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## Summary

Over the past decades, donors, aid agencies, consultants and enumerators have conducted increasing amounts of aid-related research in the form of monitoring, assessments and surveys in Somalia. The rise of third-party monitoring (TPMs), new technologies and the arrival of global consultancy firms have not only led to an internationalised and professionalised market for aid information but also introduced new power dynamics in the production of aid knowledge. The way in which aid data in Somalia/Somaliland is produced reflects prevailing stereotypes about the supposedly superior value of 'Western' expertise over local knowledge. This brief raises important questions about the production and ownership of aid-related knowledge in the Somali territories where, due to weak state institutions, data collection is unregulated, and often *de facto* privatised. Moreover, the insufficient uptake of aid information by aid agencies, the governments and the public gives pause for thought. As Somali government institutions are strengthening, there is an urgent need to localise knowledge production in Somalia and to make aid information and data available to the public. There is also a need to strengthen data protection and research ethics and to rethink some of the extractive and negative impacts of the current aid information business.

## About Somali Public Agenda

Somali Public Agenda is a non-profit public policy and administration research organization based in Mogadishu. Its aim is to advance understanding and improvement of public administration and public services in Somalia through evidence-based research and analysis.

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# Who owns data in Somalia? Ending the country's privatised knowledge economy

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## Introduction

Donors, aid agencies, consultants and researchers regularly produce studies on development and humanitarian interventions in Somalia. Among the standard aid research activities are baseline assessments, monitoring, and mid and end of project evaluations. With the rise of remote programming since the 2010/2011 famine, many donors and agencies have adopted so-called third-party monitoring (TPM) data collection and analysis instruments. The need to monitor projects in remote and inaccessible places, new technological possibilities including call centres, and more stringent accountability requirements have made this data even more precious. As a result, an internationalised and professionalised market for aid information has emerged in the Somali territories.

Drawing on a study on the political economy of aid information in Somalia/Somaliland conducted between December 2020 and January 2021 in Mogadishu, Hargeisa and Nairobi, this brief provides insights into the aid data business in Somalia. We look at the actors and the power and economic dynamics in the production of aid data, the factors affecting the reliability of the information produced as well as the broader effects of this new knowledge economy. For this purpose, we conducted 44 interviews and informal conversations with local researchers, consultants, enumerators, monitoring and evaluation specialists and other key informants familiar with the practicalities of aid-related research in Somalia/Somaliland.

The prolonged Somali civil war destroyed many facets of Somali society including its knowledge production base and educational institutions, which had limited research capacities even before the war. A majority of educated Somalis left the country in the early 1990s, resulting in an intellectual brain drain and a generation of Somalis unable to attend higher education during much of the 1990s and 2000s.

Most of the local universities established after the war do not have functional research centres and rarely commission academic studies. With the exception of a handful of think tanks established over the past two decades, most of the research in Somalia is aid-related and has been funded or conducted by international consultancy firms, humanitarian organizations and aid agencies. Local organizations, researchers and consultants are mainly commissioned to collect primary data on behalf of these international actors. The study design, analysis and writing is then typically done by these international organizations and experts, leading to a situation in which Somalis rarely get to write and represent their own society.

In these past two decades, donors and aid agencies working in Somalia have dominated data collection and production in the form of thousands of assessments, reviews and evaluations. These studies are applied in nature and driven by the demands and requirements of donors and aid agencies who seek to understand and document the various impacts of their projects and programmes. Most of these studies are not published. As a result, publicly available data and publication on various aspects of Somali society and economy are only a fraction of all the data that has been and continues to be collected.

These data collection practices have negatively affected the communities – the proverbial ‘beneficiaries’ – whose lives are being documented and researched. Many key informants we spoke to highlighted how aid-related research in Somalia had produced interview fatigue and instrumentalist attitudes towards research by respondents as donors and aid agencies continue to duplicate data collection. Moreover, the role of the state in defining the research agenda, monitoring existing data collection by international actors, and regulating knowledge production more broadly remains rudimentary. The fragility of state institutions has given a free reign to those who collected data in Somalia/Somaliland, including [sensitive biographical data](#), who can keep and use this data more or less as they wish.

