

Rise and Pitfalls of Somali Globalization: Trade at the Interstices and the Combat between Formal and Informal Regimes

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Somali globalization has been way ahead of times and has introduced, in its free and uncontrolled territory shaped by state collapse, the most updated electronic devices and technologies for communication, well before many other African and European countries, besides distributing cheap consumer goods in its regions (including neighbouring Ethiopia and Kenya) and autonomously developing sophisticated systems for transferring money.

War, the necessity to face economic insecurity as well as the opportunities offered by the interlacing of civil strife, state collapse and humanitarian assistance, and finally the flight of refugees overseas, have represented the peculiar mode in which this form of globalization unfolded.

Small and medium-scale traders have been protagonists of these changes. They typically set off their careers during the conflict by establishing and developing internationalized economic networks reaching commercial posts as far as Dubai, Bangkok and Southern Asia. In the 1990s, they seemed perfectly in tune with the global atmosphere stressing open markets and deregulation, and the Somali case appeared as paradoxical and at the same time forerunner of future trends. In the 2000s though, against the background of the general war on terror, their activity appeared as suspicious, potentially dangerous, to be controlled and even clamped down.

The new atmosphere pointed out all the drawbacks of the Somali mode of integration into the international system and highlighted a real combat between formal and informal systems of regulation involving such different fields of actions as the control of movement of people and goods across international frontiers, money transfers, formal standards presiding over the circulation of goods and so on. This combat reveals not the existence of a clear demarcation line between formal/informal systems, but rather the construction and use of formal regimes of regulation as a tool of power and a central site of struggle in the globalization process.

Providing specific case studies which draw on extensive fieldwork carried out in 2007-08 and taking into account the growing body of literature on cross-border informal trade, the paper will question the relevance of the small-scale traders' activity with respect to larger dynamics (is it a form of accumulation that can eventually lead to larger investments and development?) and will focus on their articulation with global forces in order to ethnographically assess how in any single place hierarchies and forms of embeddings in global economy are reconstructed, negotiated and contested.

