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## Introduction

During the last decade piracy outside the Somali coast has become an increasing problem – not only for international shipping companies but also for many affected local communities in Somalia. This study<sup>1</sup> will address how and why individuals in Somalia get involved in piracy activities, and how and why some of these individuals eventually disengage from these criminal groups and activities. Based on qualitative interviews with 16 ex-pirates and pirate associates and a number of other locals and experts, the study provides first-hand insights into some of the conditions, circumstances and processes which may serve to discourage involvement and continued engagement in piracy. It will also analyze factors and circumstances which may encourage and facilitate disengagement from these criminal activities and reintegration into non-criminal economic activities and social relationships. A question of interest is whether the decisions to join and leave a piracy group are made by the individuals alone or are influenced by others, such as family members and peers. The roles of moral authorities like religious leaders and parents are also a core issue. The chaotic political and economic situation in Somalia provides the context for the choices individuals make in relation to piracy. However, the focus of this study is on micro and meso (individual and group) level processes rather than on macro level factors, which have been covered well by other researchers (e.g. Hansen 2009; Bøås 2009).

The article also looks at the Norwegian Church Aid's "Alternative Livelihood to Piracy" (ALP) project. This is not an evaluation of the ALP project as such<sup>2</sup>. This study will rather analyse to what extent the project is facilitating the disengagement of individuals from piracy groups and their eventual reintegration into productive non-criminal livelihood in the Somali context.

The study is based on an analytic model developed in studies of engagement and disengagement processes in other types of extremist and criminal groups elsewhere (Bjørgero 1997; Bjørgero & Horgan 2009). These processes, which may be described in terms of push and pull factors, are quite generic even if the social, economic, political and ideological context and content may differ.

## **The Context**

Somalia has undergone a protracted civil war, mass famine, and large emigration since the fall of President Siad Barre's regime in 1991. Since then Somalia has been referred to as a failed state. In spite of the weak state structures, Somali society has a strong clan system. Both Islam and the traditional clan system underlie the informal institutions that manage social and economic activities (Lewis 2008). After the overthrow of Siad Barre, the country was divided into different political and administrative units. In 1991, Somaliland declared itself an independent state with a parliamentary-style government and a functioning administration. In 1998, Puntland also established separate political institutions, without seeking complete independence from larger Somalia. The regional state of Puntland is still politically unstable, with a highly centralized power structure which creates safe havens for criminal groups such as pirates in the more decentralized areas at the cost of Puntland. Piracy<sup>3</sup> has been a growing problem in the Somali waters the last ten years and in 2008 the numbers of piracy attacks off the coast of Somalia almost doubled from the previous year (Middleton 2008:3). Reported piracy attacks and attempted attacks by Somali pirates in 2011 were the highest ever registered and almost half of the total attacks reported worldwide were done by Somali pirates<sup>4</sup> (International Maritime Bureau 2011b). Despite this, the number of successful hijackings by Somali pirates in the first six months of 2011 as a proportion of the attacks has declined compared to the same period in

2010 (International Maritime Bureau 2011a:25). However, the reporting of cases shows that the Somali pirates are getting more violent. In addition, they are increasingly expanding their area of operation beyond the Gulf of Aden and today cover a vast area. Several attacks have taken place more than 1000 nautical mile from the Somali coast (International Maritime Bureau 2011a:23). However, the whole of the Somali coast is far from pirate infested (Hansen 2009:5) as Puntland appears to be the base for most pirates in Somalia (Middleton 2008:4). Interestingly, piracy virtually vanished around Somalia for six months when the Islamic Courts Union was in power in 2006 (Middleton 2008, Hansen 2009). Hence, the problem of piracy may be understood both as an outgrowth of the war economy and an outcome of a weak or non-existent state power and an inadequate police and coast guard.

### **The Alternative Livelihood to Piracy project**

Various measures have been taken the last few years by the international community in order to counter piracy. Many of these are costly sea based military strategies with low degree of cooperation with local civil or governmental institutions. There are only a few examples of more soft approaches to prevent piracy with strong local involvement. One of these is the “Alternative Livelihood to Piracy” (ALP) project. The ALP is a three years pilot project started by the Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) in Puntland in 2009. It builds on a grassroots initiative by local religious leaders who organized campaigns in the most piracy affected local communities, preaching that piracy is “Haram” which means that something is forbidden by Islam. The ALP project consists of a preventive and a response component. The religious leaders continue to play a central role with their campaigns to dissuade youths from getting involved with piracy activities and raise awareness on the negative effects of piracy. At the responsive side the project provide alternative means of livelihood to former pirates in forms of vocational skills training or

business skills training accompanied with a start-up grant. The project is undertaken in close partnership with the State Government of Puntland, in particular the Ministry of Justice, Religious Affairs and Rehabilitation (MoJRAR). The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Norwegian Shipowners' Association and the Norwegian Shipping Insurance Company are the main donors.

## **Theoretical and analytical perspectives**

A number of studies and research traditions have addressed various aspects of how individuals join and leave different types of reclusive, militant, extremist or criminal groups or scenes.<sup>5</sup> However, the traditional focus of this analytical interest has been on the processes of recruitment into the groups, rather than on disengagement and reintegration into mainstream society. The last 10-15 years have seen an increased level of interest in the processes of disengagement or desistance from crime and extremism. Many of the factors and processes involved in leaving religious 'cults', terrorist organisations, racist groups, organized crime groups and criminal youth gangs appear strikingly similar, despite the great differences in ideological content, background and aspirations. The social movement literature (e.g. della Porta 1995) is one of the bodies of research that has addressed these issues, studying a wide variety of movements. A related approach is to analyse these processes as identity changes (Ebaugh 1988). Studies of the sociology of religion of joining and leaving new religious movements ('sects') have also made significant contributions to theoretical development on these processes, including the understanding of push and pull factors and the role of disillusionment in the process of disengagement (e.g., Wright 1987). Criminological studies on desistance from crime (Maruna 2001; Laub and Sampson 2001), particularly disengagement from criminal gangs (Decker and Lauritsen 2002; Pyrooz and Decker 2011), have also been applicable for the study of other fields.

