data/information in your areas of operation?
- How much do you assess or trust the data/information you collect?

<sup>2</sup>Centre for Humanitarian Change (2023), Corruption and Diversion in Humanitarian Aid in Somalia, Discussion Paper.

<sup>3</sup>This came from a member of a focus group discussion (FGD) with IDPs, after a long discussion and initial reluctance to speak openly.



# Two Gatekeeping Models

Two models of gatekeeping were identified during the study, one described as a business model focused on IDP camps in major urban centres (Mogadishu and Baidoa) and the other a model that describes the typical pressures and clan-based biases associated with implementing CVA (and other) programmes in Somalia. The exact mechanics of these two models will vary from location to location and over time, depending on local power dynamics and as individual and institutional actors and behaviour change. These two models are not mutually exclusive but may both be applicable in contexts such as Mogadishu and Baidoa for example.

## A) IDP Business Model

### The Problem

In the business model, an IDP camp manager or owner (IDPs call them the camp 'owner'), is the primary gatekeeper. He or she (there<sup>3</sup> are many women camp owners) makes a number of upfront investments and arrangements in order to set up a camp, as part of a business enterprise. This typically includes obtaining the land, usually on a rental basis, from the landowner (or person claiming to be so), with an agreement often made for 3-5 years through the use of a notary, and a fee for the camp to be registered. The camp owner may also work with other brokers to encourage and organise for people to come from rural areas or other camps to their camp, make links to humanitarian agencies and even pay for the cost of transport. Once the IDPs arrive in a new camp the camp owner registers the camp with the local authority. This can involve an unofficial fee ranging from USD 500 – 2,000 depending on local relationships and context.

These upfront investments by the camp owner (made in different combinations of cash and credit) are undertaken in order to generate an income as a return on investment, once aid (particularly cash or vouchers) is brought to the camp. This return is made through a pre-agreed social arrangement with camp populations (IDPs), the most common breakdown of which is: 50% of a cash/voucher entitlement for the 'beneficiary' with the remaining 50% claimed by the camp owner and reallocated on the following basis: 10% rent; 10% security; 10% local authority/NGO/UN; 20% camp owner.<sup>4</sup>

This business model is based both on the large amounts of aid coming into major aid hubs as well as due to the shortage of available land in contexts such as Mogadishu and Baidoa; a key enabling factor for this business model is the privatised access to land.

Displaced populations have mixed views of these agreements. For many of them, a 'cut' or commission taken by camp owners is reasonable as they – the camp owner – provides some assistance when they first arrive and is perceived to be key to bringing aid to the camp and its residents. However, there are also levels of coercion and exploitation that take place, where camp residents know or are told that, if they report problems, they will be evicted from the camp and will lose their benefits. In this light, one IDP respondent was advised 'don't punish yourself and don't punish others' (by reporting problems).

<sup>4</sup>These figures are consistent with other studies which suggest a 20-50% range as the 'cut' of the beneficiary entitlement. According to this study, a 50% cut (to the camp owner who then pays others) is the dominant model in large aid hubs such as Mogadishu and Baidoa, but other percentage fees may also apply.

## Guidance

Given the existence of this business model and its implications for IDPs, the following points are suggested for senior management to consider and act upon:

- a) Define realistic objectives of engaging in this area, which may include:
  - To reduce financial losses to IDPs.
  - To reduce security threats to IDPs.
  - To improve the quality of services to IDPs.
- b) Develop an understanding of the key stakeholders and political economy of the displaced camp/s you are working in. Relevant questions include:
  - Who is the camp manager/owner? Who are the other actors or interested parties in the gatekeeping chain?
  - What percentage 'commission' is being taken by the gatekeeper?
  - What is the reputation of the gatekeeper and is it possible to develop a constructive relationship with him/her in order to negotiate improved conditions and financial benefits for IDPs?
  - Can you pilot/explore covering some costs out of the percentage claimed by the gatekeeper e.g. can rent be paid through the Minimum Expenditure Basket (MEB) or directly to the landowner?
  - Can land be obtained directly from government, removing the business model (this may create other incentives, such as identified in the typical gatekeeping model)?
- c) Assess what your staff capacity is to engage constructively in these issues, which are both complex and sensitive.
- d) Develop your understanding of land access and land tenure issues in order to fully understand the topic and the potential entry points. This may include
  - Exploring options for obtaining land for IDPs, including covering rental costs and facilitating lease procedures, involving IDPs themselves.
  - If land is obtained, could NGOs work in an integrated manner in order to deal with different sectors in a coordinated way e.g. provision of shelter; provision of WASH; provision of CVA; joint lobby/relations with camp manager/owner.

