

## **Can Somali piracy be explained by the “greed vs. grievance” debates?**

War torn since civil war began in 1991, Somalia is the classic example of what political scientists call a failed state. The country is divided and some territories are now struggling for more autonomy and even, in the case of Somaliland, separation and independence from Mogadishu. The failure of the state brought a surge in piracy along the Indian Ocean and along the Gulf of Aden. The seemingly perpetual state of conflict in which Somalia, and other countries, are engulfed has become the focus of study and debate among theorists. Throughout this essay I will engage with arguments political scientists that claim that greed is at the heart of the explanation for piracy, as well as with those that advocate grievance as the cause for the enduring character of these conflicts. I will argue that neither side is able to provide a definitive explanation for the Somali case. The whole political economy needs to be taken into consideration if one is to do an accurate assessment of the situation that might lead to effective solutions.

Somalia has technically been in civil war since the regime of Mohamed Siad Barre fell in 1991, an event that coincides with an outburst of piracy in the Gulf of Aden. Although there are records of pirate attacks in the region before president Barre was overthrown, there was a gradual increase in 1989. The incidents came after the Somali National Movement lost Ethiopian support and needed money to fund the rebellion against Mogadishu (Murphy, 2011: 11). Since then, the number of attacks has increased exponentially, taking advantage of the failed Somali state. Piracy is thus intimately related to the outbreak of conflict in Somalia and therefore falls into the scope of the “greed vs. grievance” debate.

The greed and grievance debate tries to offer explanation to why civil wars start and, in numerous cases, endure without an end in sight. On one side of the argument we have the 'grievance' thesis which argues that horizontal inequalities between different and well defined groups are the main cause of civil wars (Keen, 2012a: 757). On the other hand, the 'greed' thesis highlights the importance of vertical inequalities, emphasizing economic agendas as the

main drivers of conflict and rebellion (Keen, 2012a: 757). The latter claim has been made popular especially through the work of Paul Collier, who has been highly regarded both in the media as well as in several policy circles (Keen, 2012a: 758).

As a strong advocate of the greed thesis, Collier claims that countries with high commodities exports, low education, a considerable proportion of young men and economic decline increase the risks of conflict (Collier, 2000: 110). He adds that “economic agendas are central” in understanding conflict because wars generate opportunities for profit for a restricted group of actors (Collier, 2000: 91). These groups will therefore be the likely cause for the beginning and perpetuation of these conflicts because of their opportunistic interest (Collier, 2000: 110). He adds that this agenda is usually hidden, because the country's economy *per se* will suffer with the ongoing conflict (Collier, 2000:110) and, in his opinion, it is here that grievance plays a part, even though a small one.

Collier dismisses the 'grievance' argument as a mere rhetorical tool used by rebel leaders not only as a discourse to gather sympathy with the international community but also with the rebels they are commanding. Finding themselves between the need to recruit more supporters and the fact that the bigger the organization, the smaller are the material gains, rebel leaders will resort to this kind of rhetoric to find followers. Thus, the if at the top of the organization the driving force is greed, the narrative towards the lower echelons can be entirely grievance (Collier, 2000: 92).

While Collier's analysis on the influence of economic agendas seems to be, at the very least, relevant towards an explanation of civil wars, its dismissal of the grievance explanation weakens his argument. As Keen notes, through an analysis of Joanna Skelt's work, in order to achieve peace out of civil war the economic factors are implied “but also something much more than that” (Keen, 2000: 40). One can assume then that the forces behind conflict are also much more than just economic.

The grievance argument therefore brings into the equation horizontal inequalities – understood as not only economic but also social and political divergences and cultural status

between different well defined groups within the same society (Keen, 2012a: 757). The factors that might be considered grievances are ethnic or religious hatred, economic inequalities, political repression or government economic incompetence (Collier, 2000: 96). Collier promptly dismisses these justifications as “seriously wrong” claiming that they lack “empirical support” (Collier, 2000: 96-98).

Keen, however, draws on the work of Frances Stewart to argue that these factors are indeed important in motivating conflict (Keen, 2012a, 760). He adds that besides its economic functions, violence can have a security or psychological agenda behind it (Keen, 2000, 23). It can provide a chance for role reversal between the dominant and dominated groups in a certain society. Therefore, acts of revenge should not be seen as random but as a reaction to specific past interactions (Keen, 2000: 23). They are the result of not only economic but also political actions (Keen, 2000: 23).

Although it seems unquestionable that greed plays an important role in perpetuating civil wars, there are usually underlying grievances (Keen, 2012a: 770) It is therefore important to adopt a more moderate position when it comes to the “greed vs. grievance” debate. One must not focus exclusively on one side but instead try to understand the way in which both arguments interact (Keen, 2012a: 771). Political and psychological factors, and not only economic agendas, also play a role in the shape of conflict and in its enduring nature (Keen, 2012a: 776). Narrowing our analysis to just one of these elements risks compromising our assessment of a certain conflict and will undoubtedly contribute to the failure of an ensuing attempt to achieve peace. The idea of a relationship, rather than an opposition, between greed and grievance will become clear when we look more carefully at the concrete case of piracy in Somalia.