Studies on disengagement from racist and right-wing extremist groups (Bjørgero 1997) are relevant to a wide variety of other extremist or terrorist movements and groups (Horgan and Bjørgero 2009).

A common theme in all these research traditions is the importance of social ties, both in the process of joining the group or movement as well as in the process of disengagement. Individuals typically join a group or movement because their friends or family members are involved (Sageman 2004:178) although they sometimes join despite family opposition. After disengagement, family may play an important role in the individuals' reintegration (Boucek 2009:219). When individuals join and leave various types of militant groups, relations with the mainstream community vary. In some cases, joining a stigmatised community means cutting most ties to mainstream society. Being accepted back into the society is then difficult due to the stigma and social rejection (Bjørgero 2009:33-36; 41-42; Maruna 2001). For other types of militant groups (such as Hamas, IRA), becoming a fighter is widely acclaimed as an act of heroism to defend the community.

These processes are frequently described as criminal/extremist careers, typically with a beginning, a peak and an end. The various research traditions share the view that individual decisions to join or leave are usually the product of a mixture of factors and motivations working in tandem. Various forms of disillusionment are often a main triggering factor. This typically relates to unfulfilled expectations or fantasies about political or economic gains, friendship, social status, exciting experiences, etc. Different types of persons may have different drivers for joining and may also be disillusioned for different reasons (Bjørgero 2011). Some are mainly motivated by hopes for tangible political or economic gains, others by social benefits.

There is increasing evidence that the processes involved in joining and leaving criminal or militant groups are quite generic (see Bjørge and Horgan 2009, Ebaugh 1988, Pyrooz and Decker 2011, Wright 1987, Laub & Sampson 2001). Findings on the exit-processes in studies of very different types of groups are to a large extent converging. We will argue that these patterns are relevant to piracy groups in Somalia as well.

Based on their work on terrorism and violent extremism, Bjørge and Horgan (2009, ch. 1-3) developed a set of theoretical models and concepts on exit processes and disengagement from armed groups. 'Disengagement' refers to changes in behavior and participation in social groups and activities. 'Deradicalisation' refers to changes in values and attitudes. These two processes are loosely tied, and one may happen without the other, or in different sequence. Theories on engagement and disengagement processes are built around push and pull factors. Thus, push and pull factors are at work at both at entry and exit phases of criminal or extremist careers. Push factors are negative forces and circumstances that make the present social affiliations unattractive and unpleasant. Conversely, pull factors offer attractive and rewarding alternatives into crime or towards a life out of crime. Barriers are factors which may block a process of such change, e.g. negative sanctions or removing opportunities. These push and pull factors and barriers may also be reinforced or reduced by various external interventions. When both push and pull factors are strong and barriers are weak, a change into or out of crime is likely to happen. When either push or pull factors are weak, or barriers are strong, a change is less likely (Bjørge 2009:36). Bjørge and Horgan's conceptualization of engagement and disengagement processes is used in this study to map and highlight the informants' processes of engaging with, and disengaging from, piracy groups in Somalia.

## **Methodology and data material**

The primary empirical material for this study was gathered in Kenya and Somalia in May and June 2011. It is based mainly on in depth and semi structured key informant interviews with 16 individuals<sup>6</sup> who were former pirates, active service providers to pirates, or youth at risk of joining piracy. Eleven of these had been active pirates, meaning they were integrated members of a pirate group, either in land or sea based roles. Three of the five remaining informants were in the process of joining a piracy group, but changed their minds or in other ways disrupted their recruitment process. Another two female informants had roles as service providers, selling khat and tea to pirates on shore. Their husbands also were pirates. Six ex-pirates had moved to and were interviewed in Nairobi and were so called self-integrated, meaning that they did not go through any formal reintegration process or programme. 10<sup>7</sup> graduates from the Alternative Livelihoods to Piracy project (ALP) were interviewed in Bossaso and Garowe, in Puntland. In addition representatives from several ministries in Somaliland and Puntland as well as UN organizations, INGOs and local NGOs were interviewed.<sup>8</sup> The six ex-pirates interviewed in Kenya were recruited by a local assistant with solid knowledge of the Somali environment in Nairobi. The ten graduates from the ALP project were selected by the Norwegian Church Aid. Most of the interviews with representatives from institutions and organizations were conducted in English. The interviews with the ex-pirates were done with translators translating between Somali and English. These interviews were later transcribed and translated into English by one of the translators.

Due to time and budget constraints in addition to the challenging security situation in Somalia the study has some limitations. First of all it is important to note that that the sample is too small to make any general conclusions on piracy and pirates in Somalia based on the material gathered.



However, Gjelsvik recently led an evaluation of the ALP project including a fieldtrip to Puntland and Nairobi in July 2012. During the fieldtrip a total of 66 people were interviewed including among others community/religious leaders, partner organizations, NCA staff, representatives from the civil society etc. 14 former and current participants in the ALP project participated in Focus Group Discussions. Due to the different methodology and scope of the evaluation, these interviews could not be directly integrated into this article. However, the findings from the data gathered for the evaluation point in the same direction and strengthen many of the findings in this study.<sup>9</sup>

The fact that data has not been collected from active pirates or people still involved in piracy is another limitation of this study. All the pirate informants had disengaged from piracy by the time they were interviewed. However, this study is focusing on *their* particular experiences – how disengagement from piracy happens. The informants can also be classified mainly as foot soldiers; hence, the data is limited to lower-rank participants. Neither does the data material include interviews with “successful” ex-pirates who may have retired from piracy with a significant amount of wealth. However, the study still provides a basis to understand the processes of how and why young Somalis engage with, and disengage from, piracy groups.