## B) Typical (clan-based) gatekeeping model

### The Problem

Belet Hawa, Dinsor, and Wajid were the locations in which research was conducted for this study (in addition to Mogadishu and Baidoa).<sup>5</sup> These were identified with the usual or clan-based gatekeeper model which is generally applicable anywhere in Somalia. This model is distinct from the IDP business model in that,

there is not the equivalent business aspect (articulated as an investment and a return on investment),

there is no primary business actor i.e. the camp manager or owner - in these locations, there are no major IDP camps or land constraints and therefore the business model has not been established.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Dinsor and Wajid can be considered hard-to-reach areas.

<sup>6</sup>Dolow in Gedo, although not part of the study, may involve some elements of business model dynamics, given its history as a major aid hub. This was not explored in this study.

Gatekeeping, according to this model, is based on the competition for resources between clans or sub-clans that exists in most or all areas in Somalia. In this model, the gatekeeper/s may be the local authority, the local elders or the implementing agency itself (or some combination of this group), who attempt to direct resources towards their own identity groups. This model may involve competition between similarly powerful local clans, or it may be part of marginalisation / exclusion processes with dominant clan interests limiting access and assistance to marginalised or minority groups.

These dynamics have been part and parcel of operating in Somalia for the last thirty years. All agencies and resources are subject to these pressures, and all resources are affected, from contracts (for car hire, office space and accommodation) to staff recruitment, as well as cash and voucher distribution modalities. These practices and pressures also exist outside of the aid system as part of norms in society. The challenge for aid agencies is to understand and navigate these pressures and not be captured by specific interest groups, and to be informed about what trade-offs are acceptable.

### Guidance

Given these local clan biases, the following are suggested for senior management to consider and act upon:

- a) Assess the clan (and other) interests in your operational areas and how your field office/staff are related to them. This can be approached by:
  - Conducting internal or externally commissioned political economy assessments or analyses.
  - Assessing whether your organisational culture enables open and honest discussion of field realities, including internal biases, pressures on staff, constraints to resisting gatekeeper demands, amongst others.
  - Assessing whether your organisation – or senior management – has a diverse information network to draw upon, in order to inform its understanding of the local context and your organisation's practices and reputation within it.
- b) Develop good practices in Staff and Organisational issues, including:
  - 'standing up' to powerful actors; this has been identified as a starting point to many good operational practices in Somalia, from negotiating access (on favourable terms) to pushing for quality programming. It requires staff who have personal courage, the right skills (particularly negotiation skills), the right networks, and an organisational culture that supports them.
  - Spending time in project areas; organisations whose senior staff are able to visit project sites and talk directly to local populations, authorities and staff are viewed positively in the field – spend more time out of the office in field locations!
  - Incentivize reporting difficulties in field operations and support staff to find solutions.
- c) Assess and improve Partnerships and Risk Management:
  - Operational risks need to be discussed and shared between all parties; they are commonly passed down to the implementing level, with insufficient discussion and agreements on risk-sharing.

- Knowing whether implementing partners have sufficient financial flexibility (overhead resources) to implement a quality programme is critical.
- Develop strategic partnerships with local partners rather than service provider engagement.

### Box 1. Barriers related to marginalisation/exclusion.

**A Humanitarian Support Hub for Somalia identified three distinct types of barriers which led to exclusion or marginalization**

- **Geographical Barriers** – Security and Access constraints mostly related to Al Shabab presence and perceived risks of operating in these areas.
- **Power and Identity Barriers** – Households from specific clans and sub-clans do not have the power to negotiate a share of resources because they are either:
  - a. Minority clan in area e.g. Mogadishu or Baidoa IDP Camps,
  - b. Bantu groups e.g. Kismayo IDP Camps,
  - c. Somali lower 'caste' clans,
- **Humanitarian System Barriers** - Equitable distribution of aid is blocked by powerful influencers in key positions (Gatekeepers and in NGOs and government). Power is derived from a combination of clan, corruption and politics.

