



Community Narratives  
Editorial Essay

*An iterative series that re-examines the stories, semantics, and systems that have come to define  
Somalia's development and humanitarian landscape*

## Somalia's Story: Authentic Articulations

*Exploring how the semantics of aid and the systems of care intersect in Somalia.*

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## The Somali Story

*“Man is ... essentially a story-telling animal. That means I can only answer the question ‘what am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question of ‘what story or stories do I find myself a part of?’”*

— Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*

If you were to search for the narratives that define Somalis on the world wide web, you’d likely find words like *war, drought, crisis, conflict, instability, and vulnerability*, all the negative connotations the English language can muster. Many of these narratives come from less academically gifted figures, and then there are those who are genuinely intrigued by Somali history, development, and culture.

But we live in a world where the shorter and more detached a narrative is, the more dominant or viral it becomes. The problem is that virality feeds emotion, not substance. These narratives are not about understanding; they are about performance. I’m reminded of the ever-eloquent Somali literary giant, Ali Jimale Ahmed’s words, “ambivalence, one might argue, is a state of mind and one is entitled to groping in the dark until one finds oneself. What is not permissible, however, is to project one’s pretended ambivalence as if it were a fact of life.”

Yet, even among those we look to for greater objectivity academics and the development community, Somalia is still framed largely through *strife*. To be fair, these accounts are often contextual and data-driven, but even here, the focus tends to be on crisis rather than continuity, on strife rather than striving.

Ironically, *strife* and *strive* share the same root: the Old French *estrif*, meaning “fight, battle, torment, dispute.” Over time, they diverged, one toward conflict, the other toward perseverance. Thus, looking at that word from one perspective or meaning would not be doing it justice. Much like deciding that the main story of Somalia is strife rather than striving. Magnifying strife while minimising the striving gives us an incomplete picture of Somali reality.

Somalia has always spoken for itself. Known as a land that values eloquence and articulate expression, Somalia has long been recognised for its lyrical traditions. Even the orientalist Richard Burton once observed that:

*“The country teems with poets, poetasters, poetitos, and poetaccios: every man has his recognised position in literature as accurately defined as though he had been reviewed in a century of magazines – the fine ear of this people causing them to take the greatest pleasure in harmonious sounds and poetical expressions.”*

Somalis have long articulated their narratives through multiple linguistic mediums – introspective in nature, communal in spirit, and political in purpose. These expressions are deeply rooted in their historical moments yet remain forward-looking, speaking to both the realities of their time and the possibilities that lie ahead. Somali culture is steeped in *topophilia*, an affection for land, environment, and ecosystem underwritten by a profound sense of pride.

At the heart of Somali literature lies the motif of striving, a persistent current that runs through the experiences of colonialism, independence, democracy, civil war and the evolving discourse of rebuilding. Yet as global narratives grew louder and less nuanced, that striving was reinterpreted as strife.

## Diagnosing and Defining

*Waxa ninkii safarka aha laga sheegay in uu yiri: in aan hubsado ba igu haboonayd.*  
*It was said the man who was traveling remarked: I should have confirmed first.*

— Somali Proverb

In the developmental context, which dominates much of the analysis on Somalia, the aim is often to identify and solve a problem, sometimes both at once. That makes sense: diagnosing a problem is the first step to addressing it, same rings true in Somali culture. But after diagnosing the problem, addressing it ultimately requires intervention from the parties concerned. Since the collapse of its central government, Somalia has become the concern not only of its own people but of the international community. A poster child for failed states, repeated external interventions — and their mixed record — have earned it the moniker of a “failed state.” But what does the evidence actually show? Outcomes are mixed at best: some interventions saved lives and rebuilt services, while others reinforced dependency or eroded local agency.

Perhaps, as the traveller in the proverb discovered, the journey matters less than the humility to *hubso* — to pause, to check, to understand before acting. In Somalia’s case, the journey of intervention has too often begun without that pause for understanding, without listening for the story already in motion.

The language of intervention changed in the 2000s. As external actors pursued renewed state-building in Somalia, Ken Menkhaus warned that orthodox, top-down institution-building would be ill-suited to a context of fragmented authority and hybrid governance.<sup>1</sup> Over the same period, critics of the “liberal peace” argued that rapid, blueprint-style institution building often neglects local political dynamics<sup>2</sup>, while ethnographers of aid have shown how participatory rhetoric routinely collapses into bureaucratic practice.<sup>3</sup> The result is familiar: many studies call for “bottom-up” approaches, yet operationalising them in ways that genuinely empower local agency and avoid reproducing top-down dynamics under new labels, has proved far easier in rhetoric than in practice.