## **Entry processes**

### **Motives for entering piracy**

People get involved with armed, extremist or criminal groups for various reasons, including life circumstances, family background, and social ties (Bjørge 2011, ch. 6; Nesser 2010). Although prospects of easy money are often a main lure for joining criminal groups, social ties (relatives or

friends already involved with the group) are typically the means. None of our informants from piracy groups was forcefully recruited, although peer pressure, poverty and lack of alternative livelihoods may pull and push youngsters into armed movements.

Fifteen of the 16 individuals involved with piracy did so for economic reasons and/or lack of other life opportunities. Piracy was seen as a possible livelihood. Fourteen of these also mentioned that the influence of friends, acquaintances or family members led them to engage with pirate groups. Hence, the present data give credence to the theory that most young foot soldiers do not join because of strong identification with the group's ideology and beliefs (although some did actually refer to such reasons). Rather, they are pulled in by friends and family members for economic and social returns. As Bjørgo and Horgan observed: "*Individuals do not necessarily join extremist groups because they hold extremist views; they sometimes acquire extremist views because they have joined such a group for other reasons*" (Bjørgo and Horgan 2009:3).

### **Economic gain and lack of livelihood**

Poverty and lack of other appropriate livelihood opportunities are main factors pushing individuals into piracy in the Somali regions.

It is claimed that people engage in piracy because they benefit more from it than from other alternative activities; either because there are no other alternatives (for example due to a lack of work opportunities), or because the benefits that can be achieved by piracy is so great that it draws recruits away from other relative good jobs. In other words, you are drawn into piracy because of opportunities for increased income. (Hansen 2009:7)

With few exceptions, the young interviewees appeared to come from economically deprived families. They either dropped out of school or never attended. Due to the high level of unemployment and few opportunities of livelihood, piracy, for many, was a tempting alternative to get income. A young ex-pirate explained: *“The market closed in our faces and we didn’t get any jobs. So it was a new door for us to get an income”* (#14). Even though they knew piracy was *haram* (forbidden by Islamic law) and unacceptable by local communities and religion, people still decided to join. One young man who joined a piracy group at the age of 17, said the following: *“For the lack of job. Here in the country there is nothing to do”* (#3).

Seeing friends who became rich from piracy can also push other youth to explore similar opportunities involving easy access to money. A former member of a group of fishermen stated that they shifted from fishing to piracy: *“After seeing some of the youth [pirates] that we knew riding expensive cars and throwing money here and there”* (#14). Another informant added: *“When life became more expensive, and we saw the others at our age scatter money here and there and they could get whatever they want, then we decided to be like them and become rich”* (#16).

While a large majority of the informants joined piracy for the opportunity to meet basic welfare needs, others may see piracy as the surest access to quick and supplementary income. An informant got in contact with the pirates through his work at a local restaurant. *“They told me a lot about the hijacking, the money they received and then I joined them. I left the job as a waiter, and started cooking for them and giving them food”* (6#). Thus, having a job and regular income is not a guarantee against the appeals of piracy groups.

## Social networks and ties

Traditionally, Somalis have a strong clan and family system which shapes their actions and resource rights (Bøås 2009:91). Economic activities are usually family-run and some activities are monopolized by certain families.<sup>10</sup> Social networks and relationships therefore play an influential role in youth's livelihoods and life chances. This is also the case for piracy groups as they often consists of a leader, family members and a network of friends. *"In general, groups seem to be recruited from individuals with previous family or village ties"* (Hansen 2009:34). Peers and schoolmates of members of pirate groups are also ripe for recruitment: *"I left school in eighth grade and joined some of my friends from school who became pirates to get rich"* (#11). Local restaurants and coffee shops, where young men drink tea/coffee, chew khat, and converse, are fertile grounds for recruitment: *"The people know each other because we study in the same schools and live in the same areas. So I had an idea about them, and we met them in places like the coffee shops where everyone goes"* (#12).

An interviewee got recruited through his uncle.

I finished school and started working with my uncle. He was a fisherman, so I was helping him with fishing and whatever he needed. In the beginning, he was working alone, but then they became a group. My uncle was driving the boat, and they were about 10 people in the group. One day they had problem with a ship cutting off their nets. From then on, the group started organizing themselves [to become pirates]. (#5)

Despite his uncle being the group leader, it took some years for the young man to join, due to his mother's strong objections. *"Well you can die. There is a risk. She had heard stories. Of people in Mombasa. It is a difficult job. I could lose myself even"* (#5). However, the uncle and friends

eventually convinced him to join their group: *“I heard stories about them, about what they received, money. I heard many stories. Most of my friends were in the groups. I saw my friends receiving money”* (#5).

This is a good example of how family members both encourage and discourage youth to join violent armed groups. In this particular case, the uncle’s influence and the prospect of sudden richness were pulling factors into the armed group, while the mother served as a barrier to group membership. Thus, an individual may make the decision to join a group, but peers and friends are often highly influential.

In Sageman’s research on jihadist movements, he argues that recruitment is not necessarily a top-down process by group leaders. It is rather the *“formation of a network of friendship that solidified and preceded formal induction into terrorist organization”* (Sageman 2004:107-108). While studying a group of men who joined al-Qaeda, Sageman found; *“Instead of a top-down process of the terrorist organization trying to recruit new members, it was a bottom-up process of young people volunteering to join the organization”* (Sageman 2004:110). Similarly, it seems like many of the Somali piracy groups use ties of friendship and kinship to recruit members, or kin and friends volunteer to join.

An important observation is that 13 of the 16 informants involved with piracy noted economic motives in combination with influence of friends and relatives, as reasons for getting involved in piracy. Hence, economic gain and social ties together were strong factors in pulling or attracting them. Lack of alternative income sources and the persuasion of relatives or friends can therefore be hard to resist.

## Illegal fishing

Ideology and politics was not a strong motivating factor for membership in pirate groups in our sample. However, five interviewees noted that they got involved with piracy in response to illegal fishing in order to protect their interests and rights. One informant said: *“We were a big group going together to fish. So when that happened [getting their nets cut off] to us many times, we had a meeting and decided to defend ourselves against them. So we brought our guns, went into our boats and defended ourselves. That’s how it started”* (#2).