The rhetoric surrounding Somali piracy is unmistakable. Most of these men prefer not to be referred to as ‘pirates’ but instead as members of the ‘Coast Guard’(Harper, 2012: 149). They argue that foreign trawlers are fishing illegally on Somali waters and that their fisheries are being depleted (Harper, 2012: 149). Although the grievance rhetoric has a strong

presence, the fact is that, as Hansen points out, “the pirate’s targets clearly indicate that profit considerations are more important than any agenda to protect against illegal fishing” (Hansen, 2009:8). Although Hansen, in his report on Somali piracy, dismisses this rhetoric and any justifications that it might have started as an attack on illegal fishing, he argues that if most interviewed pirates mention this situation, it is important to take it into account (Hansen, 2009: 12). It must be prevented, not only because it is a crime, but also because of the sense of anger that it might foster amongst the local population (Hansen, 2009: 12) He adds that it will prevent pirates from using it as an argument to justify their actions (Hansen, 2009: 12).

The case about illegal fishing has details that sometimes are usually not reported but that pirates might see as important. The wide belief that Spanish vessels are among the ones that partake in the illegal fishing along the Somali coast, makes it hard to understand why Spain’s navy is among those that police the Gulf of Aden (Hansen, 2009: 13). Clearly many complex issues are at stake here and a closer analysis must be made. It is not simply a case of either greed or grievance and one must not exclude either side.

In his report, Hansen also adds that since pirates operate from very distinct areas of Somalia, it is possible that they have different motivations (Hansen, 2009: 12). This idea is shared by Adbi Ismail Samatar, Mark Lindberg and Basil Mahayni who, in their article, argue that there have been four different types of pirates operating off the Somali coast, since 1989: “political, resources, defensive and ransom pirates” (Samatar et al, 2010: 1384). Political pirates were the first type to appear in the region and their target was the regime that controlled Mogadishu. They operated in 1989-90 and their aim was to prevent supplies from reaching the Somali capital, by sea. (Samatar et al, 2010: 1384). They had also lost support from Ethiopia and this was seen as a good method to finance their activity and acquire weapons (Murphy, 2011: 11) These first pirates were members of an opposition group called the Somali National Movement (Samatar et al, 2010: 1384).

As we have seen, President Barre’s regime collapsed in 1991 and with it most civil institutions, including the Coast Guard. Somalia’s waters were left unpatrolled and several

fishing companies took advantage (Samatar et al, 2010: 1385). South and South-east Asian trawlers were amongst those that took and still take advantage of the lack of authority on Somali waters but there are also ships from several European countries, namely France, Italy and Spain that do the same (Bahadur, 2011: 251). The annual worth of fish looted in Somali waters amounts to about 150 to 450 million dollars. This type of piracy still endures, mainly because the international forces that are present in the region apply different standards for “pirates” and “thieves” (Bahadur, 2011: 251). This issue strengthens the resentment of Somalis towards the international forces stationed in the Horn of Africa, which sometimes are of the same nationality of these fishing trawlers, as I mentioned above.

This type of piracy lead in turn to a response on the part of Somalia’s fishing communities, which saw their natural resources being stolen (Samatar et al, 2010: 1385). It was an act of defence against “illegal, uncontrolled and unregulated” fishing (Murphy, 2011: 17). Some of these pirates were joined by elements of the former government’s coast guard (Samatar et al, 2010: 1385). The lack of policing of the Somalis coast and the opportunity presented by the twenty four thousand ships that cross the Gulf of Aden, every year, attracted criminals from around the country. Copying the tactics of defensive pirates, this new type of actor focused solely on the ransom money that could be negotiated through the hijacking of merchant ships (Samatar et al, 2010: 1386). The opportunity presented by the apparent cost/benefit of these attacks and the lack of alternative activities and jobs attracted increasing numbers of Somalis – to this contributed the rise of the unemployment rate to 47% in 2002 and 54% in 2012 (UNDP, 2012: 61). These ransom pirates span over a growing area of the Indian Ocean and are able to extort about 35 million dollars, annually, in ransoms (Samatar et al, 2010: 1387). The different motivations of these pirates suggest different reasons for their behaviour that fall within the scope of both greed and grievance and can even go beyond the debate itself.

Another important figure to consider is the average pay of a pirate at the bottom of the organization. Drawing on the experience of Jay Bahadur with the pirates that attacked the

Victoria cargo ship, we can see that the idea of enriching through piracy is a myth, except for those at the top (Bahadur, 2011: 227). Media attention is often directed at the millionaire ransoms paid to pirates without dwelling into the amount that each pirate receives. If the leader of the organization and main investor will keep about half of the amount received, an average pirate will get just slightly more than 2,2% (Bahadur, 2011:227). The Victoria's seizure lasted 72 days and the ship was only released after a ransom of \$1,8 million was paid (Bahadur, 2011: 225). Each of the holders, men that guarded crew and ship on land, received about \$12,000, which amounts to \$10,43 *per* hour (Bahadur, 2011, 226). It is still a considerable amount, by Somali standards, but not the amount one would expect of a job that gives no guarantee of a sure income - the International Maritime Bureau registered only 14 hijackings in 2012 out of the 24,000 vessels that crossed the Gulf of Aden (CC IMB, 2013: 20) – and that has a 6% to 9% chance of getting the pirates either killed, wounded or prosecuted and arrested (Bahadur, 2011, 226).