Perhaps, as MacIntyre reminds us, we should return to the question of story. What stories do Somalis find themselves a part of? Are they scripted in the echoing halls of Geneva, or woven, retold, and reshaped in Somali gatherings? Are concerned parties seeking narratives that soothe their assumptions, or ready to engage with those stitched by Somalis?

The argument I make in this essay is that the global narrative of Somalia and of Somalis, is one of *strife* rather than the richer tradition of *striving*: a tradition rooted in a moral economy of care, kinship, and communal endurance that underwrites Somali life. That is not merely Somalia’s narrative – it is its story.

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<sup>1</sup> Menkhaus, K. *Governance without Government in Somalia: Spoilers, State Building, and the Politics of Coping*. *International Security* 31, no. 3 (2007): 74–106. <https://direct.mit.edu/isec/article-pdf/31/3/74/693025/isec.2007.31.3.74.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Paris, R. *At War’s End: Building Peace after Civil Conflict*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Mosse, D. *Cultivating Development: An Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice*. London: Pluto Press, 2005. <https://www.plutobooks.com/9780745322558/cultivating-development/>

## Stories to Systems

*“Language is a process of free creation; its laws and principles are fixed, but the manner in which the principles of generation are used is free and infinitely varied. Even the interpretation and use of words involves a process of free creation.”*

— Noam Chomsky, *Language and Mind*

If stories define us, then language is the architecture that allows those stories to take form. It maintains both boundary and possibility, a shared grammar that allows for infinite variation. A Somali proverb corroborates Chomsky’s theory: *“Hadal ninna si uu yidhi, ninna sii uu qaaday – Words uttered in one way by man, are interpreted varyingly by his fellow man”*. In Somalia, those who narrate most of the stories that define the country are humanitarians or humanitarian-adjacent actors. Naturally, those engaged in helping solve a problem are best positioned to narrate it, even if many of them are external actors. But what does it mean to help, assist, or be a humanitarian. What does the word mean? Or, without disagreeing with Chomsky and my Somali ancestors, what did its inventors intend for it to mean?

Its origins are theological, but by 1834 it had evolved to mean “one who professes the creed that a person’s highest duty is to advance the welfare of the human race.”<sup>4</sup> Over the next century, humanitarianism expanded from ethos to action, from moral intention to institutional practice. But where does humanitarianism now find itself in a rapidly changing world?

Classical humanitarian ethos rests on principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence – a needs-based, apolitical ethic of giving relief solely according to urgency.<sup>5</sup> Some critics posit that the infusion of liberal developmentalist logic has increasingly challenged these principles. They argue that humanitarian neutrality and singular focus on immediate needs are being reshaped – even undermined – by market-oriented and governance-driven approaches.<sup>6</sup> Humanitarianism today is often expected to align with broader liberal “peace-building” agendas and state-building projects, rather than stand apart from politics.<sup>7</sup>

Supporters of this evolution contend that the shift was both inevitable and necessary. They argue that crises are prolonged, and saving lives without addressing root causes traps communities in recurring cycles of need. Integrating resilience, self-reliance, and peacebuilding, they believe, helps bridge the humanitarian–development divide and ensures aid strengthens systems rather than perpetuates dependency.

The architectural language of classical humanitarianism once meant to express assisting humans in need, has coagulated into goal-oriented systems that rely on categorisation, measurement, and control to reach those objectives. And once a project ends, another begins, often accompanied by images of those in need, deployed anew for fundraising efforts. Humanitarianism has evolved beyond providing care to people in need, and development has become more than just teaching a man how to fish.

