

# Education in Somalia: history, destruction, and calls for reconstruction

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**ABSTRACT** *In pre-colonial traditional Somalia, education was dispensed through informal systems of communal interaction. With the arrival of colonialism in the mid-late 19th century, formal programmes of learning were slowly but steadily established. These were limited in scope and were essentially designed for the purposes of colonization. With independence in 1960, the education sector developed very quickly with pre-1991 civilian and military governments building hundreds of schools, training tens of thousands of teachers, adopting the Latin script for the writing of the Somali language, and successfully implementing nation-wide literacy programmes. But with the collapse of the Somali state in 1991, all modern systems of learning in the country were destroyed by the fighting factions, and Somalia has since been a country without any formal programmes of education. This paper first looks at the history of education in Somalia, then it describes and analyses the nature as well as the magnitude of destruction, and ends with an urgent appeal to the international community to come to the rescue of Somalia's children, and help resuscitate and reconstitute the country's structures and forms of learning.*

## Introduction

The entire fabric of the Somali society has been damaged, the existence of the whole nation has sunk into a deep, dark sea of unimaginable human and material disaster, and the communal mind of the people is in a coma. (Afrax, 1994, p. 233)

Since the collapse of the Somali state in January 1991, Somalia has been a country without any level of organized systems of learning. This is obviously the result of the division of the country into clan-based fiefdoms (Samatar, 1991b) the secession of the northwest from the rest of the country (Samatar, 1992), and the ensuing civil war that has claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Somalis (Michaelson, 1993; Sahnoun, 1994). In this process of social disintegration, schools, technical training centres and university facilities and resources became among the first casualties of the senseless mass destruction of the country's total infrastructure. The physical destruction of the facilities was, at times, peculiarly coupled with the targeting of the educated cadre among the warring factions. As a result, underdeveloped Somalia seems to have embarked on the treacherous road of de-development, defined in this sense as reversing the limited trend of development by deliberately destroying everything that could function in, and sustain a civil society.

These observations, serious as they may sound to the concerned reader, will pale in comparison with the bleak future that awaits Somalia's children. The first and the most

vulnerable victims of the civil war and war-triggered famine in post-state Somalia were and are still the children with an estimated 3000 of them dying every day in early 1992 (Sahnoun, 1994). This cruel trend was fortunately reversed with the launching of Operation Restore Hope by the USA under the auspices of the United Nations UN (Lyons & Samatar, 1995). But as that undertaking and all other UN operations are now derailed, Somalia, along with any concern for the future of Somalia's children, is no longer on the active agenda of the international community. In the case of the USA, and as Michaels (1993) points out in her article 'Retreat from Africa', Somalia may forcefully satisfy its role in an Africa that is fast falling off the policy map in the US State Department, the Executive Branch and Congress. As far as the European Union (EU) is concerned, there may be some limited efforts such as the November 1996 Lake Nakuru (Kenya) Conference on Somalia. The EU's initiatives should have been complemented lately by other reconciliatory schemes undertaken by, among other African countries, Ethiopia and Egypt, for example. Apparently, all these efforts, which were limited in scope in the first place, fell short of producing any tangible reconstruction and development programmes.

The central question of this article thus becomes: where will Somalia, without any forms of organized systems of learning, go from here, and what are the chances of reversing the current trends of de-development? The country's children are now, for all observable intentions, 'aspiring' illiterates in today's interdependent, technologically advanced and global economy-oriented world. Moreover, and without minimizing the descriptive aspects of the problem, Somalia's children are actually being denied their right to one of the fundamental principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In the declaration (UNESCO, 1991), it is stated that:

1. Everyone has the right to education, and education shall be free, at least, in elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional training shall be made available, and higher education shall be equally accessible on the basis of merit.
2. Education shall be directed to the full development of human personality, and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. (p. 16)

This article attempts to take an analytical look at this almost hidden but crucial issue with the deliberate view of giving a socio-historical as well as a futuristic perspective of what could happen in Somalia if the critical situation of education in the country is not dealt with. The general character of learning systems discussed here conforms to a definition of formal education as the 'deliberate, planned experiences designed to transmit certain values, knowledge and skills' (Ghosh, 1994, p. 3).