The brief starts with a short explanation of different types of aid information gathered in Somalia/Somaliland. This is followed by an analysis of the problems and challenges of aid research in Somalia/Somaliland. We then draw attention to the context in which data is being produced, including data protection and storage practices, but also how data is disseminated, as well as the existing legal framework and politics of national data. The brief concludes with a number of policy recommendations in view of ending Somalia’ de facto privatised knowledge economy dominated by international aid organizations.

## Different types of aid data

A number of different actors contribute to the data and information business in Somalia. They include international organizations, donor and aid agencies, local research and consultancy firms, enumerators, and other local actors including gatekeepers. Donors and aid agencies commission assessments and monitoring reports based on data collection in Somalia/Somaliland. UN agencies, major bilateral donors, International Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and charities fall into this category (those who commission assessments and monitoring and evaluations). Because aid data collection and knowledge in Somalia/Somaliland is driven by donors’ interests, there is unequal coverage of the sectors and populations covered. Education, health, and food security are better researched than other sectors, in particular political issues, and security. International consultancy firms, also known as ‘vendors’, obtain contracts from these donors and aid organizations and in turn contract local consultancy and research firms to collect data on the

ground. In consultation with the client, these international vendors define research and monitoring standards and data collection tools, analysis and ethics.

Local consultancy firms collect and produce the data required following specifications set by the donor and the international firm. Numerous local Somali firms have been established in the past decade with offices in Nairobi, Mogadishu, Hargeisa and elsewhere. Because they lack connections, political clout and at times also capacities to win major contracts directly from donors, these local consultancy firms are mainly sub-contracted by international firms. Local companies have a pool of enumerators and data collectors, which they hire on a case-to-case basis. Local consultancy firms usually collect the data required and send it onward to the international firm. The latter does the analysis and write-up and then shares the results with the client, meaning the donor or aid agency who commissioned the study in the first place. The men and women collecting data in the field, mainly from surveys which is the most common method, are referred to as local monitors or ‘enumerators’.

Under the third-party monitoring arrangement, the aid agencies, also known as ‘implementing partners (IPs), who undertake a particular intervention on the ground are monitored and assessed by independent local or international researchers and consultants. They are audited and held accountable in relation to the targets they agree upon with their donor. The IPs are wary of being ‘flagged’ by third-party monitors, which will report them to the donor in case they have failed to meet or only partially achieve their objectives. Third-party monitoring essentially relies on information provided by individuals who benefitted from a particular aid intervention and who were selected to provide information on this experience to a data collector. Our interlocutors described the attitudes of these respondents as containing a mixture of expectation for more aid, interview fatigue and cynical attitudes towards data collection. Respondents’ dependence on aid, in particular on the continuation of the aid intervention that is being monitored, explains why many of them agree to be interviewed. Their answers, however, often reflect a calculus of attracting more external assistance, which distorts the information given, regardless of who collects it.

The proliferation of third-party monitoring was motivated by, first, a lack of access that international organizations faced in central and southern Somalia and, second, the need for increasing accountability in a context of [massive aid diversion in the early 2010s](#). Most TPMs focus on the process and impact of implemented activities, including an evaluation of the site, beneficiary selection, costs, outputs and impacts as stated in the proposals. In the last five years, third-party monitoring companies have become prominent service providers for the aid industry in Somalia.

The collection of aid and humanitarian related data in Somalia/Somaliland has dramatically evolved in the past decade. The spread of mobile phones and tablets has allowed to save time and costs during data collection. It also somewhat increased data accuracy. Digital data collection also allows supervisors a closer follow-up of the data collection process by enumerators while in the field. Call centres are another recent technological

innovation and addition to data collection in Somalia/Somaliland. Staff working in call centres usually call random numbers among a list of beneficiaries provided to them by the implementing agency and then ask them questions about the impacts of the aid intervention. This raises ethical questions including consent and protection, especially for respondents in risky areas.

