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Looking for Political Demography: Population Excess, War and Migration in Somali Arenas of Socio-demographic Transitions

Abstract

The article explores methodologies and perspectives for the construction of a non-deterministic political demography grounded on case-study analyses and on interdisciplinary collaboration, namely between demographers and anthropologists. It argues that a focus on transitions (demographic, mobility and socio-economic transitions) and on their interrelations could provide a bridge between the disciplines. On the one hand, this means developing context-specific analyses of life conjunctures, circumstantial social navigations, social becoming, with the goal of showing how specific demographic variables (fertility, reproductive choice, family seize) take shape within specific arenas of socio-demographic change. On the other hand, working between micro/macro perspectives and between disciplines also implies, for anthropology and social sciences, an increase in scale and a specific contextualisation, one that focuses on structural transitions and interconnects their multiple dimensions. This analytical framework is tested in the study of the socio-demographic consequences of war, protracted conflict, and displacement in Somalia and its diasporas.

Keywords

Political demography, transitions, population excess, Somalia, war-migration

In a recent debate examining potential forms of collaboration between the fields of demography and anthropology (along with history and other social sciences), the contributors remarked how international migrations – so peculiar to our times – could inspire broader academic interaction. The authors (David Kertzer, Pier Paolo Viazzo, Pier Giorgio Solinas, Giuseppe Micheli - 2018) suggested that disciplines traditionally hesitant to interact, could instead create structured forms of collaboration, moving from "reluctant bedfellows" to "committed partners" (Viazzo 2018 citing Bachrach 2014). The study of migration, it was argued, could promote disciplinary intersections since it requires complex explanatory models combining macro and micro perspectives, in order to situate global phenomena into specific contexts and understand their local and contextual meanings.

As these observations came amid the so-called 2014-18 "migration crisis" that spread from war-torn Mediterranean regions (Syria and Libya) to Europe, the plea for a renewed disciplinary collaboration appeared extremely urgent. Motivating this was the goal to scientifically respond to the increasing public anxieties on population movements, demographic unbalances and decline mounting at that time (see Ciabarri, Conte, Fusari, this issue). As often happens though, under the pressure of these very events, reality had already overridden scientific wishes, and public debates displayed an uncontrolled emergence of "popular demography" or "demographic ideologies". These dealt with crucial themes for demography (population growth rates, fertility etc.) and anthropology (national, ethnic or even "racial" identities and their boundaries), distortedly presented and politically loaded.

The 2010-20 Mediterranean disorders, in other words, challenged the disciplines of demography, anthropology and history not only in pointing out necessary mutual collaboration, but also because it was in correspondence with these events that an increasingly cumbersome politicisation of demographic data took hold and "invaded", in uncontrolled forms, the public debate (as ever, uncontrolled invasions have more to do with ideas about migration than with migration itself). Starting from these considerations, this article fundamentally represents a methodological reflection (written from the perspective of an anthropologist) on the potential partnership between demography and anthropology vis-a-vis migration dynamics, as well as an exploration of the political dimension of demographic dynamics and data. I could call this goal an attempt to contribute to an emerging multidisciplinary field of political demography, except that this term has already experienced a number of different,

and in some cases even ambiguous, developments in recent years, particularly in political sciences and international studies. I will therefore begin my reflection by reviewing a few possible definitions of political demography, in order to identify a path within which to move.

Directions in political demography

That demographic factors have an influence on politics and social dynamics is of course a fact; however, the way we conceptualise this link continues to be a highly debated subject. As noted (Kertzer 2018), a classic approach in demography has generally presented demographic facts as technical data transformed into numbers, statistics and correlations (probably a way to neutralise their incandescent nature, as founding disputes on demography show),[1] with this format then offered to the political decision makers (consolidating an alliance which has defined the demographic discipline). In the recently proposed subfield of "political demography" within political science and international studies (Weiner and Teitelbaum 2001; Goldstone, Kaufmann and Toft, 2012; Goerres and Vanhuysse 2021) the correlation is instead openly acknowledged and posed as a set of potential causal relationships geared towards understanding how demographic change and demographic disparities impact on policies and politics, both at international and national level (Goldstone, Kaufmann and Toft, 2012).