### **Education in Pre-colonial Traditional Somalia**

As elsewhere in most of Africa, pre-colonial traditional Somalia was not familiar with 'modern' national systems of learning. This was for the most part due to the prevalent socio-political and economic arrangements that were in place. The Somali nation, as it is known today, is essentially a 20th century phenomenon, and pre-dating it were a group of several major clan families residing in the area that is now called Somalia. Peculiar to this notion, though, is the possibility that Somalis may have always partially fulfilled the general academic definition of nation. In this sense, a nation is a 'social group that shares a common ideology, common institutions and customs, and a sense of homogeneity' (Connor, 1994, p. 92).

In a setting like this, one may expect the existence of a similar, if not systematic, regime of education that is formulated and implemented, albeit informally, across tribal lines. But that has not been the case as arrangements in this regard were limited to a specific clan in a given area. This last point may make more sense when we include the definition of nation as also involving 'a feeling of oneness, of sameness, of belonging, or of consciousness of kind' (Connor, 1994, p. 93). With the incorporation of this last point into the core characteristics of nationhood, it may be difficult to rely upon the general homogeneity of the Somalis as a particular asset that would have protected them from the debilitating ethnic/tribal conflict that is currently ravaging many parts of Africa's post-bipolar political landscape.

Despite the resemblance of their physical appearance, shared cultural beliefs and norms, common language, and sometimes the claim of common ancestry (Lewis, 1967; Cassanelli, 1982; Laitin & Samatar, 1987; Samatar, 1991b), the important psychological bonding among the several major clans may not have been there. The first informal systems of learning in traditional Somalia may be likened then to what Keto (1990), discussing the South African situation, describes as the training of the young by the elderly in history, manners, methods of exploiting the environment, responsibilities and military and fighting skills. Again this should have been clan specific, but because of cultural and language homogeneity, the general characteristics may have been the same. Later, non-sedentary nomadic schools were introduced with religious men teaching children how to read, write and memorize the Koran, the Muslim Holy Book. According to Lewis (1967), the pupils in that setting were learning by rote from wooden tablets, enabling some to acquire some familiarity with the Arabic language.

In terms of how traditional Somalia designed and dispensed education was conducive to the relative socio-economic and political 'development' of its recipients, one should realize that these systems were positively impacting on the life chances of those who were receiving them and graduating from them. That does not necessarily mean that the systems were perfect. What this should indicate, though, is that since these were not imposed from outside, their formulation and implementation were both responding to needs identified locally, and through time and experience, recognized as responsive and responsible to those needs. In the larger African context, Rodney (1974) refers to these advantages:

The following features of indigenous African education can be considered outstanding: its close links with social life, both in a material and spiritual sense; its collective nature; its many-sidedness, and its progressive development in conformity with the successive stages of physical, emotional and mental development of the child. There was no separation of the education and the productive activity. Altogether, through mainly informal means, pre-colonial African education matched the realities of pre-colonial African society and produced well-rounded personalities to fit into that society. (p. 239)

In terms of the qualitative or quantitative differences in the provision of traditional and Islamic education, we could say that it was essentially of male-oriented dispensation. Later, girls were also admitted to these Koranic schools (Lewis, 1967). The preferential treatment for boys was basically continuing the gender-biased decision-making process where only adult men had a say in community affairs (Touval, 1963). Moreover, as the *sheikhs* (religious scholars) were self-employed in this manner and were living on fees (in the form of ration, sheep, cattle, camels, etc.) collected from the pupils, the economic situation of subsistent pastoralists may not have allowed them to send all sons and all daughters to these schools. Obviously then, the sons would have had the educational priority in the patriarchal Somali society.

The dominant gender-biased socio-political arrangements had apparently led to the creation of, albeit selectively, 'democratic norms and the rejection of all claims to domination which may have been conducive to a tradition of anarchy, not in its current connotations of disorder and lawlessness, but in lacking any institutionalized roles' (Laitin & Samatar, 1987, p. 43). Lewis, in his seminal work, *A Pastoral Democracy: a study of pastoralism and politics among the northern Somali of the Horn of Africa* (1967), looks at this issue:

In settling social, political and economic matters, all adult men are classified as elders with the right to speak at the councils. As a trait of [the larger] human organization, though, the political equality of all men does not guarantee a level playing field for opinions: status may have depended on wealth, inherited prestige, skills in public oratory and poetry, political acumen, age wisdom and religious knowledge. (p. 196)

Traditional systems of education, especially when the religious element is de-emphasized, were based on value systems that were communal. In that sense, they were designed and implemented for the limited and temporally relevant forms of social administration and other matters of communal arrangements. Moreover, these systems of learning were symmetrical with the development needs and the relational patterns of a society that was socio-economically advancing at a pace that was resourcefully and ecologically congruent with its needs and expectations. At a more critical level of analysis, one may even extrapolate the implications of Freire's (1991) *Conscientization* to that situation. In Freire's terms, when people see themselves in their education, they question their surroundings, analytically view the world, and acquire the potential to develop.