CHC, 2017<sup>7</sup>

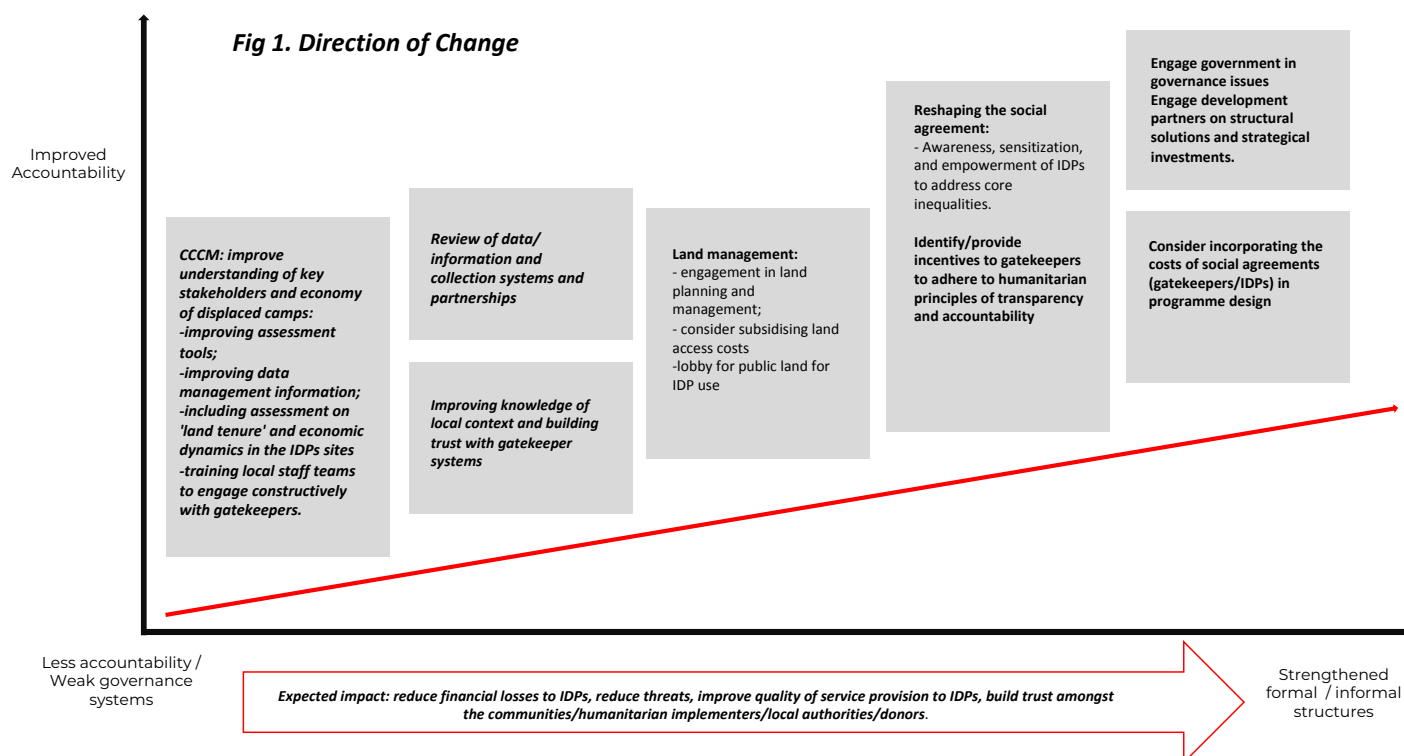
## Ways Forward – focused on the IDP Business Model

The previous sections identify a range of issues and problems associated with the two gatekeeping models as well as provides guidance to consider and act upon. Further resources have also been referred to and listed below.

Given underlying concerns around the IDP business model in urban areas such as Mogadishu and Baidoa, this section elaborates on points raised above and identifies specific steps or actions that agencies could further develop or explore, within an overall pathway towards improving accountability and strengthening trust and operational structures. This overall direction is presented in Figure 1 below.

<sup>7</sup> Centre for Humanitarian Change, 2017, Humanitarian Support Hub Pilot Project.

Figure 1. Indicative Direction of Change



A number of actions are suggested in the following (not in any order of priority).

#### Action 1 - Supporting the Camp Coordination and Camp Management Cluster (CCCM)

The CCCM should, in principle, play a key role in relation to the gatekeeping phenomenon, both in terms of understanding the political economy around IDP camps as well as in supporting improved governance and accountability. The extent to which CCCMs are doing this is unclear and therefore could be supported in the following areas:

- improving assessment tools.
- improving data management information systems.
- commissioning assessments on 'land tenure' and economic dynamics in the IDPs sites.
- training local staff teams to engage constructively with gatekeepers.

**Action 2** – Review of data/information and collection systems and partnerships  
(see section 2 above)

**Action 3** – Improving knowledge of local context and building trust with gatekeeper structures.

Previous research focused on working with gatekeepers focused on improving accountability suggests that positive results can be attained, if based on a 'thorough and well-researched understanding of the local



context (political economy, social, ethnic) ... and ‘involving all members of a community (formal and informal powerholders, vulnerable groups, community leaders, etc.)’.<sup>8</sup>

#### Action 4 - Engaging in land access and land management issues

The use of private land is one of the key driving factors in the IDP business model. The process of an IDP camp manager/owner obtaining access to land (described above), usually through a rental agreement, gives him/her the ‘legitimacy’ to set up the ‘business’ and negotiate or determine the various taxation levels. A shortage of publicly available land in Mogadishu and Baidoa enables this.

A specific action point in this regard is to consult with agencies and experts who are knowledgeable about land access and land tenure in Somalia, particularly in urban areas.