The proliferation of third-party monitoring consultancy firms in Somalia/Somaliland led to the emergence of an internationalised ‘data business’ in which consultancy firms compete for donor contracts to study aid related impacts and phenomena in Somalia/Somaliland. As a result, data production has become increasingly commodified. A hierarchical division of labour within the aid data business exists, marked by stark power relations among the various actors involved in producing aid information. The owner of an international consultancy firm with longstanding experience in Somalia observed how ‘just like a political economy of security has developed in Somalia over the years, there is a political economy of data, of reporting results’. The aid information business is also a livelihood for local monitors, researchers, and enumerators.

The political economy of aid information on Somalia/Somaliland is also manifest in how aid organisations treat this data: as their property, which they rarely share with their competitors – whether other donors, aid agencies or consultancy firms. This institutional competition between donors and aid agencies working in and on Somalia/Somaliland is the driving force behind the continuous replication and duplication of aid information. The absence of a national or centralised repository or archive for aid related data and reports leads aid agencies to commission and conduct assessments and studies serving their own reporting and analytical purposes. The director of an international consultancy firm observed how: ‘More and more [donors and aid organizations] want their own data, but they don’t want to share the data other than the clients. The donors need to ask themselves how much data do they need? You feel sorry about the beneficiaries and enumerators.’

The lack of coordination among aid actors is maybe as old as foreign aid itself (Bourguignon & Platteau, 2015). It also extends to aid organisations’ analytical and research work and negatively affects local communities as they are subjected to multiple surveys and data collection exercises. An international research consultant who used to work for the UN in Somalia remembered how: ‘Each agency wanted to have control over it (...). And they know that information is power. They didn’t want this information to be publicly accessible.’

Aid agencies routinely resist calls for greater transparency and for making aid-related data publicly accessible because of institutional concerns, in particular a worry not to criticize government authorities, but also because of competition with other aid agencies. Although more and more data is collected by aid organisations, there is very little reliable statistical information on many of the key

issues on which donors commission studies. One of the reasons for this gap is the lack of uniformity in indicators, design and methods that are used when aid data is collected in Somalia/Somaliland. Every donor likes to use its own framework and definitions.

That said, some data sharing mechanisms are in place despite the absence of a centralised repository. Major aid agencies share data with the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA). Specific thematic consortia exchange information and use shared platforms among themselves, for example the Building Resilient Communities in Somalia (BRCiS) Consortium, the Regional Durable Solutions Secretariat (ReDSS), and the Somalia Cash Consortium.

## The problems with aid data in Somalia

There are several limitations to the reliability and validity of the aid information that is routinely collected in Somalia/Somaliland. ‘Data cooking’ is an expression used by researchers to describe various forms of fabricating data during surveys or assessments (Biruk, 2018). In its most basic and common form, enumerators invent answers to particular questions and fill in questionnaires by themselves. It is difficult to gauge how widespread ‘data cooking’ is in aid related research in Somalia/Somaliland. Anecdotal evidence suggests that it was a common occurrence, in particular before the introduction of digital data collection tools because these tools can be used to monitor the location and activities of enumerators. Enumerators might fabricate data for different reasons. Either because it is a convenient shortcut, because they are not paid adequately or because prevailing insecurity and the remoteness of some field sites are too bothersome for them. This said, most researchers and monitors that we interviewed agreed that data rigging was much more common in the old days of paper-based monitoring.

A major challenge to the production of aid related information in Somalia/Somaliland is the prevailing sense of interview fatigue among aid recipients. The repetitious character of assessments and monitoring, the duplication of studies by competing organizations and the commodified nature of data collection have left many beneficiaries wary of interviews. Our informants reported numerous examples of interview fatigue among their respondents, which at times take an openly hostile turn towards data collectors. An enumerator with a decade of field experience told us how local communities used the following nickname to refer to them: ‘They call enumerators and data collectors the *maxaa cunteen* [what did you eat?] group. This is because it is common that most studies ask about their livelihoods. They call us you *maxaa cunteen* people we [they] are tired of. You have been asking us what we eat for many years. How many more years will keep you asking us what we eat?’