### Colonialism in Somalia

The social and economic motives of colonialism in Africa have been presented through history in different versions. Colonial governments and their apologists have made an argument for colonialism that paints itself as a civilizing, developing and emancipating force designed to hasten the incorporation of the backward regions of the world into the realm of modernity (Mudimbe, 1988, Bayart, 1993). The other side of the argument, and the one that should be forcefully propagated in this article, is that colonialism was a planned response to specific historical and socio-economic *moment* of the Western world with the paramount objective of acquiring new lands and exploiting them (Rodney, 1974; Mudimbe, 1988). In terms of the historical trajectory of colonialism, Cesaire reminds us:

The great historical tragedy of Africa has not been so much that it was too late in making contact with the rest of the world, as the manner in which that contact was brought about; that Europe began to propagate at a time when it has fallen into the hands of the most unscrupulous financiers and captains of industry. (Cesaire, 1978, cited in Mudimbe (1988, p. 2))

Colonialism in Somalia, although quantitatively less ambitious than many experiences in many parts of Africa, was nevertheless, qualitatively a conformist in the general scheme of appropriation of resources and the subsequent exploitation of peoples and lands. Lyons & Samatar (1995) contextualize the familiar theme of colonial interests, and how these had crept into Somalia:

Interests in India led the British to occupy the port of Aden in Yemen in 1839–40 as a strategically vital point of contact with the sub-continent. Then Aden's needs,

particularly for meat supplies, soon brought the adjacent northern Somali coast with its abundance of sheep, goats, camels and cattle to London's attention. Later, the British also claimed territory inhabited by Somalis in Northeastern Kenya. (p. 11)

The British were followed by the French who captured former French Somaliland (now the Republic of Djibouti), the Italians who completed their colonization of southern Somalia in 1893, and the Ethiopian emperor, Menelik annexing western Somalia with the consent of the European powers in the late 19th century (Habte-Selassie, 1987; Sauldie, 1987; Lyons & Samatar, 1995).

### **Colonial Education in Somalia**

Colonial education in Somalia was, as elsewhere in Africa, designed and pragmatically implemented for the administrative and low-level technical needs of the imperial powers. To that effect, as Rodney (1974) points out, the colonial school system 'was to train Africans to help man the local administration at the lowest ranks, and to staff the private capitalist firms which meant the participation of few Africans in the domination and exploitation of the continent as a whole' (p. 240).

To qualify this last argument, one may have to refer to some previously unintended benefits from colonial education, especially the training of some of the continent's most prominent nationalist leaders. These leaders, one could argue, primarily because of their Western education, organized the liberation struggles that have eventually led to Africa's independence. To name a few, these included Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, Somalia's first President Aden Abdulle Osman and first Prime Minister Abdirashid Shermarke, as well as the current President of South Africa Nelson Mandela. And this will still be the case even when one realizes that some of these leaders have eventually been rightly accused of having installed dictatorial regimes, thus thwarting democratic systems of governments and truncating the development potential of their peoples.

In Somalia, colonial education demonstrates a systematic conformity to the general colonial education system with imperialist governments training low-level administrative personnel to help them administer the colonial territory effectively. As education is shaped by the social forces that surround it, colonial education then signifies the type of learning that is conducive to the general themes of subordination, exploitation and inverse development relationship between the colonized and the colonizer (Rodney, 1974; Memmi, 1991). Ironically, though, colonialism was 'justified as an attempt to make the non-industrialized societies (which were seen as primitive) advance to a more developed stage' (Ghosh, 1994, p. 4).

