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Faith and Education – A Case Study on Qur’anic Education in Somalia

Presentation

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In the seven years since 9/11, religion has taken a more central stage in defining world politics. Global security issues and many conflicts are now seen through the prism of religion: with the view that they are about religious groups fighting each other. To many, the conflict in Somalia is now also seen through this lens. A newspaper headline was most telling - ‘The Christian Government in Ethiopia fears Somalia will become an Islamic State!’ - interpreting the motivation for Ethiopia’s invasion in Somalia as a clash of faiths. Such a perspective has significant implications not just in understanding the nature of the conflict, but also in conceptualizing nation-building, recovery and development in Somalia.

After 9/11, education became central to the debate over whether religion mitigates or perpetuates conflict. Qur’anic schools became seen as a breeding ground for religious radicalism. Yet in the context of Somali society, the Qur’anic education system cannot be ignored for the enormous potential it holds for change and development in the lives of Somalis. Some 80 – 90% of all children in Somalia attend Qur’anic schools. However, the issue is an extremely sensitive one for all stakeholders in education.

Though education is understood as a basic right for all children, identifying the type of schools that can be supported to deliver it has become entangled in the battle of religious ideologies. But when Somalia can only boast an overall level of school enrolment of 30 percent nationally, it becomes apparent that without new approaches and significantly greater gains, the country will never make any significant progress to achieve the education-related Millennium Development Goals.

This presentation will make the case for the integration of formal primary education into Qur’anic schools in Somalia based on the knowledge and experience gained from an ongoing pilot initiative now being undertaken in Northeast and Northwest Somalia¹.

As long-standing cultural and community institutions, Qur’anic schools have been the nucleus of the Somali education system. Throughout its turbulent history, they have often been the *only* form of education available to Somali children.

Since Qur’anic schools in Somalia have survived by adapting to the country’s culture, tradition and changing conditions, it begs the question of whether the existing deep-

rooted tradition of Qur'anic education can adapt to and integrate with a modern formal education system? If so, how? And how do we address the vexing question of whether Qur'anic schools help to promote religious radicalism and extremism in Somalia?

To a large extent, the formal basic education system in Somalia has been non-existent since the collapse of central government in the early 1990s. Formal basic education has been eroded and undermined by years of conflict, under-funding and neglect, even in Somaliland and Puntland, where there has been relative peace, stability, and government presence for more than a decade.

The kind of basic education provided to Somali children during these protracted years of turmoil has been driven by local community initiatives with fees and school development costs paid by parents themselves.

The many years of civil war in Somalia have created serious problems in the education sector, ranging from limited and unequal access to the exclusion of children from poor rural communities, particularly girls². The indicators of education quality (such as levels of teacher education and drop-out rates) are also extremely poor when compared to other similar conflict/complex emergency countries. Indeed, the whole education system in Somalia is characterized by 'lack': the absence of a national school curriculum, non-existent standards for learning outcomes and an ineffective quality control system.

The fact that - in spite of this - we can document an increased enrolment of more than 200,000 children (an average 3 percent increase) over the last 6 years, is largely because Somalis have shown a commitment to sending their children to school; as a result of increased remittances from Somalis in Diaspora and renewed interest in education from the UN and international partners.

Even as the government-funded formal education system in Somalia remains paralysed, Qur'anic Schools continue to thrive, providing educational opportunities to most Somali children – particularly in rural and nomadic communities, and with near-equal representation of boys and girls.

This means that while almost seven out of every ten children are **not** enrolled in formal primary education; eight out of ten children **are** attending some form of a Qur'anic school. Parents send their children to Qur'anic schools not only to meet religious and cultural obligations, but because they also value education itself.

The Qur'anic education system provides a flexible and sustainable form of Islamic education to young and old³. Deeply rooted in local Somali culture and traditions, it has had an enormous influence on how most Somalis conceive the concept and value of education and knowledge in general. Unlike the formal education system, it encourages a relationship between the child and his or her environment to create an equilibrium in which each respects their role and contribution to family livelihood practices such as animal rearing and farming.

In Somalia, a country which has long been impacted by conflict and environmental disasters, the adaptive nature of its culture and institutions has been critical for their survival. The institution of Qur'anic education is no exception. The most notable change over the last decade has been the emergence of what has been called a *hybrid* or an *integrated* form of the Qur'anic school.

The Qur'anic school system in Somalia has never operated as a unified structure. Instead, each school has evolved and functioned as an autonomous unit. Though both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Religious Affairs have in the past claimed that their mandates extended to the Qur'anic schools system, in reality, neither Ministry appears to have taken its responsibilities very seriously.

Recently, however, education authorities in both Somaliland and Puntland have taken steps towards recognizing their roles within a policy framework for Qur'anic education. The Somaliland National Policy of Education of 2005 and the 2004 Puntland Education Policy Paper provide clear policy guidelines to be adopted. Though both policies include Qur'anic education under 'non-formal education', the Somaliland document articulates clear government guidelines to promote and assist in upgrading Qur'anic education⁴ and the Puntland policy identifies the integration of basic education into the Qur'anic schools curriculum as part of the government's overall strategy to develop an alternative path for basic formal education.

These two policy documents demonstrate that the education authorities in the two northern zones of Somalia recognise the need to uphold the original mission of Qur'anic education while at the same time upgrading the system in order to increase the much-needed service provision of formal basic education⁵.