Illegal fishing outside of the coast of Somalia is another result of the weak state institutions. *“The lack of control meant that both Somali and foreign fishing boats could fish without regulation”* (Rengelink 2012:184). After the fall of President Siad Barre in 1991, foreign fishing trawlers increasingly moved into Somalia’s unpatrolled waters (Menkhaus 2009). To strike back, angry local fishermen armed themselves and started attacking the foreign trawlers in order to defend their territory and livelihood.

While we were getting our daily life from the sea, some foreign ships attacked us, took our nets, fish and terrorized us. [...] When that happened we decided to go back and defend our income, our sea, because no state was there any more that could defend our sea and the rights of the fishermen. [...] We collected guns, no one cared about the risks that we could meet at the sea. We put our souls in front of us. No one cared or was afraid of death or being taken to another country to be put in prison. (#7)

Another issue is illegal dumping of toxic waste, such as radioactive and chemical waste, in Somali territorial waters (Rengelink 2009). Even though illegal fishing and dumping of toxic waste is a large challenge in Somalia, it has received very little attention internationally (Waldo

2009). Piracy is mostly prevalent in the decentralized villages in Puntland, where the state has little or no presence. There is hardly any functioning police force or coastal guard in these areas. Piracy may therefore have started as a genuine grievance from fishermen and others and as a way of filling the power vacuum. However it quickly developed into an opportunity driven business to get easy cash (Menkhaus 2009). *“The Robin Hood narrative of Somali piracy as a grassroots form of coastal patrol against rapacious foreign fishing vessels is thus only partly true, and at any rate has long since been overtaken by less noble motives”* (Menkhaus 2009:22-23). Hansen also argues that *“Somali piracy is first and foremost profit driven”* (2012:523).

While pirates probably do play a role in reducing illegal fishing, not at least because of the “scare factor” they create, slow-moving bulk carriers and cargo ship transporting valuable cargo to Africa, Asia, and Europe-not trawlers-have been their main target, at least until 2010. These vessels offer easy prey with the potential for a high reward. This would seem to suggest that piracy, far from being altruistic, is a “for profit” business that actively seeks out the most lucrative vessels to attack. (Hansen 2012:523-524)

Hence, Somali piracy can be seen as a typical example of a shift of motives of an armed group from grievance to greed (Menkhaus 2009). Notwithstanding, many pirates continue to justify their activities as a stand against illegal foreign vessels and for the protection of their fishing rights.

## **Barriers to engagement**

In spite of general risk (push) factors towards certain delinquent behaviours or militant groups, most people affected by these factors nevertheless do not join (Horgan 2005:48). Many young men in Somalia are unemployed and in a vulnerable situation, however most of them still refrain

from joining piracy or other armed groups. As earlier stated, relatives and friends are important sources of recruitment into armed or criminal groups. However, networks of friendship and family can also provide strong barriers to joining such groups. Eight of 16 informants indicated that their family (parents in particular) and local community members expressed objections to their involvement with piracy.

A 19-year-old informant, who had planned to join a pirate group, recounted that his father quickly put an end to his plans. *“I was planning to join them [the pirates] when I heard and got an idea about what they were getting from hijacking. So I told my father about my plan but he refused me to join”* (#12). However, the father was still concerned that his son would be lured into a pirate group.

My father was worried about me and decided to enrol me into this vocational training [ALP] that he had heard about from his friend, the mayor. [...] So my father came to me and told me about this training and that he had registered me and he sent me to Garowe to take me far away from the sea environment. This is how I got involved with the training. (#12)

In this particular case, the father was the main barrier to the son's membership of a piracy group. The ALP project provided skills training and a potential alternative income source, as well as a basis for relocation. The combination of these barrier and positive factors pulling towards another alternative proved strong and prevented the young man engaging in piracy.

Another 15-year-old informant decided to join a pirate group due to a difficult family situation, including the early death of his mother and an abusive step-mother. His father was a fisherman. The young man had no formal education and was unemployed, and twice tried to join piracy.



However, his father physically prevented him from doing so and even removed him from the piracy boat. *“I got involved with them twice and both of the times my father brought me back home”* (#15). The father also got him enrolled into the ALP vocational training.

A 29-year-old male interviewee with three wives and eight children, also considered joining piracy. He was originally a pastoralist, but due to changing environmental conditions and drought, he moved his family to find work to provide for his family. He was unsuccessful, leading him to consider joining a pirate group: *“I planned to join piracy. I didn’t meet them, I just had an idea of joining them. But before doing that, I heard about the [ALP skills] training and I joined it”* (#8). The training gave him a potential livelihood alternative, preventing him from going into piracy. His family also influenced the final decision: *“My wives did not allow me to join piracy. They would refuse money coming from something that was not acceptable in Islam”* (#8).

The notion of *haram* and ill-gotten money seems to often be used by families to prevent male family members from getting involved in piracy. Religious norms are strong factors in dissuading people from involvement with pirate groups. The religious leaders in the ALP project built on these norms when recruiting participants to the project. As one interviewee explained:

I was planning to go to the sea and hijack these ships, but before I did that some of the elders and religious leaders came to us and made us aware about what we were about to do and what our religion says about it. That the profit that we get from it is considered *haram*. We became more aware, and were promised a programme to learn new skills for an occupation and a new life far away from piracy. We took to us what the religion advised us and went to register for the training through the mayor (#14).

## **Engagement as pirates**

In order to design effective reintegration programmes, it is important to understand the dynamics of the specific militant or criminal group (Bjørge and Horgan 2009:7). The nature of the group, especially structure, activities, status, roles, and bonds among members, influences the disengagement process.

### **Short involvement**

Most of the informants in the sample were only involved with piracy groups for a relatively short time. This is also the case with many other forms of criminal involvement. An increasing body of gang research shows that gang memberships turns out to be a temporal experience for most youths involved in such groups. According to Thornberry, Huizinga and Loeber (2004), the large majority of gang members quit after a brief stay in the group; less than half stayed for more than a year. It is also a general finding in studies of criminal careers that for most of those who get involved in crime, it is limited to a short period during their youth (Laub & Sampson 2001; Maruna 2001:20-35).