One of the first formal colonial schools operating in Somalia was opened by the Italian Dante Alighieri Society in 1907 to teach Somali children the Italian language (Laitin, 1976). Later, more colonial schools were opened with the number of pupils reaching 1265, but with Somalis not going beyond grade 7 (Laitin, 1976). This testifies to the overriding character of colonial education where, despite the claim of civilizational, developmental and educational motives, the essence of that education ultimately fulfils the real objectives of imperialism. In the case of Somalia, as elsewhere in the colonized world, a grade 7 education was apparently sufficient for administrative and low-level technical duties assigned to the natives. The type and the level of education that should lead to critical citizenship and social analysis would have been a danger to the longevity of colonialism, and apparently, colonizers were not unaware of that.

With the beginning of the struggle for Somalia's independence in the mid-1940s, and with the formation of the Somali Youth Club (SYC) in 1943, which became the Somali Youth League (SYL) in 1947 (Laitin & Samatar, 1987), modern education was a priority on the agenda of the new liberation organizations and their leaders. Some of the SYC's main objectives, according to Markakis (1987), were 'to promote modern education and to adopt a script for the Somali language' (p. 53).

The prioritization of modern education and the implementation of a local language script are, as Gellner (1983) and Kedourie (1993) point out, important factors for identifying, upholding and sustaining a modern national system. In Somalia's case, the situation was more urgent in terms of using education as a tool to diminish the role of tribalism and tribal conflict which, when unchecked, could lead to the current nation-state destruction in Somalia and elsewhere. The Somali liberation groups, therefore, were seeing education as an indispensable building block to fight clanism and to create a clan-transcending Somali nationalism (Markakis, 1987; Laitin & Samatar, 1987).

### **Education During the Civilian Rule, 1960–1969**

Despite the physical and motivational barriers to education during colonialism, the Italian colonial government was required, under UN Trusteeship between 1950 and 1960 to prepare Somalia for independence, and in the process to educate the Somali population. Article IV of the Trusteeship Agreement, for example, specifically required the setting up of modern education systems for Somali children and adult learners (Laitin, 1976). With this, Somalis embraced the values of modern education in the 1950s as an important vehicle for national development (Afrax, 1994). And, as Somalia became an independent republic on 1 July 1960, mass education was promoted as the country's best available venue for socio-economic advancement. As a sign of the times, Abdillahi Qarshe, a prominent Somali singer/composer, buoyantly sang this popular nationalist song:

*Aqoon la'anni waa iftiin la'aane  
waa aqal iyo ilays la'aane  
Ogaada, ogaada, dugsiyada ogaada  
O aada, o aada  
Walaalayaal o aada.*

(Lack of knowledge is lack of enlightenment  
Homelessness and no light  
Be aware, be aware of schools  
And go to schools, go to schools  
brothers and sisters, go to schools).

(Abdillahi Qarshe (1961) cited in Afrax (1994, p. 244)

Immediately after independence in the early 1960s, the positive image of the educated person and what he or she could contribute to the process of nation-building and progress were conspicuous in the Somali culture (Afrax, 1994). In this sense, and as elsewhere in Africa (see Marvin (1975)), education, beyond its utilitarian niche, may have been seen as building character and promoting positive image within the community. Any subordination of education to economic calculations in the African case could have been, therefore, 'a crude oversimplification of the fact that many people in the continent see education as providing a broader foundation for adult life, and not necessarily just the certificates for the highest paying jobs' (Marvin, 1975, p. 444).

With 18,000 Somalis enrolled in different schools in the 1961/62 school year, and a university institute with law and economics departments set up by the Italians already in place (Laitin, 1976), the future of Somali education looked promising. If there were any serious shortcomings then, it may have been the lack of script for the Somali language. As the case has been in most post-colonial Africa, the languages of instruction in independent Somalia remained Italian and English, the colonial languages. These two languages were complemented by the Arabic language which was basically confined to several schools run by the Egyptian government. And although the civilian government had indicated its willingness to constitute a script for the Somali language (Laitin, 1976), nothing was done when that government was overthrown by a military coup d'état on 21 October 1969.

### **Education During the Military Years, 1969–1990**

With old tribal loyalties taking centre stage in the Somalia of the late 1960s, coupled with an overriding public desire for a change in the way the national government was being run, the military takeover was warmly welcomed by the general population (Lewis, 1994; Lyons & Samatar, 1995). This type of the sometimes tumultuous reception of new military governments in some developing countries may be explainable by accepting the assumptions of at least one version of political analysis. Arat (1991) while discussing this issue, concludes that the army, which is seen in most countries as the best organized and the most professional public institution, is usually accepted as an alternative to a weak and corrupt state system.