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<sup>4</sup> Harper, D. “Humanitarian.” *Online Etymology Dictionary*. 2001–2025. <https://www.etymonline.com/word/humanitarian>

<sup>5</sup> Hilhorst, D. Classical humanitarianism and resilience humanitarianism: making sense of two brands of humanitarian action. *Int J Humanitarian Action* 3, 15 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41018-018-0043-6>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> See Jens Pedersen, “Humanitarian Action and Peacebuilding: Incompatible or Complementary?” in *The Companion to Peace and Conflict Fieldwork* (Springer, 2020); Charles T. Call, “Building States to Build Peace? A Critical Analysis,” *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 2, no. 4 (2008): 367–386; “Liberal Peacebuilding and Its Critiques,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies* (2023); and “Is Humanitarian Action Independent from Political Interests?” *Sur – International Journal on Human Rights* (Conectas, 2018).

The terminology of aid has become a language of its own, sometimes fluent to its practitioners, but also very foreign to many of the people it claims to describe. When words become systems, meaning becomes method and nowhere is this more visible than in the humanitarian vocabulary of salvation.

## The Semantics of Salvation

*“Hadal, ninkii dhahaay miyaa dhamaay, mase ninkii dhabjiyay?”*

*Are words uttered by man better than the man who has realised its outcomes?*

— Somali Proverb

Does the vocabulary of salvation, in this case humanitarianism, speak the language of those it seeks to save? Terms like *resilience*, *localisation*, *inclusion*, *peacebuilding*, and *empowerment* now travel easily across reports and conferences, often detached from the lives they were meant to represent. Their repetition gives an illusion of clarity, but each carries assumptions about what progress looks like, what agency means, and who gets to define it. The problem is not that these words are wrong, but that they have become unexamined systems, largely self-referential and resistant to translation. I would go as far as saying these are less like systems and more like *articulations* — to borrow Stuart Hall’s term — connections between things never meant to fit seamlessly. They are shifting alignments between global languages and local lives. In Somalia, these articulations are constantly made and unmade as imported vocabularies of “progress” meet, coincide with, and sometimes co-opt existing grammars of survival and development.

In Somalia, the terminology of aid often lands lightly on the tongue but heavily in meaning. When a donor rolls out a programme on *resilience* and tries to define it for the local populace, the Somali listener will likely hear the word *adkaysi* — loosely translating to endurance, patience, the will to withstand. Resilience is more of a concept than a word; it is more nuanced than its Somali translation allows, and endurance is merely an aspect of resilience. But imagine how it sounds when translated, almost self-aggrandising. As if a people who have fought off colonialists, survived a civil war after the collapse of strong institutions overnight, while weathering prolonged drought, insecurity, and displacement, must now be *delivered* resilience, or that an external actor could *provide* it through a short-term project.<sup>8</sup>

Worse still, when resilience programming became the donor darling, even agencies themselves struggled to agree on what it meant. As *The New Humanitarian article*<sup>9</sup> reported over a decade ago, among international development agencies there was a glaring disconnect as to what the concept of resilience meant, with UNDP stating that it was perplexed by organisations embarking on “rolling out resilience.” Since then, resilience programming has improved in Somalia, but a gap remains between its design and its local interpretations. One quote that stood out was from a farmer who, when asked what critiques he had of resilience programming, said:

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<sup>8</sup> Numerous aid organizations and donors – including the World Bank, UNDP, FCDO, and WFP – have used the language of “*delivering*” or “*providing*” resilience to communities, framing it as a capacity that can be transferred or built through intervention. Scholars and practitioners, however, critique this framing for commodifying resilience and overlooking the historical and political foundations of local coping systems (Cannon & Müller-Mahn, 2010; Tierney, 2015; IFRC *World Disasters Report*, 2016)

<sup>9</sup> Kindra, J. Understanding resilience. *The New Humanitarian* (2013, March 4).

<https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2013/03/04/understanding-resilience>

*“We have been enduring (adkaysi) for over 30 years. We don’t need more people telling us how to endure or recycling our coping mechanisms we need actual opportunities. We want markets to sell our products internationally or improved infrastructure to sell our produce domestically. Or this is just another project.”*  
Somali farmer – Beledweyn.

That word, *project*, is revealing. In Somalia, *mashruuc* (project) is the catch-all term for all humanitarian and development work. It’s not just how a layperson would describe it, although one could argue that the layperson should also be able to differentiate between emergency response and development projects — and if unable, that is the fault of donors and implementers. But that’s how it is largely interpreted by the intervened-upon, the people these projects are meant to assist. To those on the receiving end, *project* doesn’t distinguish between relief and development, emergency or reform; it’s simply another cycle of external intervention.