#### Action 5 – Reshaping the social agreement.

IDP camp managers/owners currently have a ‘social agreement’ with displaced populations. This may include elements of coercion and exploitation as well as reciprocity, depending on the specific individuals and camps being looked at. Raising awareness and sensitising IDPs as to their entitlements would be a useful avenue to explore, while being mindful of the risks and vulnerabilities that IDPs may be exposed to in relation to such engagement; it is not clear however that IDPs, even if more familiar with programme modalities and their entitlements can act to improve their conditions, given their weak social position.

#### Action 6 – Providing incentives to gatekeepers.

Providing incentives for gatekeepers to adhere to humanitarian principles of transparency and accountability requires exploration. Gatekeepers vary in their motivations and some may be willing to negotiate or compromise on their profit-making motives in exchange for greater legitimacy or other benefits.

#### Action 7 – Explore including gatekeepers in project design.

Consulting with IDP camp managers/owners at the project design stage may enable trust to be built and negotiations to take place, concerning the conditions and benefits for both camp owners and IDPs.

#### Action 8 – Engaging humanitarian and development stakeholders in longer-term solutions.

Somalia’s urban settings are the focus for both humanitarian and development interventions, and this is likely to remain the case for the foreseeable future. Issues of land access and land tenure, gatekeeping, targeting, and urban governance (amongst others) are relevant for both humanitarian and development actors. Mitigating gatekeeping practices and the exploitation of IDPs should be developed collectively, based on a common analysis of the problem/s and the respective roles and complementarities of actors in the two sectors.

This includes donors and implementing agencies being willing and able to identify and discuss implementation challenges (e.g. taxation of IDPs through the IDP business model), and constructively develop solutions and facilitate dialogue with Government and other local stakeholders on sensitive issues.

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<sup>8</sup> See: Bryld, E., Kamau, C., and Mohamud, M.A. (2020: 985). Using an adaptive approach to making gatekeepers accountable to internally displaced persons in Mogadishu, *Development in Practice*.

**Action 9** - Incorporating the costs of social agreements (gatekeepers/IDPs) into programme design  
Some costs associated with the IDP business model could be covered through an increased Minimum Expenditure Basket (MEB) or by other means, such as by government providing land for IDP settlement and/or agencies obtaining land (through rental agreements). There are however risks associated with these potential arrangements, for example as an increased MEB may attract further taxation.

**Action 10** – Utilise/pilot different targeting modalities.

Different targeting modalities can be developed and piloted but new initiatives must be aware of the 'social agreement' as a condition of an IDP's residence in a camp. For example, current efforts to bypass gatekeepers do not necessarily mean that taxation is not taking place as part of the terms of the social agreement between camp managers and IDPs, that have already been agreed and remain binding.

**Action 11** – Resourcing issues

Donors and agencies need to assess if/what additional resources are required in order to pursue some or all of the above actions, and how they should be funded. Some of these resources may be more appropriately sourced from development funds, where they concern land and governance issues. Resourcing of political economy assessments of IDP camps could be shared by different donors. Appropriately qualified staff to support engagement and negotiation with gatekeepers may be required for individual agencies or could be shared within a consortium.

## Key resources

Land issues:

- RVI land studies: Land Conflict in Somalia: Key issues and challenges for transformation- Somalia | ReliefWeb
- Somalia urbanisation review: Open Knowledge Repository (worldbank.org)
- Urbanisation in Somalia: Project MUSE - Precarious Urbanism (jhu.edu)

Programme quality:

- The following brief identifies a range of factors, including good practices, that influence programme quality, in Somalia :  
[https://gppi.net/media/SAVE\\_\\_2015\\_\\_Somalia\\_access\\_and\\_aid\\_quality\\_\\_Background\\_Brief.pdf](https://gppi.net/media/SAVE__2015__Somalia_access_and_aid_quality__Background_Brief.pdf)
- The following brief discusses issues related to aid corruption and diversion, including good practices in resisting such practices:  
<https://www.transparency.org/en/publications/collective-resolution-to-enhance-accountability-and-transparency-in-emergen>
- The following report identifies issues in different locations, concerning reaching marginalised populations: Centre for Humanitarian Change (2017), Somalia Humanitarian Action Support Hub (available upon request, from SCC).
- The following report identifies funding issues and operational realities of local humanitarian actors (local NGOs) in Somalia: Funding to local humanitarian actors: Somalia case study | ODI: Think change

#### IDP camp managers / gatekeepers

- The following paper – ‘Using an adaptive approach to making gatekeepers accountable to internally displaced persons in Mogadishu, Somalia’ – provides the detailed, practical experience and guidance of engaging in this area:

<https://reliefweb.int/report/somalia/using-adaptive-approach-making-gatekeepers-accountable-internally-displaced-persons>