The first years of the military regime were characterized by the formulation as well as the exhortation of a number of so-called 'revolutionary' programmes. To start these, the new Supreme Revolutionary Council (SRC) introduced what it termed as 'scientific socialism' to be the country's guiding ideology (Pestalozza, 1974, Lewis, 1994). That announcement was followed by other rhetorically powerful but not enduring self-help, self-reliance and national military training programmes (Lewis, 1994).

One major programme that was introduced and implemented by the military government, and indisputably its national development landmark, was the institution of the Latin script for the writing of the Somali language in 1972 (Sheikh-Abdi, 1981). Somali, as a written language, brought with it the Somalization of state functions and administrative sectors, followed by its gradual implementation as the medium of instruction in schools (Pestalozza, 1974). The writing of the Somali language coupled with a mass literacy campaign in the rural areas (*Somalia: a country report*, 1982) was also responsible for sharply increasing the rate of literacy which immediately went from a dismal 5% to an estimated 55% (Laitin & Samatar, 1987) in the mid-1970s. The 1974/1975 literacy campaign programmes physically involved the mobilization of 100,000 students and civil servants, who were sent 'to the countryside to live, learn and study with the nation's large nomadic population for a period of six months or more' (Sheikh-Abdi, 1981, p. 171). As all of that was complemented by an exponential rise in primary school enrolment, and as the majority of Somalis now write in that script, the writing of the Somali language was one measure of the national development programme that was productive and enduring.

Other advancements on the education front included the expansion of the university institute which was renamed the Somali National University (SNU) in 1970. With pre-state collapse student figures of 4650, SNU established itself as a full-fledged institution of higher learning with 11 faculties: law, economics, agriculture, education, veterinary medicine, medicine, industrial chemistry, geology, languages, journalism, and engineering (*International Handbook of Universities*, 1993). At the lower levels of schooling, the substantial growth in enrolment was hastening the printing of new materials in Somali, while at the same time, the

new language script was being adopted for use in technical and scientific fields (*Somalia: a country report*, 1982).

These developments in creating a script for the Somali language for the first time in Somalia's history, were positively responding to the core issue of national identity, social emancipation and the de-emphasizing, at least partially, of one tenet of colonialism, i.e. the colonial language. That will still be the case even if we are cognizant of the world's current economic and technological interdependence which actually has increased the prominence of English as the undisputed lingua franca of business and politics.

It would also be less sentimental to argue, therefore, that in Somalia, as elsewhere in Sub-Saharan Africa, language is seen as one of the most precious national resources (Laitin, 1976). Laitin (1976) maintains that 'yet the process of nation-building and modernization in most African states, and very often mass education and political administration are conducted in a language that is foreign to the citizens of these states' (p. 1). Fanon (1967), sees language as the crucial force that sustains culture and supports the essence of civilizations. To Fanon (1967), 'a man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language' (p. 18).

What is conspicuously evident, though, and especially in Somalia's case, is that sometimes, if not always, necessity overrides any prevailing nationalist ideology. That was practically the case at the SNU where 'given the comparative lack of reading and research materials in Somali, and the relatively few Somalis with graduate degrees, most university courses were conducted in Italian' (*Somalia: a country report*, 1982). The most important exception in this regard was the College of Education where English was the medium of instruction.

The written Somali, despite the premium it was placing on social development, did not dissuade the military government from succumbing to Somalia's chronic ailment: tribalism. As the euphoria over the revolution's 'glorious' objectives was replaced by combined economic and political difficulties, the military regime turned to clan manipulating and to the classic tactics of divide and rule (Lyons & Samatar, 1995). In hindsight, it may now be sound to see that as the beginning of Somalia's journey to state collapse and national disintegration which were both fully realized in early 1991.

### **Political Repression and Education in the 1980s**

The effects of political repression on education in Somalia were many and multi-faceted. According to the United Nations Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 1991). Somalia's literacy rate was 24% (36% for males and 14% for females) in 1990. This dismal literacy situation was compounded by the fact that in 1988, the rate of access to radio receivers per 1000 inhabitants was 40, while that for television receivers for the same number of inhabitants was 0.4 (UNESCO, 1991). And to get a clear picture of how the situation was deteriorating, the gross enrolment ratios for 4–23 year olds was 14% in 1980; by 1988, that had slid back to 7% (UNESCO, 1991).