The way these words circulate tells us something deeper: language and system are intertwined. If the terminology of aid has become detached from local meaning, it is no surprise that many of the systems built around it often feel the same, distant, temporary, imposed. Before aid built its systems, Somalia already had its own.

## **Colliding Compasses**

*Raahow, biyo maxay taraan? Dabadayda ba laga arkii lahaa.*  
*Oh frog, what benefits does water provide? My backside would’ve shown it.*  
— Somali Proverb

This Somali *Labo Jile*, a two-actor micro-fiction, captures the paradox at the heart of this section. It highlights the disconnect between the frog, whose very existence depends on water, and his dismissive response that his backside would have revealed its true value. It is a Somali way of saying someone has grown blind to what sustains them.

I am reminded of this whenever I recall watching public reactions on a Somali news channel following the USAID funding cuts. They aired street interviews with citizens asking what impact the cuts would have. Many replied that we would be better off without them, with some stating that they were in Somalia not to help but to profit. Meanwhile, aid agencies reacted with panic, warning that a country already in crisis could hardly survive without external support. I found myself asking, in this story, who is the frog?

The international community has, without question, played a role in Somalia’s recovery. Billions in aid have flowed through humanitarian operations, peacekeeping missions, and state-building projects that have helped save lives, reopened schools and sustain fragile institutions. So why do many Somalis still read these efforts as self-serving? Is it because of imported architectures, reinforced dependency, or the optics of overhead and fortified compounds?

As someone who works in the sector, I often hear these views in informal settings, conversations uncontaminated by the language of projects and beneficiaries. When I ask what fuels the scepticism, the answer is almost always the same: people think those in the humanitarian world are in it for themselves.

As compounding crises have reshaped Somali environs, they have also reshaped its marketplace. Once reliant on goods from rural areas, trade and industry, a new marketplace has emerged, one dubbed by Alex de Waal as the *political marketplace*.<sup>10</sup> The political marketplace is a system in which political loyalty is bought and sold, and where external funds, including aid, become the currency of power.

Jaspars et al. extend this logic into the humanitarian sphere, arguing that it can entrench permanent precarity, especially among internally displaced people: the “maintenance of a large group of displaced people in permanent precarity as a source of aid and labour.”<sup>11</sup> One could argue, in Somalia, this dynamic has moved beyond displacement camps to shape a wider economy of permanent precarity. State-building has not dismantled the marketplace; it has decentralised it, multiplying actors while preserving the oligopoly of influence.<sup>12</sup>

Much has been written about how humanitarian aid can sustain a rent-seeking class, and I don’t wish to overstate the case. Not all aid contributes to this dynamic; much of it genuinely relieves suffering. Aid agencies themselves warn against dependency, and many Somalis would agree. Yet the tension between intervener and intervened-upon persists, and it raises a deeper question: how much of this assistance truly reaches those in need, especially in times of crisis?

A 2019 study by the Overseas Development Institute found that international humanitarian aid makes up less than two percent of the total resources available to people in crisis.<sup>13</sup> Most assistance, it turns out, comes from within. In Somalia that often means *Qaraan* — support from families, neighbours, communities, and diaspora quietly doing what they have always done: keeping each other afloat.

Even ODI admits how hard it is to trace those informal flows<sup>14</sup>, leaving policymakers with only a partial picture of how people actually endure, adapt, and rebuild in the aftermath of crisis. One estimate by World Bank has Somalis in the diaspora sending back close to two billion dollars, almost 20% of the country’s GDP in 2022.<sup>15</sup> Juxtapose that with the Federal Government’s 2022 budget: of the projected \$929.9 million, roughly 73 percent was expected from donors through project and budget support, despite the year’s official theme being, “*Reliance on our domestic revenue*.”<sup>16</sup> Has the scale of external help been overstated? Or are they actually propping up Somalia?

It seems that there are two compasses: one pointing outward to external funding and donor frameworks — the water Somalia is told it needs to survive — the other inward to the overlooked economies of kinship and community that have sustained it all along. In effect these are two competing economies. The first is the Somali model, what anthropologists such as James C. Scott and Marcel Mauss would describe as a *moral economy* which is structured to spread or redistribute risk across kinship and community networks.<sup>17</sup> So, if

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<sup>10</sup> As Alex de Waal argues in *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa* (2015), politics in the region often functions as a ‘political marketplace’ where power is brokered through monetary and patronage exchanges rather than formal institutions.”