Introducing a dense collection of essays exploring this perspective, Achim Goerres and Pieter Vanhuysse ask how the relative and absolute size of a population, its age structure and long-term dynamics relate to general political consequences. With the latter, they specifically hint at "political processes such as voting outcomes, political rhetoric, power balances and various expressions –peaceful or otherwise – of political conflict, public policies (e.g. pensions, education, family policy, population control) and political institutions" (Goerres and Vanhuysse 2021, p. 3). By focusing on this linkage, the authors aim to highlight "population dynamics as one of the main drivers of politics at the meso- and macro-level" (p. 2). The set of correlations explored, however, presents merits and flaws, as they unresolvedly oscillate between a contextual-focused analysis of variables and the wish to deterministically correlate macro demographic aspects and political phenomena.

Though demography, it is acknowledged, always swings between a "mixture of certainty and unpredictability" (p. 5) – the former deriving from the certainty of demographic cohorts once they are born, the latter from the variations

of social life – what is more highlighted in these reconstructions is, in fact, predictability, posing a deterministic link between well-identified (demographic) facts and unknown socio-economic variables. Moreover, analyses framed by preoccupations related to state or human security often tend to focus on demographic unbalances, rapid and uncontrolled social changes (specifically rapid population growth), and diversions from normalised demographic transition models.

Consequently, what often emerges is a kind of pathological look towards what are regarded as anomalies or evident sources of disturbance and conflict in contemporary demographic transitions: youth bulges (defined as "clearly higher population shares in young age groups", p. 2) correlated for instance to political disorders, instability and mass-migration, or high fertility rates correlated to unemployment and poverty. Instances of such an approach can be found in essays devoted to connecting young populations to conflicts or separatist movements (Cincotta and Weber 2021; see also Urdal 2012); age structures to intrastate instability (Sciubba 2021); or to shifts from liberal to autocratic regimes; or, again, from secular to religious-fundamentalist ones (Toft 2012). Clearly, in these cases, the analyses are always at risk of taking on a unilateral character as age structures are seen, per se, as explanatory factors prone to produce, in probabilistic terms, specific social behaviours.

Let's take the concept of youth bulge as an example. This notion is extensively discussed, and broadly popularised, in the security-focused approaches to political demography, and it is often linked to potentially negative phenomena like youth disorders, political disequilibrium etc. Indeed, the term "bulge", expressing a specific age structure witnessed by different societies in different periods of time, is quite ideologically loaded and automatically conveys that sense of disorder or lack of control just recalled. Youth in this sense is seen as disconnected from other generations and as a subject merely defined by its quantity. On the opposite, empirical studies on youth bulges clearly show how outcomes are never predetermined – after all, European societies witnessed a youth bulge (the Baby Boomer generation) in the 1960s and 1970s without it being generally associated with negative consequences, but rather with growth, economic and political gains, and emancipation, at times produced through social conflict.

Alessandra Bonci and Francesco Cavatorta dealing with the Maghreb region (2021) and Sophie Roche dealing with youth bulge in Tajikistan (2014) provide, in this respect, two exemplary case studies. In the first, the authors

reflect on the causative role of demographic factors, connecting youth social behaviour in the so-called Arab Spring protests to levels of unemployment, relative deprivation and forms of dissatisfaction. Here youth, more than "forming a bulge", is confined to an expectations trap (a persistent generational waithood) to which social and political structures do not provide any answer. Indeed, extensive young age groups, the authors notice, took shape earlier in Northern Africa demographic changes, and a transition to lower fertility rates have already emerged and produced its (numerical) effects. Besides such structural socio-economic factors, Sophie Roche also stresses how youth behaviour, in her Tajikistan case, is framed within expectations related to local models of life-course, where collaboration with other generations is prescribed, and to ideas of status and prestige that seemingly socialise and domesticate (as, of course in other cases can de-socialise) youth expectations and grievances. Rather than an objective and countable quantity, youth is a social category that can be used for social or political mobilisations, with different possible outcomes. In some of these cases, young people act as a unit; in many others, not; but even in the former case, it is just a portion of youth that acts in the name of the entire group.

If we look at the intersection between demography and other social sciences, including anthropology and history, further declinations of political demography emerge.

