Islamic Charities and Governance in Somalia

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The recent attention devoted to Islamic humanitarianism has prompted a number of scholars to explore the realm of Islamic charities and NGOs, mainly from the perspective of the anti-terrorism studies; this perspective is often aimed at orientating partnership and funding approaches of the international community for development.

Though useful to development policy makers and agencies, this “evaluative” approach does not favour a deep comprehension of the Islamic charitable sector and its potentialities due to its underlying direct nexus between the Islamic aid organisations and international terrorism. This paper will instead seek a non-evaluative approach, with the ambition to spur analytical understanding of the Islamic charitable sector in Somalia as a phenomenon, taking into consideration its multi-faced aspects.

Can Islamic charities be considered to be true actors in the governance and development of the stateless Somalia? What is their role in the provision of basic social services (health and education) to the population?

These are the leading questions of the paper that will be explored through the following steps: an overview of the origins and evolution of the charitable sector in Somalia will represent the first part of the paper including the analysis of internal and external factors that stimulated the growth of the charitable sector as a space for civil society. Organised Islam as substitute for the State in the areas of social services (Charitable sector) and internal security (Islamic Courts) in South-central Somalia is the second part of the paper, that will consider the concept of governance.

This paper will support the thesis that Islamic Charities in Somalia are more than simple charitable organisations, that their role within a stateless society is also related to normative functions on the basis of the Islamic religion and advances the hypothesis that Organised Islam is “de facto” replacing the State in key areas such as social services, wealth redistribution mechanisms and basic internal security.

This paper is part of a larger PhD research on the charitable sector in Somalia, which was inspired by the previous experience of the author as humanitarian and development worker in Somalia from 2003 to 2006. Its methodology includes extensive literature review on the Islamic charitable sector worldwide and ad hoc interviews and field observations.