As Bahadur points out, most of those that embark on these perilous attacks, earn less than “a crack foot soldier” and most of their money is quickly spent on the well being of their “family and friends” (Bahadur, 2011, 233). Harper’s report on the subject provides a similar conclusion. Actual pirates are said to receive about 30% of the ransom money (Harper, 2012: 153). If we take into account that the Victoria was hijacked by a 35 person crew (Bahadur, 2011:225), excluding the gang leader, 30% of \$1.8 million, divided by 34 amounts to less than \$16,000 *per* crew member.

In his analysis of the economics of piracy, Bahadur adds another interesting point. In a country where future prospects are nearly existent, piracy provides young Somalis with a legitimate chance for socioeconomic advancement (Bahadur, 2011: 233). Unemployment reached 54% in 2012, as mentioned, and youth unemployment peaked to 67%, which is one of the highest youth unemployment rates in the world (UNDP, 2012: 61) One must therefore look at the bigger picture to understand the reason for piracy in the Indian Ocean. It is certainly not grievance against fisherman that makes these men attack a cargo ship full of rice

but it is also not just the financial benefits (greed) of this perilous action that drives them. The issue of Somalia's whole political economy is at stake here.

There is also another issue that points towards a broader analysis of Somalia, going beyond the greed and grievance debates. Most authors, like Bahadur, Hansen or Boot argue that the solution for Somali piracy is on land rather than on the sea. This involves the establishment of local institutions that can guarantee, social stability and enforce the rule of law as well as "occupying and dismantling pirate lairs" (Boot, 2009: 102-103). In sum, make piracy less appealing by guaranteeing that those that engage in it will be considered criminals.

Somaliland, the self-proclaimed independent republic in the Northwest part of the country, has been an example of success in this area. This independent project developed by the Somalis themselves, without outside help, has been one of the most successful examples of state building (Harper, 2012: 198). This multi-clan, multi-party system managed to establish a basic structure of government, which soon became democratic (Lewis, 2008: 95-97). Political stability and development brought socioeconomic evolution and an increase in the quality of life as well as security (Lewis, 2008: 98). These improvements had positive effects not only on land but also on water with the number of pirate attacks, on their waters, decreasing to one in every two years, from 1999 to 2009 (Hansen, 2009: 30). Hansen adds that the strength of Somaliland is not in its capacity to patrol the coast but in the enforcement of the rule of law as well as the control of relevant areas through "local popularity" (Hansen, 2009: 30).

The Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) had similar success in the southern part of the country (Harper, 2012: 198). The UIC established itself in Mogadishu, in 2006, ending the fifteen year control of the capital by Somali warlords (Keen, 2012b: 122). It had the support of the Somalis and was successfully managing to restore order on land (Keen, 2012b: 122) with similar results on the sea (Harper, 2012: 198). However, because of its Islamist inspiration, it was rumoured that the UIC was harbouring African terrorists and that Somalia was becoming an oasis for Al-Qaeda (Keen, 2012b: 122). These highly exaggerated

assumptions were proof enough for the United States to support an Ethiopian invasion of Somalia, that defeated the UIC and installed an new government (Keen, 2012b: 123). The invasion displaced more than one million and its effects culminated in the famine of 2011 (Keen, 2012b: 123). It left in place an “abusive and corrupt” regime, reverted the good work of the UIC and managed to drive the more moderate Islamists out of the country, leaving behind only the more radical ones that, today, form the Al-Shabaab, a militia that is publicly affiliated with Al-Qaeda (Keen, 2012b: 123-124). The US's interests in the region, regarding the 'war on Terror' are another important factor in the perpetuation of this activity that is not encompassed by neither greed nor grievance.

The UIC and Somaliland are two examples of success, specific of Somalia, but there are other similar cases in history. The successful strategies employed to deal with piracy in the Caribbean and the Mediterranean, centuries before the outbreak of the phenomenon in Somalia, also included actions on land that took into account social and political, as well as economic factors (Boot, 2009: 102-103).

As we have seen, greed and grievance are both present in the Somali piracy case but alone they are unable to provide an explanation for what is motivating this type of criminal activity. A close look at both claims and at the Somali case has shown us that there is more at stake than just economic motivations or grievances against illegal fishing and international patrols. The involvement of international actors in the region and lessons from the past also show us that there is more to it than just greed or grievance. We can conclude that the failure of the Somali state and of the whole political economy are at the heart of the issue a assume a dominant role in the present outcome. A thorough analysis of this particular case must therefore take these issues into account if it aims to provide effective solutions.

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