Within anthropology, Claude Meillassoux already established – in the 1980s, and with much less ambiguity – a political perspective on demographic dynamics, inserting them into the processes of change of African societies driven by colonial and postcolonial economic transformations, by agricultural and industrial changes, and by shifting forms of exploitation. In the huge changes affecting African societies throughout the 20th century, Meillassoux saw the emergence of demographic disorders centred on the figure of excess and its politicisation. The interpretative model he developed regarding the transformations of West-African agrarian societies entering the sphere of international capitalism, in further studies in the 1980s was moved and adjusted to the South-African society and its industrial economy. In the first case, amidst the paradox of the apparent immutability of the rural sector, changes were brought about by cash-crop agriculture; in the second, by the mining industry.

The "rural model" – which later I'll hint at in outlining a framework for describing socio-economic transition in Somali society – refers to a chain of interrelated changes brought about by agrarian capitalism backed, in a colo-

nial and postcolonial situation, by a rural "domestic community". The latter initially compensates for the overexploitation and low wages of the plantation economy by sustaining the plantation workers, who recurrently return to their villages of origin or receive distant help from them.[2] In the medium and long term however, the domestic community loses land, men and workforce, in a vicious circle that generates its own crisis, to the advantage of emigration towards the regional markets or cities. Following the ups and downs of cash-crop agriculture (linked to international prices and soil productivity), the latter's capacity to absorb and sustain the workforce proved always precarious. Informal urban economies, rural-urban emigration (nowadays converted into the international equivalent) and subsidised import food (when existing) organised by the state and capitalist entrepreneurs, have only partially limited these trends and taken on a structural dimension (Meillassoux 1975, 1979).

On the other hand, Meillassoux's 1980s studies on South African economies – where commercial agriculture is replaced by industrial mining centres, and the domestic community by the township / bantustan system – expanded on the demographic implications of these exploitative dynamics. The disequilibria he had described between rural and urban areas maintain high birth rates but also generate demographic disorders marked by the production of an excess population, scarcely employable and thus requiring, as demonstrated in South Africa, increasing forms of economic and political control. His studies, however, also show the specific politicisation of these disorders, with (borrowing Meillassoux's expression), Malthus spectres in the background: the naturalisation or culturalization (linked for instance to African reproductive habits) of the excess of population; the idea that demographic dynamics are autonomous from economic ones; and the implicit suggestion that poverty or specific demographic policies might mitigate the disequilibria by reducing fertility rates and keeping mortality rates high (Meillassoux 1979, Gendreau et al. 1991).

Contrary to this naturalisation, Meillassoux shows that the bone of contention has not to do with mere fertility or mortality rates, but with youth transition to adulthood – or the integration of youth in the labour market – circumstances moulded by long-term historical dynamics related to production and labour force. In this sense, Meillassoux insists, demography cannot be posed as causal factor of history; on the contrary, population is produced by socioeconomic systems (Gendreau et al. 1991, p. 22-23).

Transition appears as a key term in Meillassoux's demographic reconstruction. The term does not refer to the macro-model advanced by demographers,

but to inner processes of social reproduction. Interestingly, transition conceived in these terms is central also to contemporary discussions trying to bridge social sciences and demography. The point is noticed by Micheli (2018) according to which a focus on life transitions could detach demography from pure formal models and, in turn, give social sciences a ground for interdisciplinary comparison.

Transitions here are not thought of as structural passages through life stages (in Van Gennep's style) but as changes occurring within specific forms of social organisation. Micheli, in particular, refers to the work of the anthropologist-demographer Jennifer Johnson-Hanks. Her studies on life transitions (2002, 2008) look at specific vital conjunctures as marked by processes of change open to multiple outcomes, to possibilities and aspirations, where individuals' choices mediate between structural factors, tactical interpretations of them, and social context and institutions, thereby producing the demographic variables (marriage, reproduction, fertility etc). Vital conjunctures thus express life pathways characterised by uncertainty and only *ex-post* attributable to pre-determined stages. Similar focus on transitions, social becoming, conjunctures and contingencies can be found in Sarah Walters' historical demography (2017, 2021); to a certain extent, we could say that the current reflections on waithood, emerging in studies related to African youth and migration (Honwana 2012), also connect to these analyses (see infra). In this sense, the emphasis on people's transitions could pave the way to an ethnographic and diachronic approach of the fundamental demographic elements, otherwise framed by generic theories of modernisation or cultural difference. Equally, such emphasis reconnects to classical anthropological relationships, like that between youth and elders, or men and women.