As the economy was weakened by Somalia's border war with Ethiopia in 1977–1978 (Lyons & Samatar, 1995), the military regime did not introduce any national development programmes for reconstruction. Instead, and especially since the coup attempt by dissident military officers in April 1978, and the subsequent execution of 17 officers (Sheikh-Abdi, 1981), the government embarked on crushing what it called 'domestic enemies'. Among the most prominent elements of this internal campaign was the proliferation of nepotism and favouritism. With this came, among other management misfortunes, the corruption of the education system where the de-development-oriented maxim *yaad taqaannaa* (who do you

know) replaced the development-oriented *maxaad taqaannaa* (what do you know) in admissions, scholarships, fields of specialization and types of employment after graduation.

The tragedy of corruption in military-ruled Somalia was not unique to the country's learning systems, nor was it limited to Somalia in chronically underdeveloped Africa (Brittain, 1994). Africa whose share of world trade in manufactured goods fell from a dismal 0.4% in 1965 to a disastrous 0.2% in 1986 (Kennedy, 1993), seems more peripheral than ever. Africa's quasi- moribund economic situation is complemented by what Bayart (1993) portrays as the completely corrupted state structure and functions in the continent. The combined forces of economic collapse and institutional corruption have, in the words of Brittain (1994), forced '100,000 African professionals and intellectuals to flee their continent in search of better opportunities, thus bleeding their countries of the talent, education, and energy that would offer a chance of reversing the trend of de-development' (p. 22).

In Somalia's case in particular, the problems of corruption and mismanagement were compounded by the phenomenon of cold war induced disproportionate armament. Because of border conflicts the country inherited from the colonial legacy, and because of super power opportunism, Somalia was one of the most militarized countries in the world. Consequently, social programmes such as education and health care were relegated to negligible status in expenditure. In effect, the 1984 estimates, as the percentage of state expenditures, show that the Somali government was spending 36% on defence and security, while it spent 10.5% on social programmes including education, and only 8% on economic issues and development (Samatar, 1988).

The combination of internal conflict, super power opportunism, economic decay, institutional corruption, and eventually the end of bi-polarity and the inauguration of the New World Order, could all explain the collapse of the Somali state in 1991. These could also rationalize why, with the collapse of the state, the only things Somalis could find in abundance were American- and Soviet-made assault rifles, artillery pieces, tanks, missiles and fighter jets. All this military hardware seemingly was useful as Somalis decided to kill one another, and destroy, at times with rocket science accuracy, all social and economic infrastructure of which educational institutions and facilities were among the first casualties. At the end, Somalia, even within the context of Sub-Saharan Africa, may be educationally and, therefore, developmentally more marginalized than other countries. In this regard, the World Bank (1995) reports that while the median level of illiteracy is 56% per Sub-Saharan for Africa, it is 81% for Somalia. This is complemented by a median infant mortality rate of 93.1% for Sub-Saharan Africa and 120% for Somalia, and a median life expectancy of 52 years for Sub-Saharan Africa and 47 years for Somalia (World Bank, 1995) [1].

### **The Destruction of the Education System in Post-state Somalia**

With the collapse of the state in January 1991, the country immediately succumbed to the opportunistic tendencies of a dozen or so competing factions mostly created and led by special interest warlords. The warlords, having learned their political lessons from the former military dictatorship, all wanted, rationally or irrationally, to occupy the seat of the presidency. State, in this context, is defined as the law enforcing agencies of the country (Gellner, 1983). More broadly, it could also be seen as representing a political entity that functions within a set of prescribed boundaries that are primarily designed and maintained to deal with the organizations of human associations (Samatar, 1994). In the Somalia of the early 1990s, the conspicuous absence of the state was complemented by the lack of any genre of national leadership that was able to see beyond the tribal spectre of events. In lamenting the paramourcy of this leadership vacuum, Mirreh (1994) concludes that the 'single most

important factor responsible for Somalia's catastrophe is the nature of the opportunistic leadership that is there' (p. 23).

In terms of what happened to Somalia's schools and systems of learning after the collapse of the state, the scenario, tragic as it is, may still have a 'cluster' of historical parallels. In early civilizations, many treasuries of learning such as schools, universities and libraries were either destroyed during wars, or were intentionally burned down, demolished or converted into less dignified facilities or residencies. In all the cases, the perpetrators of these acts of senseless destruction, to be described in our context as deliberate, or at times, 'innocent' forays of de-development, were the invading groups, who, for all possible explanations, were enemies of what they did not understand: the value of knowledge and learning. In a more generalized manner, the almost permanent relationship between education and social development (Nyerere, 1968; Thompson, 1981; Fagerlind & Saha, 1985; Mandela, 1994; Tilak, 1994) was apparently lost on the invading factions.