Of the 11 informants who were active members of a pirate group, only two had been active for more than a year. The majority had just been in the group for a couple of months or participated in one or two hijackings.

I joined them two times but we failed on both missions. We went to a village and started going on our hijacking mission with two boats. We stayed at sea for two nights, but we couldn't find anything so we returned back to land. Then we went back to the sea, and this time we stayed three nights. Then I decided to quit, to give up. (#16)

Thus, the notion of “once a pirate, always a pirate” does not apply to those in the sample. Most of them were engaged in hijacking a couple of times and then left the group.<sup>11</sup> The more amateurish groups are more likely to dissolve after a short time, as they lack sufficient experience, skills, capital and equipment for effective raids. Some get lost at sea, or end up in prison. However, it should be noted that for this study only ex-pirates were interviewed who mainly had been involved with the less organized (and possibly less successful) pirate groups. Some of the more advanced groups probably last longer, and their members are likely to be involved for a longer time. Still, even those groups are likely to have a considerable turnover of personnel.

### **The organization of pirate groups**

The organization of Somali pirate groups has changed over the years. The 2008 piracy boom led to fragmentation of groups into smaller and more varied entities (Hansen 2009:34). Many of these small groups were not well-organised and consisted of less-experienced fishermen who just wanted to earn extra money. Pirate groups are normally a loose constellation that consists of a leader and about 12 to 35 people (Hansen 2009:34, 36). An informant who was elected leader of a group of fishermen that turned into piracy, explained: *“We divided ourselves into two groups. One group was on the sea while the other was waiting outside the water giving us directions”* (#2). Other informants confirmed that this was standard operating procedure. The sea-based team undertook the hijacking, while the land-based team took custody of the hijacked ship and provided other support services. Some individuals shifted between the teams: *“I was in the boat with my gun and also climbing onto the other ship. Afterwards, I was also attending to the crew on the boat that was hijacked”* (#4). Even though pirate groups are loosely organized, they seem to have a clear hierarchical arrangement:

Most of the time, I was in the boat. My uncle and I were functioning as guards to look out for what may come from outside while the others were inside the ship. For one week, we kept it at sea and then we brought it close to Eyl. Then it spent 21 days in Eyl. My responsibilities in Eyl were to bring what the group needed from town and cook. I was the youngest, so I just got these kinds of jobs. (#5)

The money earned also varied according to rank and status in the group:

When the ship got to Eyl, the boss contacted where the ship was coming from, and they got a ransom of \$300,000. I received \$10,000. I was young and low rank so the bosses took most of it. My uncle was the second commander in the group and the driver of the boat. He received \$40,000 for this job. He had been doing this for a long time. (#5)

Informants that had received payment after a successful hijacking typically earned around \$10,000-\$20,000. However, piracy groups work on the “no prey, no pay” system (Hansen 2009:36), meaning that in the event of failed raids, they do not get paid. The young man joining his uncle’s group for a year remarked: “*We had only one successful hijacking. So I only got paid once*” (#5).

In terms of financing piracy, some of the groups mobilized initial resources:

We didn’t have any money, but you know, most Somalis have weapons, so we collected them from here and there. Sometimes we got some money from other people by begging them to give us some money. But of course we don’t tell them the truth that we needed this money to buy guns (#7).

The more established groups have their own financiers, as interviewee #3 explained: *“There were four financiers who provided us with everything, including weapons. And they were the ones getting the largest share of the money”* (#3). Being an investor can be quite beneficial if the raids are successful. *“There are people whose business is to provide the pirates with what they need. So when we succeeded on our mission, then we payed them twice of what they invested. In this way, they also benefited”* (#13). Support is often given on credit and repaid after successful raids. Profits are often invested into new raids: *“The pirates tend to be self-financing and the money from hijackings is reinvested in new attacks”* (Hansen 2009:37). This also means that if raids are unsuccessful, the financiers risk losing their investment. Like the others, local businesses providing goods on credit are in such cases not guaranteed payment.

### **Managing family and community relationships**

Many local communities are against piracy for various reasons. Thus, for many informants, their family relations changed when they went into piracy. Some tried to keep their activities secret in order not to offend the sensibilities of relatives. Informant #4 explained this strategy:

My family did not have any idea about what I was doing. I hid the money because they would start asking me where I got the money from. And at the same time, they would refuse to accept money from me as they consider it *haram*. (#4)

To make it easier to hide their earnings, some pirates moved from their families and local communities. Thus, involvement in piracy can also lead to a change in community and social relationships. Informant #13 noted: *“I joined my friends planning to become a pirate and hijack ships to get money. So we decided to rent a house. I left home and moved in with them”* (#13). He told the family that he was going to look for a job. Some become totally isolated from their families while in

the piracy group: *“The family didn’t have any idea where to look for us. Even those who knew what we are doing, didn’t know where to find or search for us”* (#7).

Piracy money is also said to cause inflation, creating problems for already financially distressed people in local communities. In addition, the pirates engage in other social activities which are seen as unacceptable by the local communities, such as drug abuse and bringing in prostitutes: *“The communities consider the pirates themselves and their bodies as haram. So they avoid those they know are in piracy groups”* (#7).

Thus, in spite of the riches the successful pirates can show off, there is a considerable stigma attached to their social identity as pirates in the local community.

## **Exit and disengagement processes**

The process of leaving criminal or extremist groups depends on several factors, such as duration in the group, group character, group role, status and experiences, and ties to other group members and people outside the group. *“The reason of disengagement can be numerous, conflicting, competing and exceptionally complex even within a single case”* (Horgan 2009:27).