The reference to the macro-model of demographic transition is not, however, totally displaced in this reconsideration of the term "transition". On the one hand, current discussions of the processes of demographic transition in Africa are centred on their diversion from the classical model, reflecting on the significance of stalls and divergent temporalities. Demographic transition is nowadays approached in plural and context-specific terms (see Ciabarri, Conte, Fusari, this issue). Here too, ethnographic analyses studying the intersection between temporality, generations and social ascent through concepts like waithood or aspirations resonate with these questions.

On the other hand, current theories of mobility transitions in extremely sophisticated forms reflect on the correlations between changing patterns of mo-

bility, demographic and socio-economic data, trying to build up interconnected analyses of social change and of mutual causation (Skeldon 2011). Next section will be devoted to this specific task. From the confluence of all these traces it is possible to convene a political demography in an anthropological perspective free from deterministic temptations. The "conceptual bulge" accumulated around the term transition is what this article will seek to delve into.

The Somali macro-transitions

If we are to reflect on Somali transitions from a perspective of intertwining social, demographic and mobility changes (Skeldon 2011), we need first to reconstruct a general background. This has to represent the macrosocial changes brought about by colonial and then postcolonial modernity: in a compressed form, the crisis of the labour-intensive agro-pastoral societies and their transition towards what today look like network-intensive informal urban economies coupled with transnational trading and diasporic links.[3] As long as it represents a shift from a predominantly rural society to emerging urban spaces characterised by weak industrial and service economies, this transition resembles the one described in Meillassoux's typical model, slightly applicable to most contemporary African societies. Equally, such transition has the characteristics of the distinctive sub-Saharan African demographic transitions, or of the demographic disorders as Meillassoux put it, with an age structure increasingly comprised of young people with uncertain prospects in the emerging local economic systems.

Specific relevance in the Somali case was played by the structuring of the postcolonial state, by livestock export in the north and postcolonial plantation agriculture in the south, while in the medium-term severe shocks like recurring wars, drought and mass-displacement have provided unique variables to local change dynamics.

The rural sector in Somalia, due to ecological and historical adaptations, consisted of a widespread practice of nomadic pastoralism or agro-pastoralism. In the arid northern areas characterised by scarce and unpredictable rains, scattered water points and recurrent droughts, pastoralism was prevailing (sheep, goats, camels, and cows where possible). In the large southern area between the river Shabelle and the river Juba, prevalent agriculture was supplemented by seminomadic animal husbandry. In all cases, production was organised extensively around large households and kin groups whose composition in number and territorial distribution was extremely variable and segmented, requiring

sophisticated systems of territorial distribution, cooperation and connection. Production was labour intensive and based on sizeable households divided, for most of the year, into minimal family units scattered and moving over the territory. Animals (camels in particular) were regarded as the crucial form of capital, in economic terms as well as socially and symbolically, but in reality, manpower availability was at the core of the social reproduction of this specific mode of production. Urban centres were, until the emergence of the central state, rare. Concentrated along the coast or on the margins of the Ethiopian highlands, they performed the role of organising trade relationships with the outer world. Yet, agro-pastoralists were in constant connection with members living in the cities and articulated complex systems of exchange – through caravan trade – with trading networks operating on an international scale.[4]

The social forms corresponding to these eco-historical adaptations were, in prevalently nomadic areas, extremely flexible social units that through genealogical schemes could separate and re-aggregate themselves, forging marriage and political alliances with groups insisting on the same territories and water points. In prevalently agricultural areas characterised by short-scale movements or sedentary villages, the emerging social forms were based on complex webs moulded by hierarchical integration, assimilation and collaboration.

Clearly, this picture is extremely changed nowadays. Even though classical accounts of Somali society represent it as predominantly agro-pastoral and rural, and according to the different regions, conventionally depict an estimation of 60-80 % of population living in the countryside, recent statistical surveys overturn this representation. Indeed, the recent Population Estimation Survey of Somalia conducted by UNFPA reports of a 23 % of population living in rural areas, 26 % in nomadic areas and 51 % in urban areas (of which 9 % are internally displaced persons living in camps).[5]

To understand these transformations, we must consider different temporal dimensions. A long-term perspective captures the transformation of the rural Somali society by means of its encapsulation in the wider world of international exchanges as well as the formation of the modern state from the colonial experience. The medium term has to do with the stratification of conflicts and instability that unfolded in the area since the 1977-78 war between Ethiopia and Somalia, followed by the still-unresolved civil conflict (since 1991) and the changes it has brought about. This constitutes the current temporal reference.