In Somalia's case in particular, the deliberate destruction of schools, university lecture halls, libraries and laboratories, sometimes complemented by the targeting of the educated cadre among the warring factions, may sadly remind one of different, albeit less promising, historical epochs. One such historical moment that could serve as a relevant example in this regard was the destruction of the Alexandria Library in Ancient Egypt. That library had the hitherto unprecedented collection of 400,000 volumes, and it was destroyed by the Roman army commander Julius Caesar in 48 BC (Jackson, 1970).

### The Current Tragic Situation

With no organized systems of learning in place now, millions of Somalia's children, young adults and adults are all at the mercy of whatever informal education 'bestows' upon them. Informal education, seen in this context as what is randomly learned from the general societal situations, may sometimes, and depending on the situation, enhance social development. In Somalia's case, though, the country's situation in the last 7 years or so would lead us to believe that informal education is not only destructive at the moment, it also seems to be legitimizing a host of negative consequences, and in the process, it is self-perpetuating. Hence, and to use Bayart's (1993) term, it is of *longue durée*.

The overwhelming destructive nature of informal education in current Somalia is conspicuous in the lives of millions of former schoolers and would-have-been schoolers who are no longer in the business of future-building. Instead, Somalia's youth are fast adopting the culture of thuggery, war-like attitudes toward life, clan and sometimes sub-clan fightings, and survival on the fringes of an otherwise disintegrating society. The social formation that is taking place within the lives of Somalia's children in these situations, therefore, is conspicuously capable of diffusing in them a wanton desire to destabilize the human and physical environments in which they must function. As Samatar (1991a) points out:

Even if the unthinkable happens, and the warring factions manage to honour the terms of the cease-fire agreement, Mogadishu is unlikely to see peace. The reason is not far to seek. Of the estimated 20,000 armed militia roaming Mogadishu, only about 5000 are commanded and controlled by the two main warlords. The remaining 15,000 are thugs who are answerable to no one. So many hungry, Qaat-crazed youths armed with assault rifles are likely to use their weapons as a means to gainful employment. They will continue looting, pillaging and terrorizing the city. (p. 141)

The 15,000 former potential students may now be hundreds of thousands all over the country. In terms of any changes that have affected their lives, one could only guess that

whatever has been happening to them is impacting on their lives more negatively than positively. More importantly, the qualitatively discouraging effects of the situation are not the results of any deliberately planned schemes by the youngsters themselves. As adults, we should be cognizant of the fact that children are social beings who will do mostly what they are socialized to do. In today's Somalia, children are not being socialized, at least not formally, for responsible and accountable future roles.

Moreover, as these young 'fighters' become fully anaesthetized to life in the potentially fatal lane, they may be more hostile to any peace and reconciliation efforts. To them, a government that restores law and order, would reduce the demand for their services as potential gangsters, robbers and bandits (Finnegan, 1995). It may be safe to assume, therefore, that as long as the psychological dispositions of these children are in the current state of affairs, they may prefer to see the current political situation maintained. After all, this is what these children know, and anything different may seem alien and dangerously unpredictable.

The impact of the several efforts to rehabilitate some learning centres by UNESCO and a few other international organizations (UN Humanitarian Affairs Department, 1993), and some efforts by some independent Islamic societies could be, if not practically insignificant, woefully inadequate. In effect, most of these programmes hardly got off the ground. Hence, there is the possibility of the current bleak situation perpetuating itself for many years, if not decades to come.

In terms of the present condition of former centres of higher learning, the buildings are, at least, not useless. They have been overtaken by former pastoralists after the majority of the city dwellers fled the urban centres. The flight of the urbanites was instigated by factional fighting in and around the major cities (Samatar, 1994). The lack of doors and windows (already looted) in most of these buildings does not seem to bother the new occupants who, having been used to living in small huts in open spaces, may now be savouring the luxury of the concrete buildings. This is also true for most of the city's nicer houses, where in the words of Finnegan (1995), the people who are now inhabiting these homes are from the countryside, and are, therefore, 'enjoying their first sojourn in the city' (p. 68).