Other researchers point to the importance of disillusionment (Bjørngo 2011) and life-threatening episodes (Decker and Lauritsen 2002) as turning points. Individuals may leave voluntary, involuntary or something in between. All of the ex-pirates interviewed for this study disengaged voluntarily. However, quite a number of ex-pirates are imprisoned in and outside of Somalia and some die at sea during piracy operations. As shown earlier, many joined pirate groups in Somalia due to influence from peers or relatives. Despite this, all 11 informants who had been actively engaged in piracy decided to leave on their own, based on an individual decision. Hence, most of

the informants joined piracy groups with friends or family members, but left alone. They also choose to leave covertly. *“I put the gun somewhere, and I didn’t tell them I was leaving. I told them I would be back the next day”* (#5). As the informants were foot soldiers and most likely not entrusted with the most valuable information, there was less of a risk of being sanctioned by the group. Only two of the former active pirates mentioned fear of reprisals from the group they had been members of.

### **Economic failure**

Disillusionment is a common cause for leaving criminal or extremist groups (Bjørngo 2011, Wright 1987). Unfulfilled economic expectations were among the push factors for disengagement for five of the informants. The young man who started working as a cook for the pirates did not benefit much from his career change: *“They did not pay me. They were expecting to get profit from hijacking, but since they had no successful raids I did not get anything. Not even a dollar”* (#6). Most people believe they will make a lot of money when engaging with piracy, however due to the “no prey no pay” system, many actually receive little or nothing.

Two of the informants were not able to make a productive use of the money they earned from piracy. A young ex-pirate who joined when he was 17 told about his lifestyle as a pirate: *“I was busy making friends and spending money on chewing khat and having fun”* (#3). He did buy a car: *“I bought a second-hand car for that [piracy] money but I had an accident with it, and it got destroyed”* (#3). In the end, the young pirate realized that even though he got money, it did not take him very far: *“The money finished by spending it here and there, so I decided not to go back to piracy”* (#3). Another ex-pirate received quite a sum of money from a successful raid, however it did not do him much good: *“You see, another group caught me and stole the money. They were masked and robbed me on*

*my way to the town with the money. After that, I decided not to go back” (#4).*

Not all who left pirate groups felt disillusioned. A leader of a pirate group participated in three raids over three years; two that were successful and one that failed. During that time, he earned \$70,000. However, his wife was not happy with his profession: *“I married her at the end of my time working with the pirates. But she wasn’t happy with what I was doing and she asked me to quit. I stopped because of her and the injury I had on my arm from a car accident” (#2).* In his case, family disapproval served as a factor pushing him out of piracy, overcoming the pull factor of economic profit.

## **Hardship and risk**

Being a pirate does not provide as easy money as many recruits may expect. It demands a lot of effort and hard work, especially for the foot soldiers in the boats doing the actual hijackings. Six out of the 11 former active pirates emphasized the risk and hardship connected with the job:

You can’t imagine the kind of life that we were living at that time. It’s a hard life, you realize how bad it is when you get out of it. You have to be awake the whole night and the whole day waiting for ships. Sometimes you get lost at sea, losing the direction.

Sometimes you run from your colleagues as you don’t trust them when they are far away and you don’t know who they are. So there is no life there. (#7)

The hard work and also seeing friends get injured, die or imprisoned push people towards exiting piracy: *“My plan was to work along with them [the pirates]. But some of the people in the group got injured, and I left because of that. With one of the ships, two people got injured and died”*



(#5). Experiencing the hardship and risks connected with piracy are therefore strong push factors to disengagement.

### **The role of family and social networks in facilitating disengagement**

Seven of 16 informants stated that they disengaged due to family or community objection: An ex-pirate stated: *“The community wasn’t happy. That’s why I left. And my mum. They were saying that what we were doing was haram and not good”* (#5). The community’s discontent and particularly his mother’s dissatisfaction with his work for the piracy group was a strong of push factors for this ex-pirate. In addition he earned some money from a successful raid that made it possible for him to leave. This represented a pull factor: *“I got the money, and I then left the group. I used the money I had earned to leave the group. I first went to Mogadishu, then Kenya and Nairobi”* (#5).

Not all low-level soldiers have the resources to leave. Close family and relatives may help create an exit route for members of piracy groups. Six out of 11 who were actively engaged in piracy got help from family.

In one raid, one guy died. Then my father got to know about me being in the group, as the whole community was invited to the funeral. So my father met the leader of the group and almost started a fight with him. But the leader of the group said that he had never forced me to join and that my father could take me back. (#6)

The father of this young ex-pirate thought piracy was a risky business and told him to change his lifestyle. In order to prevent the son from re-engaging with the group or other armed groups he made arrangements for the son to be relocated: *“My father sold some camels so that I would get*

*some transport to come to Nairobi. I was very happy. Cause it [being a pirate] was not a nice life. Even the religion does not allow it” (#6).*

Families and friends also help ex-pirates to sustain themselves when they have no other means of income. Most of the informants living in Nairobi did not have a stable job and were helped by family members, often diaspora. Many lived with friends who took care of them. Social networks, family, relatives, and friends are crucial in creating exit routes for young ex-pirates and providing for them afterwards. None of the informants cited severed family ties or fear of stigmatisation from the community as barriers to disengagement. Many stated that they felt disregard from the community while in the pirate group, however, nobody expressed experiencing stigmatization after leaving. They were welcomed back and received support from the family. This corresponds with research from extremist groups, where families frequently are found to play a crucial role in the disengagement and reintegration process (Bjørøgo, Donselaar & Grunenberg 2009:137; Boucek 2009:219; Laub and Sampson 2003).

### **The roles of religious leaders and Islamic moral values**

The religious leaders traditionally enjoy a high status in Somali society. As shown earlier the notions of *haram* vs. *halal* are strongly grounded within communities, and religious leaders have successfully used this moral aspect to encourage individuals and communities to say no to piracy. Local religious leaders therefore still play a central role in the ALP project, promoting disengagement based on Islamic norms. A former graduate from the ALP said: *“Our religious leaders made us aware that piracy activities don’t belong to our religion”* (#16). The religious leaders also managed to reach the pirates during pirate operations.