Another researcher recounted how local respondents resented the ‘relentless interviews’, which were often not followed by an actual intervention, referring to data collection as *war iyo waraaq*, literally ‘speaking and letters’. Data duplication and the over researching of entire communities has been particularly acute in IDP camps. Because aid recipients, in particular vulnerable groups like IDPs, depend on external aid, they cannot refuse data collection and have to partake in surveys and assessments both for actual and potential projects.

Some of the data collected in Somalia/Somaliland is marked by a lack of proper research ethics. Enumerators face many practical problems during data collection in the field. In spite of their contractual obligations and trainings in how to conduct proper research, research firms are essentially self-regulating. As a former enumerator put it, ‘there is no critique or strict oversight (...) in the aid research’. Our various interviews suggest that research ethics among consultants and monitors working in Somalia/Somaliland are often applied in procedural rather than substantive form. A former enumerator critical of aid research in Somaliland pointed out that in many surveys, respondents did not give full consent to being interviewed and lacked the right to withdraw their statements. In reality, consent remains nominal as respondents are dependent on the very aid intervention that is being monitored (Mackenzie, et al., 2007). Insecurity and political tensions also explain why basic research ethics are at times violated during aid research.

### Stateless politics of aid data

Data production for aid purposes in Somalia/Somaliland is often extractive, giving beneficiaries no decision-making power or ownership. A Somali intellectual with long-term experience and monitoring and evaluation pointed out that: ‘The think tanks and the TPMs do not introduce themselves to the community. They just send enumerators. They don’t take the responsibility for the data. The enumerators cannot tell the truth of the research objectives. They just want to interview the number of persons allocated for the enumerator to get the money. It destroys the relationship between the community and the researcher.’

A local researcher familiar with the aid data business came to the conclusion that ‘local communities’ were the losers of aid information gathering because the so-called research about them is not actually about them.’ He and others highlighted that the entire research agenda – from the research design to the questionnaire and its implementation – were decided on and driven by external actors. A staff of an international NGO echoed this sentiment when he highlighted: ‘the local community, which has been the source of information and the focus of research does not use the research reports and findings. These reports are not even designed for the local community to use it, the local community *‘waa lagu awr kacsada’* [they are just used to achieve the pre-determined purpose].’

Local communities’ lack of ownership in aid information in Somalia and Somaliland is undeniable. It is particularly obvious in the lack of dissemination of research findings to local communities. The results of surveys and studies are usually presented in closed door donor meetings in Nairobi, which are predominantly attended by expatriates. This illustrates how outside actors – international organizations, private companies, and research outfits from the global North – dominate not only aid data production, but also aid data ownership in Somalia/Somaliland.

### Data protection and storage

An underexplored but increasingly pertinent issue is data storage. All consultancy firms and aid agencies collecting aid information store data, which is often sensitive and involves potential privacy issues. Monitors use different strategies to identify beneficiaries and sometimes record their image, phone numbers, coordinates, or fingerprints. This biometric data is mostly used for aid targeting, and sometimes for commercial purposes such as fund raising by the donors or consulting firms to show their understanding and relevance in Somalia/Somaliland. Data collected during monitoring and other surveys is shared between the consultancy company and the client. Data storage has increasingly moved to online databases and servers accessible by donors and consultants. Local organizations mostly use cloud-based storage such as Dropbox or iCloud.

There are no legally binding rules governing data storage in Somalia/Somaliland. A partial exception are organizations funded by the European Union who adhere to the [General Data Protection Regulation](#) (GDPR). Data storage is mostly based on self-regulation by the industry. The director of an international company explained that his firm has particular protocols to store data, removing phone numbers from personal data and also editing other data points. According to the monitoring and evaluation officer working for an international NGO, some aid agencies share their internal data with external consultants who use them as baseline information or to cross-check their own data. These external users are usually prevented from accessing aid agencies’ digital platforms, which are exclusively for internal use.