Focusing now on the prevalently nomadic northern areas (where I conducted most of my research) and on the long-term dimension, the transformative role

played by the progressive insertion in international trade of Somali livestock features prominently (Samatar 1989). Rather than deriving from the intervention of external forces, this move was completely generated by Somali traders and brokers, who drawing on the historical trade links with the Arabian peninsula (Yemen, Saudi Arabia, the Emirates), responded to the increase in livestock need emerging in the Arabian booming oil economies and to the transformation in international mass rituals of the major Islamic commemorations in Saudi Arabia. From being pivotal elements of local livelihood systems founded on specific coping mechanisms against drought and uncertainties, Somali herds increasingly became the object of market-oriented strategies.

This has occurred alongside a shift in the control of pastoral products and organisation from rural producers to the urban-based merchant class, through the privatisation of water points, enclosures of open grazing areas, dependence of pastoralists on low-price imported food products, growing inequalities, erosion of long-established internal coping mechanisms in the face of uncertainties, dependence on external products mediated by urban-based groups. All of these factors generated an increase in the vulnerability of the pastoral groups. Equally, the formation of the central state meant the emergence of inland urban administrative centres where political and economic power began to be concentrated. New cities and villages in the Somali pastoral lands took on multiple meanings: anchors of the pastoralists' movements contributed to reduce the latter's mobility and attracted marginalized pastoralists; at the same time, they started to represent a focus of accumulation linked to the resources and positions distributed by the postcolonial state. Indeed, relevant flows of immigration towards cities, and particularly towards the capital city Mogadishu, started to appear in the 1960s and were significant throughout the 1980s, producing an urbanism based on (little) bureaucratic capital, trade activities and informal services while lacking specific forms of production. Since the 1960s and even more the 1970s this urbanism was accompanied by the formation of a limited modernist urban class promoting forms of social emancipation and new lifestyles.

The social transition here outlined is quite well described in the Somali studies.[6] Less highlighted are the demographic implications of this transition in conjunction with different forms of mobility transitions. On the one hand, these dynamics have been barely addressed by research. On the other, sources are extremely scarce and erratic. All of this only allows us to advance some general and structural considerations. If we consider the long- and medium-term

scenario, the agro-pastoral Somali societies, and their prolonged cultural values, certainly have contributed to maintaining a marked pronatalist attitude. The notion of natural fertility does not help in this sense. Fertility habits in Somali kinship groups derives from economic factors as well as socio-cultural ones, which see the reproduction of patrilinear descent groups and their translation into a genealogical representation of society as basic incentive for large families. As stressed by comparative literature on mobility transitions in Europe (Skeldon 2011), changes on main demographic variables occurred historically at the intersection between economic and spatial (that is related to mobility) changes, specifically urbanization and the public health policies it induced. On a conjectural level we can say that in the colonial and immediately post-colonial era public health measures addressing infant mortality and access to healthcare were rather scarce, found in the new cities that emerged with the formation of the state.[7] Since the 1960s, emigration to urban centres and abroad (towards Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States) steadily increased. In abstract terms, we can presume that the new urbanism that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s under the influence of modern lifestyles produced changes in family reproductive behaviours and the corresponding decline in the fertility rates, but their statistical effect cannot be calculated. These new social enclaves shaped relevant cultural and political changes but never took on a majoritarian dimension (Aden Sheikh 2021). Furthermore, the expansion of informal urban economies grounded on kinship links and on kinship-based welfare systems further prevented such changes. Certainly, the Somali population increased in the decades between the 1960s and 1980s. More relevant, however, is the production of an "excess" of population resulting from the decline of agro-pastoral structures and the feeble economic opportunities provided by the socio-economic transition in cities and through trade.

These effects became particularly visible with the recurrent conflicts occurred since the 1970s coupled with the serious famine of 1974-5 and persistent ecological fragility, overall determining a diminishing capacity of socio-economic reaction and adaptation.

Somalia passed through an international war fought and lost with neighbouring Ethiopia in 1977-78, to internal turmoil, and finally to descent into civil war and state collapse in the early 1990s.