<sup>11</sup> Jaspars S, Majid N, Adan GM. Somalia’s evolving political market place: from famine and humanitarian crisis to permanent precarity. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*. 2023;61(3):343-366. doi:10.1017/S0022278X23000071

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Willitts-King et al., 2019 (ODI – *Valuing local resources in humanitarian crises*)

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Shariff, A. B., & Davis, A. *Empowering Somalia’s economy beyond remittances for long-term stability*. World Bank Blogs, 11 Feb 2025.

<https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/nasakiliza/empowering-somalias-economy-beyond-remittances-for-long-term-stability-afe-0225>

<sup>16</sup> Somali Public Agenda. *Reviewing the Federal Government of Somalia’s 2022 Near-Billion-Dollar Budget: Development Priorities and Donor Dependence (Governance Brief 18-2022)*. Somali Public Agenda, July 2022. [https://somalipublicagenda.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/SPA\\_Governance\\_Briefs\\_18\\_2022\\_ENGLISH1.pdf](https://somalipublicagenda.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/SPA_Governance_Briefs_18_2022_ENGLISH1.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Scott, James C. *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (Yale University Press, 1976). Mauss, Marcel. *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (Routledge, 1954).

crisis hits one household, the burden is shared by the lineage, sub-clan, neighbourhood, friends and even acquaintances. In contrast, the liberal market economy, grounded in the logic of *liberal developmentalism*, assumes that if donors channel funds through the state, services will follow, that money will flow downward in predictable, measurable ways. This assumption rests on a market-driven faith in systems: allocate resources, build capacity, and efficiency will yield outcomes.

S. M. Reid-Henry describes humanitarianism as a liberal diagnostic, a political rationality that transforms care into management. In its globalised form, this logic increasingly mirrors the market's own will-to-care: suffering becomes a problem to be efficiently administered, not a responsibility to be collectively borne. In Somalia, such liberal reason meets a moral economy founded on obligation and reciprocity, two compasses calibrated to different moral poles. The friction between them remakes the terrain they both try to navigate.

Over time, the language of partnership has become the language of replacement. Frameworks meant to strengthen local institutions often absorb, rebrand, or quietly erode them instead. An elderly man in Garowe told me a story that captures this shift. After the civil war, as people rebuilt their lives and tensions flared, committees known as *guddiyo* in Somali, would form — some were formal, many not. When an early international organisation arrived, spurred by a genuine will-to-care, it decided to pay per diems to encourage attendance. “After that,” he recalled, “we couldn't get anyone to come together. People began to think meetings were projects and if they weren't paid, someone must have stolen the money.” When the NGO could no longer sustain payments, participation collapsed.

That practice is less common now, but incentivisation remains a hallmark of aid work, creeping into places it arguably should not: vocational-education schemes, community-policing events, even elements of social protection. If a programme must pay people simply to participate, perhaps the present benefit outweighs the future one, or the perception is the future one will never arrive. Incentivisation is not inherently wrong; it can be necessary and fair. But the *guddi* did not need incentives, and a banner with an NGO's name sends the wrong message about who owns the process. Traditional systems are not project activities; they are mechanisms for fixing local problems.

The same logic that turned community meetings into project activities has also shaped how local financial traditions are perceived. Practices that long predated aid have been repackaged through development frameworks and reintroduced as innovations, often stripped of the moral fabric that sustained them. *Hagbad* or *ayuuuto*, predominantly women-led, are rotating savings circles through which Somalis, rural and urban, pool money. Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) first formalised by CARE International in the early 1990s,<sup>18</sup> drew their inspiration from long-standing rotating savings and credit associations found across Africa, saving systems like *hagbad* in Somalia, *mukando* in Zimbabwe, and *tontines* in West Africa that had long sustained communities through trust and mutual obligation.

In many ways VSLAs are a good thing. They multiply traditional systems by providing capital and liquidity, especially during crises. Their fault lies in the rebranding, presented as novel, detached from the inspiration they so clearly emulate. Some development actors would claim that, without VSLAs, people would not have been able to save at all. That is not quite true. Somalis have always had systems of saving and sharing; what they lacked was not discipline or structure, but disposable income. Perhaps it is not that VSLAs taught

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<sup>18</sup> CARE International. *Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs)*. CARE International, 2020. <https://www.care-international.org>. CARE first developed the Village Savings and Loan Association model in Niger in 1991.

people to save, but that they introduced the capital that finally allowed them to do so. This speaks to a broader tension when external systems amplify local logic but claim its authorship.