Aid agencies have their own data archiving and disposal policies. For instance, a major aid agency working in Somalia keeps all its documents for a period of five years. Documentation is mostly kept so that organisations can provide donors with additional information should they be asked to do so. Aid projects and their documentation are thus temporary. Hence, there is no durable, long-term storage or archive of past aid interventions in Somalia/Somaliland. Neither regional nor national governments have archives and, according to a monitoring and evaluation manager: ‘these reports have no future use’.

The Federal Government of Somalia (and its different line ministries) and the Somaliland government are the responsible authorities to ensure data privacy and to regulate data protection. Neither of these two entities has a national data protection act and, so far, neither have shown significant interest in or understanding of this subject. As long as government regulation is absent, private companies have, as a senior Somaliland bureaucrat formulated it, ‘a free room to collect the data they want.’ While aid agencies have provided lifesaving interventions and services to Somali society over the years, the unregulated nature of its data collection practices is increasingly problematic.

## ‘Ticking boxes’: uptake and dissemination of aid information

The vast majority of professionals working in Somalia’s aid information business that we talked to agreed that most of the surveys and assessments conducted were not taken up by donors or aid agencies. This lack of uptake appears particularly widespread with monitoring and evaluation reports, which are a standard feature of every aid intervention. Monitoring and evaluation specialists concurred on the ‘procedural’ nature of monitoring in particular. They argued that monitoring and evaluation corresponded to ‘ticking boxes most of the time’, that these reports were rarely used and that senior management often took little interest in them. Informants described monitoring reports as a formality driven by globally adopted standards and best practices in the aid industry such as the [International Aid Transparency Initiative \(IATI\)](#). These standards are meant to increase aid agencies’ accountability towards taxpayers as well as beneficiaries. But in reality they are often a formality and, according to the owner of a Somali consultancy firm, few agencies substantially engage with the data and reports from the field, which they produced or commissioned.

A Somali consultant explained how ‘we [they] collect so much data and maybe 30 percent is used for programming.’ Another interlocutor who worked both for an aid agency and as a consultant described the process as follows: ‘Money is spent on these studies, the report is produced, and then it is put at the on shelf of the international partners and donors.’

Not only is there often little uptake and practical use of aid information, it is also rarely shared with or consumed by other users. The director of an international consultancy firm, which had produced hundreds of assessments and reports in Somalia over the years, confirmed that ‘Most organisations want to keep reports in-house. They do not want to make them public. 90 percent of what I do is kept in-house by clients, only 10 percent is made public.’

A similar pattern exists with research studies conducted in Somalia. The vast majority of topical studies commissioned by UN agencies, international NGOs, embassies and intelligence agencies are not made public. Occasionally, line ministries and project staff obtain copies of some of these reports.

## Somali government(s) and the politics of national data

The political economy of aid information cannot be properly understood without considering the role of the state. Governments shape what kind of data is produced, how it is produced and what happens with it. In the case of Somalia and Somaliland, there is no state regulation concerning data collection or protection and neither of these entities has played a very active role in producing publicly available knowledge so far. In some parts of Somalia, enumerators have to seek permission from local authorities to collect data while in others, they ‘do not even know our [their] presence’ as an enumerator put it. Aid organisations usually inform the government(s) about nationwide or bigger surveys and assessments.

In principle, Somali state authorities have an interest in obtaining more and better data for planning and policy formulation. But at the same time, they are also wary of research that is critical, in particular studies that contradict their own interests and narratives towards the international community. A Mogadishu based researcher who used to work for a think tank remarked how: ‘The government 70% dislike[s] independent research and analysis. They don’t want to better understand the hidden issues. If critical issues such as security is analysed, that is not what the government wants to hear.’

Government institutions may use sectoral or thematic reports produced by major UN agencies, for example World Health Organization (WHO) reports on health, UNICEF studies on education or World Food Programme (WFP) studies on food security. But knowledge production by these agencies is not stable as they often lack predictable long-term funding. Moreover, it primarily reflects donor rather than government priorities.