We didn't meet them [the religious leaders], but we listened to their sermons on the radio. They talked about piracy, what our religion says about it, and how we are considered by the other Muslims. We were hearing these sermons while we were working at sea or on shore. This affected on our decision to go back and quit piracy. Especially for the ones who didn't get anything from it. So I quit, came back to town, and joined the [ALP] training a month later. (#7)

It is noteworthy that an organization based on Christian values, the Norwegian Church Aid (NCA), saw the crime preventive potential of building on religious moral values in the Somalian context, and was able to cooperate with and empower local Muslim leaders in their work against piracy. However, as much as the religious and moral appeals make an impact on people, the lack of jobs is a difficult barrier to overcome:

It [piracy] is not something good, according to religion. The religion does not accept to attack somebody and to rob them. And it is not something that even the community like. They are not happy about it. But most of the people are jobless, meaning you try to survive. In Eyl, most of the people in the community were not happy about piracy. The sheiks were not happy with it. The clan leaders and elders were not happy with it. It is not a sustainable life to rob someone. All the leaders were against it. However, they can only give advices, as there are no other job opportunities. The sheiks preach in the communities but the leaders of the pirates did not respond well to this. They tell the young boys that you can get a lot of money, that they can change their life. (#6)

Even though the religious leaders managed to reach out to the local population morally, they were not able to offer pirates any other profitable alternative when disengaging. This need was addressed when

the ALP project organized trainings in alternative livelihoods, which the local religious leaders could then offer as an incentive for disengagement. Religion was a push factor, and alternative livelihood training a pull factor to overcome the barrier of no job prospects. Combined, these two factors provide strong motives and incentives for disengagement from piracy.

## **Economic reintegration**

Alternative and non-criminal means of income are crucial for reintegration processes of ex-pirates. However, a general lack of employment opportunities, parallel war economies, and shattered economies with dismantled markets characterizes war and post-war contexts as in Somalia. Employment creation, income generation, and reintegration are particularly challenging. The informants from the Alternative Livelihood to Piracy (ALP) project valued the project as a positive opportunity: *“It was a good training that you benefit from. Learning new skills, which help you getting opportunity for work, and get income and also become an active person in the community”* (#14). However, graduates of reintegration programmes are far from certain to find employment and a stable income. A participant of the ALP’s vocational skills training faced difficulty searching for a job after graduating. He estimated that four people from his carpentry training group of 15 were employed: *“The market is somehow in a sleeping state. There are few carpenter workshops, which impacts on the number of employees who also are few”* (#13). Five out of the seven interviewees who had gone through vocational skills training had some type of work. However, none of them had any permanent job or sufficient source of income. A graduate from masonry training managed to find a job, but employment was sporadic and did not provide a stable income:

There are not many job opportunities. I am now working on building a house. I have a family to feed so I am working. The job that I have now, it's for one month. But sometimes it happens that I don't get any contracts for jobs and then I have to work the days that I get, even if it is only one. (#8)

Having skills training is therefore not a guarantee to employment. In Somalia, where the state is weak but the clan system is still strong, employment creation relies heavily on existing businesses and the private sector. Establishing close ties to the private sector through apprenticeship, internships and employment-subsidy programmes are therefore crucial employment-creation initiatives.

Based on the interviews and NCA's project review report from 2011 (NCA 2011), business-skills training accompanied with a seed grant proved more efficient in quickly getting a stable income. The five people interviewed who had done business-skills training and received a seed grant had all started their small businesses. A former service provider to piracy groups joined the business-skills training while her husband was in jail for piracy. After the training, she opened up a small shop, selling dry goods, soft drinks, soap and some clothing. She was able to provide for herself and her children. *"I benefited from this training. It helped me to get a new start, a different job and an income. And business skills also"* (#9). A married ex-pirate with two children was also positive to the business-skills training: *"We got trained in how to make and open a small business, how to make use of cash book to know what we sell and the other expenses"* (#16). He applied in practice what he had learned, and started his own small shop: *"I bought small stuff, what my budget allowed me to buy. Like cigarettes, soft drinks, and mineral water. I increased the price on the things to get a profit, and today I earn so much from it that I can feed my family and kids"* (#16).

Hence, in the present economic and political context of Somalia, small-scale shops and self-

employment may be the easiest way to get an income rapidly.

As mentioned, chances of getting employment may depend on social networks as they provide important entry points to the market. This was also the case for the graduates from the ALP project. Participants who did business-skills training received \$300 in seed grant money, which is insufficient capital for opening a small-scale business. However, the \$300 seed grant stimulated further support from relatives or loans from larger businesses. Four of the five interviewed from the business skills training received support from relatives: *“I got support from my father, who gave me \$200. So I opened a shop with \$500, not \$300”* (#7). A woman who was formerly a service provider to pirates opened a shop in her house with the assistance of some relatives who provided goods on credit. She needed \$1,000 to open her shop, and she pays back the money little by little as she gets a surplus.

Graduates from the vocational skills training also received support from family and friends: *“Sometimes I am called upon by my friends and neighbours when they want electricity installation. In this way, I am able to get some money to pay for my computer classes, English classes and other things without depending on my parents.”* (#15)

Naturally, as pilot project, the ALP has several limitations in terms of the size of the project, duration and type of training provided, employment opportunities for the beneficiaries, target population and areas etc.<sup>12</sup> However, the ALP project is still a good example of how an international actor has understood and embarked on important local processes and addressed some of the root causes to piracy. It has successfully built on a grassroots initiative by local religious leaders to push people out of piracy groups and provided alternatives of livelihood to pull them out.

## Conclusion and main findings

In this paper we have explored the processes, conditions, and circumstances influencing decisions to join piracy in Somalia, as well as decisions to disengage from piracy. This is discussed in terms of push and pull factors and barriers. However, the findings cannot be generalised to Somalian pirates as a whole, as the sample is small, consisting of mainly foot soldiers and only those individuals who decided to disengage. The findings are still relevant, since they offer insights into important processes – insights which may be used for developing or improving interventions to reduce this specific problem of piracy in Somalia as well as similar or perhaps even different forms of crime elsewhere.