Since the beginning of the civil war, Somalia has become an exemplar case of protracted conflict and instability. Research into the social consequences of these transformations has highlighted specific features: growing differences in

the countryside between small and socially isolated herders, with few animals, and favoured groups linked to the livestock export trade and the privatisation it brought about; huge displacement of people inside Somalia or in the neighbouring countries, gathered in refugee camps or cities and depending on imported food; additional mobilities from these initial shelters towards further destinations to constitute what has been called the Somali war-diaspora; dependence on the remittances sent back by the diaspora, taking on an essential role in the economic reconfigurations; urbanisation without jobs caused by displacement and general crisis; concentration in few hands of the urban productive activities, all centred on international import-export trade and on the remittance industry; and extensive urban economies of services emanating from this concentrated assets.[8] It is easy to see how the longer-term trends of socio-economic change, drafted above, sit behind these phenomena and precipitated the transformations brought about by war, thus making them irreversible.

The acceleration of crises produced further entanglements between demographic, mobility and socio-economic transitions. The immediate consequences on death and birth rates of war, protracted conflict and displacement are quite understandable. More subtle to detect are their medium- and long-term effects, and the processes of people adapting to prolonged conditions of uncertainty and insecurity. Similarly, the possible relationships between demographic variables and various forms of migration in African contexts and elsewhere deserve thorough research. I'll focus on this aspect shortly.

Firstly, let me briefly reflect on the correlation between demographic dynamics and the new Somali urbanisation, in connection with the broad socio-economic transition above described, and with recent recurring shocks. Several demographic-related questions emerge in this respect: how do the abandonment of (labour-intensive) pastoral production, and urbanisation without jobs affect reproductive behaviours and family compositions? How are the latter correlated with the wavering socio-economic integration of young people into the new urban informal economies? Does the current impetuous urbanisation generated by war and displacement allow for higher access to education of young women? Does this influence family models and fertility?[9]

Non-systematic direct observations related to northern Somali cities (Hargeysa and Borama) supported by recent statistical and health surveys by international organizations[10] lead one to think that a high number of children per family (high fertility) might still be the average pattern, considering both favouring

and opposing factors. A few elements support this view. The specific urban political economy characterised by an extensive informal sector based on services, co-optation and networks, coupled with the lack of welfare or pension payments, is somehow equivalent to the need of the workforce that sustained the pastoral sector.[11] Urban environments surely bring about cultural changes and new social identities based less on lineage groups but rather on locality, namely regions and cities, and on Islam. At the same time, the modern cultural influences typical of the 1970s and 80s, which also had an impact on family choices, appear to be diminishing. Patterns of marriage also vary, from exogamous exchanges between lineages, which were intended to sustain a broad and territorially scattered web of alliances, to more frequent endogamous marriages (Djama 1991) attesting to the growing influence of modern Islam and how family capital is now perceived more within small units rather than large aggregates. In this case pronatalist attitudes are followed less in response to economic consideration and more in connection to a modern form of urbanised Islam influenced by examples in the Arab countries (not only indirect cultural and religious influences, but also deriving from the decades-long emigration of Somali families there).

There are also clear signs of increased access by women to tertiary education, and thus later marriage, without however consistent translation into decreased fertility.[12] Also quite unexplored, from a demographic point of view, is the relevance of the diaspora settled in western countries in representing a model for new marriage and reproductive habits, in a transnational field where the flow of information, resources, status symbols and goods is constant.[13] Overall, the urban field appears thus as a huge changing laboratory of new practices and ideas within specific constraints, where the final outcome in demographic terms is contradictory and diverse, open to different life conjunctures and in transition to different positions and behaviours.

Moving now from the Somali territories to the various worlds of Somali emigration, similar socio-demographic questions can be raised: how Somali communities are rebuilt abroad and to what extent they would tend to develop different or similar attitudes towards marriage and motherhood / fatherhood with respect to their cultural views and to the hosting societies? To what extent these attitudes are instead built within a larger Somali transnational society constituted through exchanges between people living abroad in different localities? What is influencing changes in fertility rates? What is the impact of different economic conditions and precarious integration on the communities

living abroad? Since all recent (non-demographic) research on Somali war migration and the diasporic communities it has formed has stressed how this emerging transnational field is central to reproducing local Somali societies at home,[14] these questions clearly take on a crucial dimension.

