

Inequality

Push and Pull Factors of Piracy in Somalia

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In 2005, in Somalia, an act of piracy was reported off the horn of Africa. This was an activity that proceeded to severely threaten maritime security and the movement of nautical trade across the globe. An act of piracy can be defined as “the act of embarking on any vessel with the intention of committing theft or any other crime, and with the intention or ability to use force to facilitate that act”.



Royal Marines on Counter Piracy Operations Near Somalia (<http://www.defenceimages.mod.uk/>)

In common terms, piracy is an act of theft or criminal violence at sea. Piracy off the coast of Somalia is not merely an issue of criminality and security. The root cause of piracy in this region is the illegal international overfishing of Somali waters, which has threatened the livelihoods of local fishermen, starting in the 1990s. In response, local vigilantes began to chase away the foreign fishing vessels. Violent clashes at sea ensued, and piracy activities proliferated. Somali society remains torn by

poverty and crime amid counter-piracy operations which have failed to resolve the root causes of the problem.

The activity's economic driving force is a result of the civil war and dissolution of the Somali navy, attacks on local fishermen, and local men's desperation causing them to view piracy as their only option.

After the collapse of the central government in the ensuing civil war, the Somali Navy disbanded. With Somali territorial waters undefended, foreign fishing trawlers began illegally fishing on the Somali seaboard, and ships began disregarding industrial and other waste off the Somali coast. This is where the root cause of Somali piracy lies: the threat of illegal fishing destroying the livelihoods of subsistence and commercial fishermen along that coastline. The illegally acquired catch of the industrial fishers was packaged in the Middle East and sold overseas for large profits, none of which were seen by the Somalis. Furthermore, there was an overall decline in Indian Ocean fish stocks which meant increasing numbers of Somali fishermen started to sail further offshore, while foreign trawlers came deeper into the inshore waters. This set the scene for the violent clashes which ensnared the world's attention.

The few remaining local fishermen found themselves between a rock and a hard place. International navies' persistent failures to differentiate legitimate fishermen from

pirates left many victims of global counter-piracy operations.

Local fishermen also faced hyperinflation which was a consequence of the pirates' extravagant spending. Overall, as piracy provided a much more substantial revenue source than the dwindling fishing sector, local men began turning to the piracy.

Piracy was not only incentivised by economic pressures but also social and political ones. Since 1991, after the overthrow of the communist ruler, Somalia has been in a constant state of civil war, consisting of a number of autonomous political entities. Thus, the lack of a central government for twenty years has allowed for the development of piracy. Additionally, Somali refugees, displaced by the civil war, including over 260,000 registered in Kenya alone, have provided ample opportunity for recruitment.

But the origins of piracy are not solely a product of domestic instability. In multiple interviews, Somali pirates portray themselves as the nation's unofficial coast guard, fighting against illegal fishing and waste dumping by foreign corporations.

Furthermore, the absence of a central government and the eradication of internal authority opened up the opportunity for such behaviour to occur. Even so, local authorities have supported piracy along Somalia's broad coastline. Most notably, an Islamist militant group with links to Al-Qaeda, which continues to wage civil war with the internationally recognised Transitional Federal Government.

Ports and towns along the Gulf of Aden socially benefit from pirate activity, making it a significant part of Somalia's informal economy. For instance, in Harardheere, a small port town on Somalia's East coast, which has a twenty-four-hour stock exchange, members of the community contribute weapons, funding and soldiers,

and receive a portion of the ransom money in return.

Widespread drought and the 2004 tsunami showed that environmental driving variables can also be strong push factors. Somalia depends on its agricultural sector, with 55% of households subsisting on pastoralism or agro-pastoralism. It was estimated that some 60,000 pastoralists were facing a livelihood crisis following two seasonal rain failures in 2008, while 2.6 million people were facing famine. By July 2008, the number of pirate attacks increased by more than 50% in comparison to 2007 rates. Piracy was not only a means to earn an income but also to defend food stocks, which had dramatically dwindled following drought and food import price hikes.

In the 2004 tsunami, it was reported that 1,180 homes and 2,400 boats were destroyed. Freshwater wells were rendered, and reservoirs seen as unusable. Villages in Somalia reported that all the boats and other fishing equipment used by the residents to make a livelihood had been lost. It had wiped out the once-lucrative fishing business and deprived those, gainfully employed, of their livelihoods.

The overall push factor behind piracy is the ongoing struggle to survive in a deeply broken economy and within poverty-stricken communities. Fishermen were receiving meagre incomes, and as a result of the foreign fishing trawlers, they had to try and protect what little they had.