As far as the effects of the physical and ecological transformation of the educational institutions are concerned, Finnegan (1995), for example, describes the current condition of the former College of Education:

The low-rise, modern looking building of the former College of Education is now a displaced persons' camp. The classrooms and dormitories were full of families; the walls were blackened by cooking fires ... The library was a world of dust. Books were piled everywhere, on sagging shelves, on toppling heaps. Some were stained and disintegrating, but most were intact. Every title I saw seemed, under the circumstances, absurdly ironic: 'The Psychology of Adolescence,' 'Adolescents Grow in Groups,' 'Primitive Government,' 'The Red Badge of Courage.' Sunlight drifted through high windows on the west wall. A cow mooed somewhere. The dust was so deep that it was as though the desert itself was creeping through the walls, burying the books in fine sand. (p. 76)

## **Conclusion**

The Somalia described in this article is, technically speaking, a familiar one. People have seen the spectacle of the country's horrors on television, in the printed media, and more importantly on the faces of the victims of the whole tragedy. Because of that,

international aid efforts have been organized, military operations have been launched, and reconciliation talks among the warring factions have been held. But all these efforts, useful and, at times, life-saving as they were, did not incorporate into their agenda any strategy to save the future of Somalia's children. So by taking now a much needed break from the political debate, let us ask ourselves what should and could be done about the education situation? Definitely, the children deserve better, and the situation, if it continues as it is, may be 'objectively' signified as heralding the end of any foreseeable pragmatic hope for towing Somalia back to the waters of the community of nations.

One potential programme may be the incorporation of education rebuilding strategies into the agenda of international organizations that are delivering aid to Somalia. Another project that may have more impact could come from deliberate initiatives by UNESCO. Such efforts could be complemented by contributions from different countries around the world. Even if all aid was previously expected from Europe and North America, new venues of support and international responsibility must now also be sought from wealthy nations in Asia, the Middle East, and from Australia and New Zealand. The agreed-upon programmes to be collectively implemented may initially contain a 'cluster' of projects that would primarily respond to the re-opening of elementary schools in those parts of Somalia that are politically stable, and that have demonstrated a genuine desire to re-start institutional rebuilding. With the establishment of this basic phase of education, new projects could be designed for intermediate and secondary schools, followed by the re-tooling and the re-opening of the country's young, but proud and aspiring university system.

With the formulation or, at least, the practical discussion of educational intervention projects in state-less Somalia, one could assume that such efforts would have a high probability of success. This should be so, for parents and the wider community would now fully understand that it is time for their children's future to come ahead of factionalism, warlordism and, therefore, underdevelopment and marginalization. After all, factional political struggle is a failed scheme, and it may not be long before Somalis realize that it could be too late for millions of the country's future citizens unless something is done quickly.

On the other hand, and especially if nothing is done, we would just continue watching the spectacle of horror in that sad land in the Horn of Africa. And as years go by, we may discover the swelling numbers of yesterday's and yesteryears' innocent children coming of age, not as high school graduates, university freshmen and juniors, or young professionals and aspiring academics, but as illiterate or at best, semi-illiterate militia people who could situationally hasten the ongoing marginalization of an already alarmingly peripheral Somali society.

The responsibility to rescue Somalia's children and, therefore, any future for Somalia, is on the shoulders of the world's citizens. This is not to say that by expecting help from others, Somalis are abdicating their responsibility and blaming the rest of the world for their country's current socio-political and economic mishap. What it should mean, though, is that Somalia's problems did not take place in a global socio-cultural vacuum, but were a product of forces that have been at times out of the control of the country's citizens. If and when the call for rescue is heeded, therefore, there could be an ample chance for a situational turn-up. If, on the other hand, the case continues as it is, there may be one very plausible scenario. The people of Somalia may slowly self-emancipate in their own way, and begin the long and hard trek of reversing the current trends of de-development. One should expect, though, that it would not come to that, for the projects we are discussing are urgently needed and require, above all else, a massive amount of resources that are not available in today's Somalia. But if that becomes the only alternative, one may justifiably hope that it will not be too late for 21st century Somalia and its people.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Ratna Ghosh at McGill University for her valuable insights regarding an earlier version of this paper.

## NOTE

[1] The World Bank data, although produced in 1995, contains information for earlier in the 1990s. The latest year this data applies to is 1993.

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