Responses to these questions have to address the extreme heterogeneity of situations, communities, and host societies making up the worlds of the Somali diaspora. Each unit constitutes a specific arena of socio-demographic change, and it is thus to one of these that I'll now turn my gaze. A focus on arenas of socio-demographic change, I argue, allows us to place habits and attitudes related to family, reproductive behaviours and imaginaries of future into specific social and historical trajectories, as part of a more general enquiry on the Somali war-induced transition and the youth condition it has generated.

The Somali micro-transitions: studying arenas of socio demographic change

Anthropological literature on migrants' reproductive behaviour in Italy represents an emergent field of enquiry (see Decimo 2015, Gribaldo 2016, and the recent collection introduced by Massa and Scarabello 2024). In the extremely heterogenous panorama portrayed by these studies, a few elements can be posed as reference points. Anthropological accounts have looked for specificities related to contexts, origins and personal or familiar trajectories in order to challenge current representations in which reproductive behaviours are read in terms of oppositions between traditional or modern attitudes, and a move from the former, considered as typical of immigrants' families, to the latter, considered as typical of the hosting society. This shift, in this perspective, is seen as a sign of successful integration and as an abandonment of cultural practices – in family relationships and reproductive choices – considered as incompatible with the cultural norms of the host society. My analysis contributes to this discussion in two forms: first, by extending its central questions to refugees' communities and the diasporic transnational worlds formed by the Somali war migration; particularly, I will look at the most marginal and precarious positions of this world. Secondly, by reconnecting individual and familiar trajectories to main social trends and macro transitions, as described above. To do this, I have worked on the transgenerational biographies and relationships of some specific interlocutors with whom I interacted, situated within specific arenas of socio-demographic change.

Addressing one of the many segments of the diasporic Somali worlds, I've conducted a transgenerational analysis on social position, territorial distribution and fertility levels spanning three generations of a defined number of Somali refugees living in Italy, one group representing recently arrived persons with an extremely precarious socio-economic position, and a second group representing persons who have arrived in Italy within the last 30 years or so and with an adequate socio-economic position.[15] Clearly, the analysis is not intended to build a representative model but to explore methodological approaches, hypotheses and analytical frameworks for a political demography grounded on empirical analyses. Moreover, the sample taken into consideration has purely an illustrative aim as, despite identifying two of the most common social situations of Somali refugees in Italy, it is inevitably generic and partial.

Let me qualify this assertion. Italy has been a destination for Somali refugees since the early 1990s, the beginning of the civil conflict, and even before this it hosted Somali migrants, often within government cooperation agreements, who joined existing Somali communities formed through the colonial and postcolonial connections between the two countries. Since the outbreak of the civil war, Italy has given legal recognition as refugees to Somalis, but no specific material or social assistance. For this reason, few Somalis remained in the country; most Somali refugees left for other European destinations. Italy, in other words, represented more of an entry and transit point than a destination country for the Somali war diaspora. The situation did not change much after the implementation of the Dublin Regulation (2003) aimed at controlling the movements of refugees across European countries, which for Somalis arriving in Italy would have meant remaining there. The new provisions did not prevent the newcomers from seeking other European destinations, but if intercepted by local authorities abroad they were sent back to Italy. The regulation thus worsened the living conditions of the Somali refugees, forcing them to remain in Italy with little assistance and resources.

Among a wider range of interviews and contacts, the analysis focuses on 10 in-depth interviews regarding young males recently arrived and in quite precarious socio-economic situations – let's call them the "new refugees" – and 10 surveys with people settled in Italy for longer – the "old refugees" – as kind of "control" group.[16] Interviews were conducted in Milan, between 2023 and 2024. Let's start with the new refugees. This cohort of young people was born between 1998 and 2005. They belong to the generation who grew up amidst the ups and down of the civil conflict, protracted instability and insti-

tutional collapse, and left the country at about 16-18 years old (Generation 3). Their area of origin is mostly the northern region of Somalia and the Somali region of Ethiopia, with a few cases of people coming from Mogadishu and its surroundings. The age of their parents at their birth spans 20 to 35 years old (fathers being much older than mothers in several cases due to polygyny) thus reaching back to the late 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, and representing the generation who made their adult transition in the final years of the military government and passed through the beginning of the war (Generation 2). Similarly, the previous generation (the one of grandfathers and grandmothers) lived in the early phases of decolonisation (1960-69) and the beginning of the military regime (since 1969) (Generation 1).