Somalia's rebuilding story is not one of imposed interventions or resistance to aid, but one that despite its best efforts sometimes has misaligned languages and systems. It is the story of two compasses pointing in different directions toward salvation on the same terrain. Moving forward requires more than institutional reform; it demands a new moral grammar, one that can speak both the local language of care and the language of capacity. To reclaim the narrative itself, to move from managed suffering to narrated striving.

## A Story of Striving

*“Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person.”*

— Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

In Adichie's seminal TED Talk her warning is simple and devastating: “Show a people as one thing, as only one thing, and that is what they become.”<sup>19</sup> Stories are not only 300-page novels or anthropological studies, nor are they limited to news clips and wire copy. But stories are, as Tahir Shah said the “communal currency of humanity”. And if, as MacIntyre reminds us, we are “story-telling animals,” then the narratives we weave, and who gets to weave them carry immense power.

The internet has transformed this dynamic and democratized it beyond the articulate few. Short-form feeds and fragments now stand in for beginnings, middles, and ends. But like the late great Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o reminded us “stories, like food, lose their flavour if cooked in a hurry.” People have always bent or omitted context, yet the speed and scale of our attention economy make distortion feel like the default rhythm. These fragments become the air we breathe, shaping not only how we see the world but also how we understand one another.

In today's geopolitical discourse, one hears less about stories and far more about narratives. Phrases such as “narrative control,” “narrative dominance,” and the fight to “own the narrative” are everywhere. Governments and corporations alike pour resources into microwaving narratives, quickly packaged to shape perception. There is little investment in the slow, unbranded story, but enormous emphasis on narratives: curated bites of meaning that seek to define what is thinkable and true.

As I wrote this editorial essay, I found myself asking: what is a narrative, and what is a story? True to my obsession with etymology, I looked at what Somalis would call the *xidid*, its root. *Story* traces to Old French *estoire* and Latin *historia*, meaning “learning through inquiry” or “an account of events.” *Narrative*, on the other hand, comes from the Latin *narratio*, “a relating, a recounting,” drawn from the verb *narrare* (“to tell, relate, explain”) and ultimately tied to the root *gnarus* (“knowing”).

The difference lies in scope and perspective. A single story can be told through many narratives, the same sequence of events refracted through different points of view, each shifting what a listener or reader takes

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<sup>19</sup> Adichie, C. N. *The danger of a single story*. YouTube, 2009. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9Ihs241zeg>

to be true. Narrative is the lens through which the story and its content are understood, shaped, and believed.

Perhaps Somalia does not live in a single story of its own making, but in narratives that masquerade as that story, versions authored elsewhere or within the country, each claiming objectivity. Maybe what we call “stories” beyond our own lived experience are really narratives, attempts at knowing that rely more on recounting than on truth. It is stark reminder that narratives, for all their power, can also obscure what they seek to reveal.

With *Community Narratives*, we aim to explore Somalia’s rebuilding and development story, not by retelling it, but by examining the many narratives through which it is lived and understood. Each instalment will revisit the language that has come to define Somalia’s discourse: resilience, peacebuilding, localisation, livelihoods, anticipatory action, social protection, emergency response, recovery, climate crisis, gender mainstreaming, and state-building, through the voices of those most often described by these terms (the so-called “beneficiaries”) alongside their counterparts within institutions. We will draw on interviews, field notes, proverbs, and micro-cases to assemble what Chinua Achebe called “a balance of stories.” The Somali story has long been told through the language of strife, yet beneath it runs a deeper narrative of striving: of rebuilding amid uncertainty, of generosity amid loss.

As Stuart Hall reminded us, “we all write and rewrite ourselves through the narratives we tell and the narratives that are told about us.” In doing so, we add one more voice to the narration of a nation, alongside our fellow Somali writers, poets, thinkers and practitioners who have long done so. And recalling Edward Said’s reminder that “nations themselves are narrations,” we invite Somalis, and those genuinely curious about the country to read, question, and contribute to the series ahead.