Various government branches such as health, education, finance or trade ministries as well as regional administrations collect data, though often in an uncoordinated manner. In recent years, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) teamed up with the FGS’s Ministry of Planning to produce the [2014 Population Estimate Survey](#) (UNPF, 2014), which also includes Somaliland, as well as the [2020 Somali Health and Demographic Survey](#) (Federal Government of Somalia, 2020) for which the Ministry collected the data. Similarly, the International Labour Organization (ILO) sponsored a Labour Force Survey in collaboration with Somaliland and FGS ministries in 2012 and 2014 respectively. The World Bank’s [High Frequency Survey](#) (World Bank, 2019) documenting poverty and vulnerability patterns was undertaken with the FGS’ Ministry of Planning.

State collapse and years of political instability have led to a situation in which international actors have *de facto* privatised much of the knowledge and data production in the Somali territories. In recent years, Somali officials have accused international organizations of refusing to hand over existing data to the government. The FGS is currently in the process of (re-)claiming some of the major databases and repositories, which UN agencies have produced in Somalia since the mid-1990s. This concerns in particular the [Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit](#) (FSNAU) and the [Somalia Water and Land Information Management](#) (SWALIM) data produced by the United Nations’ Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) since 1995 and 2001 respectively. According to a senior FGS official, the newly created [National Bureau of Statistics](#) will take over and manage these two institutions in 2021. The bureau was established after federal parliament passed the [National Statistics Law](#), which was developed with the support of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). With the help of these donors the National Bureau of Statistics plans to build its statistical capacities and start publishing data. So far, it has only few staff and is, in the words of another FGS official, ‘not fully operational’.

The Somaliland authorities also seek to develop its statistical capacities. A Somaliland bureaucrat expressed similar doubts whether his government was able to ‘take over the ownership of that data’. A monitoring and evaluation officer in Hargeisa lamented that his government ‘was not interested in data management and data are not used for evidence-based decision-making’. The Somaliland administration is rarely informed about or aware of the many aid monitoring reports that are produced and does not regulate data collection by aid agencies.

### What needs to be done?

There is a need **to localise data collection and analysis in Somalia/Somaliland**. Somali researchers, analysts and enumerators need to be empowered so that they can move up in the hierarchies of aid information production and shoulder the bulk of the analytical work. Their contributions to knowledge production need to be acknowledged at all levels. This is important for the country’s future as it needs qualified data researchers, analysts, planners and statisticians. The current situation in which international aid agencies and consultancy firms dominate knowledge production without sharing the data with the wider Somali public is not sustainable.

International actors and donors should work with the Somalia/Somaliland governments **to promote and institutionalise data protection procedures**, in particular the protection of aid recipients’ personal information. They should promote and support legal frameworks, guidelines and best practices that enhance data protection as well as individuals’ right to their own data.

The communities whose data was collected and analysed **need to be involved in and benefit from the dissemination and uptake of these studies**. Local Somali researchers should not only collect data. They need to be trained and empowered to play leading roles in the research design, data analysis and writing of reports. This would go a long way in ending some of the extractive research practices currently prevalent in the Somali territories.

**Public authorities should define standards for data collection and issue laws that protect personal data. Most importantly, governments must begin to coordinate research efforts and produce much more publicly available knowledge.** All stakeholders need to be made aware of and start to address the negative effects of the currently existing privatized knowledge economy in Somalia/Somaliland.

There is a **need to publicly disseminate and share findings of third-party monitoring and other aid research**. This will allow for exchange and cross-learning with other aid organizations. Moreover, it incentivizes both consultants and clients – the aid agencies commissioning these studies – to increase the quality of reports and analysis.

International actors should work with Somalia, Somaliland and FMS authorities **to promote the production, storage and dissemination of publicly available data, analysis and statistics including georeferenced and other types of visual data**. In particular, they need to plan for the establishment of both online and offline repositories, data centres and archives.

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