In interviews with 16 individuals who had been involved with piracy groups, 15 stated that economic conditions and motivations were main factors in their decisions to join. The lack of employment and livelihood served as a push factor into engaging in piracy, whereas the prospect of a licit (or *halal*) income was a pull factor out of piracy. Disappointment about the lack of expected profit influenced the decisions of some to end their piracy involvement, serving to push them out of the group. Another push factor was the hardship and risk involved, mentioned by more than half of those who had been actively involved in piracy. Five ex-pirates stated that they started piracy in response to illegal fishing by foreign vessels. Illegal fishing and dumping of toxic waste is today a large problem in Somali waters and is seen as one of the causes of piracy. However, today fishing vessels are not the main targets and Somali based piracy is now driven by profit rather than politics or ideology.

More than half of the ex-pirates mentioned strong statements by local Muslim leaders that piracy was *haram* (forbidden) as a factor in their decision to stop involvement. This provided a strong push factor out of piracy. The message of the religious leaders was often reinforced by family and community objections to their involvement in piracy, motivated by both moral arguments and fear

about the dangers involved in piracy activities, which was another push factor.

Another point of interest was whether decisions to engage and disengage from piracy were made alone or under the influence of others. For 14 out of 16 involved with piracy, family members or peers had encouraged, facilitated, or influenced them to join. Most joined the group with others, but left the group alone and covertly. However, other family members also played important roles in trying to prevent them from joining, as well as facilitating their disengagement. The dangers involved, as well as the *haram* nature of piracy, motivated the family to try to keep or get them out of pirate groups. In several cases, fathers used their social connections to get their sons enrolled in the Alternative Livelihoods to Piracy project (ALP) that facilitates disengagement and reintegration for pirates in Somalia, or otherwise send them out of the reach of the criminal group. Thus, some of the same basic factors, such as economic motivations and ties of family and friends, played roles both in the processes of entry as well as in exiting from piracy groups.

Ten of the 16 ex-pirates and affiliates in the sample were participants from the Norwegian Church Aid's Alternative Livelihood to Piracy (ALP) project. They generally held positive views on the project and its usefulness. For some, the ALP project played a vital role as a pull factor in their disengagement process by providing an attractive alternative to continued involvement with piracy, and a concrete way to relocate and to show a definite change of status. In addition, the ALP project offered vocational and business-skills training, and some seed money to help them start a new life. A successful part of the ALP project was the close cooperation with local religious leaders, who drew upon Koranic teachings to dissuade youths from piracy. These religious leaders also recommended such youths to enrol in the ALP project. The ALP project thus seems to have provided a powerful mix of mutually reinforcing push factors out of piracy with forces pulling youths into a more rewarding and pro-social alternative. Thus, given the right combination of push and pull factors,



individuals may be persuaded to give up their involvement in this specific Somalian form of organized crime.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> This study is part of a three-country research project entitled “Improving Reintegration Programming in Somalia, Nepal and Afghanistan Through Evidence-Based Research” conducted by the International Research Group on Reintegration (IRGR) at the Centre for Peace Studies (CPS), University of Tromsø. The study has been financed by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The United Nations Development Programme in Somalia has also provided economical support. Some of the work has been carried out through our engagements at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs and the Norwegian Police University College. This article is a revised and shortened version of our project report *Ex-Pirates in Somalia: Disengagement Processes and Reintegration Programming*. Tromsø: Centre for Peace Studies, University of Tromsø, 2012. Financial support for making the article has been provided Consortium for Research on Terrorism and International Crime.

<sup>2</sup> In our project report *Ex-Pirates in Somalia: Disengagement Processes and Reintegration Programming* we further elaborate on the ALP project and provide recommendations for programming.

<sup>3</sup> According to the International Maritime Bureau (2011a:3), “piracy is defined in Article 101 of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) as any of the following acts :

- (a) any illegal acts of violence or detention, or any act of depredation, committed for private ends by the crew or the passengers of a private ship or a private aircraft, and directed:
  - (i) on the high seas, against another ship or aircraft, or against persons or property on board such ship or aircraft;
  - (ii) against a ship, aircraft, persons or property in a place outside the jurisdiction of any State;
- (b) any act of voluntary participation in the operation of a ship or of an aircraft with knowledge of facts making it a pirate ship or aircraft;
- (c) any act inciting or of intentionally facilitating an act described in sub-paragraph (a) or (b).”

<sup>4</sup> The number of attacks reported to the International Maritime Bureau Piracy Reporting Centre by the 16th of December 2011 was 421 and 231 of these were committed by Somali pirates (International Maritime Bureau 2011b).

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<sup>5</sup> For an overview, see Bjørgo and Horgan 2009:5–10

<sup>6</sup> When informants are quoted in the text, they are referred to by number, e.g. (#14).

<sup>7</sup> 12 graduates from the ALP project were interviewed in Puntland, however two of these were excluded from the sample as they had not considered joining piracy but yet joined the ALP training.

<sup>8</sup> These organizations and individuals are listed in Appendix 1 in the report on which this article is based (Gjelsvik and Bjørgo 2012). [http://www.nb.no/idtjeneste/URN:NBN:no-bibsys\\_brage\\_28573](http://www.nb.no/idtjeneste/URN:NBN:no-bibsys_brage_28573)

<sup>9</sup> See Gjelsvik and Gaas (In press) «Fighting Piracy on Land: An Evaluation of Norwegian Church Aid’s Alternative Livelihood to Somalia Project in Puntland, Somalia

<sup>10</sup> Interview with UNICEF in Bossaso June 2011.

<sup>11</sup> As Bjørgo and Horgan point out: “In reality, however, most individuals involved in terrorism eventually disengage from it one way or another. Similarly, few terrorist movements last more than a few months, in rare cases years, before coming to an end” (Bjørgo and Horgan 2009:1).

<sup>12</sup> In our project report (Gjelsvik & Bjørgo 2012) we go more into shortcomings of the ALP project and recommendations for improvement.