It is within these policy frameworks that the Integrated Qur'anic School Pilot Initiative (supported by the Strategic Partnership for Recovery and Development in Education) provided an opportunity to explore the contemporary Qur'anic school system in Somalia, to test and affirm the changes that had already begun to take place in the system, to investigate its potential to contribute to improving access to formal basic education, and to establish sustainable linkages with the wider formal system.

The initiative was both an immediate response to the needs of these struggling educational institutions and a platform to undertake evidence-based research by documenting the process. The outcomes will, in turn, be used to inform policy decisions by Ministries of Education on ways to integrate basic formal education into a range of alternative pathways towards universal primary education.

The study showed us that across Somalia, Qur'anic schools are currently undergoing a silent transformation on their own - without prompting from any formal education authority or institution. Integrated Qur'anic schools are teaching the Somali language, mathematics and Arabic in addition to religious instruction.

Integrated learning is widely supported by Qur'anic school decision-makers and other key stakeholders in the community and school administrators have no objection to an enhanced curriculum as long as it does not undermine the schools' religious mission.

As such, these schools present Somali Ministries of Education with an enormous opportunity to boost the enrolment rate and gender ratio for primary education in Somalia and provide evidence that they can make a tremendous contribution to the attainment of the goal of 'Education for All.'

By providing much-needed documentation on these institutions, the research is making it possible to provide donors and development agencies with more accurate information on the potential these schools hold are helping to facilitate the design of relevant and appropriate assistance packages.

Following the study, a pilot project has begun in eight Qur'anic schools in Somaliland and Puntland. The fifteen month project will support local communities to improve the quality of teaching and increase school capacity in order to expand enrolment. Following a baseline study to identify the educational priorities of each school, a support package has been designed to enhance the quality of teaching and learning and the school environment. This support will include teacher training and supervision, the provision of textbooks and school supplies, basic structural rehabilitation (including water and sanitation) along with assistance to establish Community Education Committees aimed at improving the management of these hybrid schools.

On this foundation, it is intended to build a strategic partnership between authorities in Somaliland and Puntland and interested development partners to expand universal basic education by integrating formal basic education into the Qur'anic education system. Here is an opportunity to ride on the self-driven momentum within the Qur'anic schools to become an integrated partner in the delivery of formal education. The chance to mainstream Qur'anic education within modern Somali society is a chance that should neither be missed nor mishandled.

This optimism does not blind us to the challenging and sensitive issue of religious radicalism and extremism. In the global context of the 'war on terror' there are very real concerns about supporting Islamic institutions like Qur'anic schools.

External partners and international donors are often wary of – if not downright opposed to - assisting or supporting Qur'anic schools. One donor country has made it clear that it will not fund Qur'anic educational programmes because of the fear of Islamic influence. One government minister from a donor country even warned, "Do not mention Qur'anic education: in doing so, Parliament in my country will immediately stop funding to Somalia! In view of this, at the very most, some donor governments are only prepared to support the water and sanitation component of projects for schools.

Challenges exist within Somalia too. The Transitional Federal Government has expressed concerns that it has no formal policy to integrate the formal education

curriculum into Qur'anic schools and over the past four years successive Ministers of Education have expressed opposing perspectives on this issue: one fearing the potential for religious extremism; another proposing a system as exists in Malaysia where Qur'anic schools are fully integrated into the formal education system.

As Somalia's indigenous Qur'anic system of education takes its own steps towards incorporating a formal education curriculum, development agencies need to see this as an opportunity to engage with religious leaders and authorities, communities and parents, and as a way to halt extremism. This may present the chance the world needs to impact positively on the quality of both the secular and moral education for the majority of Somalia children.

The success of this initiative will very much depend on our ability and willingness to understand faith and religion not just as causes of political discord and conflict, but as a means of harnessing the best of our traditions and values, without which there cannot be a sense of citizenship. For that, we may have to deconstruct our present global understanding of Islamic schools and take a new look at the religion in the context of faith and its aspirations for children - not just in the context of politics.

¹ Integrated Qur'anic Schools – Pilot Initiative supported by the Strategic Partnership for Recovery and Development in Education in Somalia – DFID, UNESCO and UNICEF

² See attached tables showing disaggregated primary school enrolment across Somalia by gender and by region.

³ Qur'anic education first came to Somalia during the 7th century AC. These traditional schools or “Dugsi” began to mushroom between the 10th and 13th century following the mass Islamization of the Somali Peninsula. Today these schools represent the first cycle of the traditional Qur'anic education system (Warsame, 2007).

⁴ The Somaliland government is committed to assessing, promoting and upgrading Qur'anic and religious study...The Somaliland government is also committed to supplementing and complementing efforts made by the formal school system and developing NFE programmes as alternatives to basic education provision. To achieve this, the Somaliland MoE will pursue a strategy to expand the scope of Qur'anic education to include literacy, numeracy and life skills training (SNPE, 2005:27-28).

⁵ The Puntland government recognizes the existence of Qur'anic schools that focus on teaching basic Islamic values and early literacy in Arabic to young children...The Puntland government, however, also recognizes the limitations of these establishments and is committed to improving teaching and learning in them as well as to widening their curriculum and quality....The government will ensure that Koranic schools are regularly supervised and supported (PEPP, 2004:8).