The analysis focused on four dimensions: the number of children per woman (fertility) to assess the size of the family groups; the place / places of dwelling; the economic activity; finally it was paid attention to the knowledge these young people demonstrated to have of their family history and, quite distinctly, the knowledge of their genealogy, which attributes one of the main elements of their social identity (lineage belonging). Clearly their family trajectories across generations vividly reflect the processes of social change sketched above, highlighting the ruptures and continuities in group and family reproduction. From Generation 1 to Generation 2 is evident the movement away from a largely prevalent countryside life focused on agro-pastoral husbandry, towards urbanisation to the capital city Mogadishu or other regional centres. Urbanisation was driven in most of the cases by employment in the public sector or in the army. Insertion into business networks represented another common pathway into urbanization. In Generation 3, the current one, agro-pastoral activities are nearly absent, and, reportedly, just a few brothers / sisters of the parents of Generation 3 are still living in rural areas. Conversely, from Generation 2 to Generation 3 the dramatic consequences of forced displacement generated by the war and the emergence of a society in diaspora are patently visible. All respondents had family members (parents, uncles, aunts or brothers / sisters) living abroad, within Africa (in the neighbouring countries as well as Senegal and Guinea in two cases), Europe or North America. In most of the cases, more than one family member was living abroad and in different countries, making recognisable the transformation of the family unit as a network scattered across long-distance locations.

In mere descriptive terms, the network-distribution of families is not new (Horst 2006) but it is now simply projected across much further distances.

Analyses, however, have shown how internal relationships (forms of coopera-
tion, hierarchies, affective links, role distribution) changed in the new transna-
tional formations (Lindley 2010). A pattern emerged in the interviews related
to Generation 1 and partly Generation 2 – and well confirmed in other research
– is the polygyny practice as a means for differentiating family economic re-
sources by marrying two wives, one residing in the countryside and the other
in the city. As simple as this is, it looks like an ordered adaptation of family
models for people transitioning from Generation 1 to Generation 2 in a time
of social change by largely corresponding to urbanisation, thus adjusting the
family composition to local trajectories into modernity. What happened later,
because of mass-displacement, is a much more chaotic and accidental adapta-
tion of family composition and territorial distribution. Here family reproduc-
tion was subjected to much higher risks. The influence of war was visible at
various levels. Representing the personal family history is not an easy task,
even when considering three generations (potentially with an average or five
to six children per family, as was the case in the past, three generations can be
comprised of 70 to 100 people): cultural memory is certainly not homogeneous
in relation to all the kinship links involved in family history; only certain
relationships are generally remembered and, particularly, the way relations
are represented and told are different from each other. Resp. 1 and resp. 3, for
instance, had very different styles. Resp. 1 told how in his family, the father,
who married twice, left for the capital city Mogadishu leaving his first wife
and their children (including him) in the rural peripheral region they were
born in. He returned from the capital city only when the war broke out, and
re-established relationships with his former wife and sons (while the second
wife, relying on connections in Mogadishu, managed to move to Canada).
They converged towards the regional capital city, but in the meantime due to
war in the north they lost contact with the rest of the family and their assets
in the countryside. Those nuclei are now dispersed. Resp. 1 has just a generic
knowledge of the second half of the family (that deriving from the second
wife). He used to visit his father regularly before the war, but then this branch
moved to Canada, and they are no longer in touch. Yet, having grown up in
rural northern Somalia he still describes his family as a complex and large
network, where however some links and branches were broken. Resp. 3's ac-
count of his family, conversely, is centred on the figure of the father, setting
aside all the intricate web of relationships made by the other family links.
Besides the emotional bond, this reflects a trajectory of the urbanisation of

the family led by the father, who was occupied in important positions within the state bureaucracy. The sense that I had in our meeting was that this work trajectory favoured a certain nuclearization of the family in the new urban environment, his representation of the family net was in fact exclusively focused on the parents and his brother (2) and sisters (4) thus removing other connections. Despite the fact that resp. 3 could easily retrieve only that part of his family history organised around the nuclear family, he was proud to show his accurate knowledge of his patrilinear genealogy (*abtirsinyo*), learnt since he was a child, and that he could mention about 20 names of ancestors. Like him, all of the other respondents were also eager to show this knowledge and challenge me to do the same or find equivalents in Italian culture of a way to place themselves as individuals in the society and in the public sphere. The difference in the knowledge held by resp. 3 of his family history and his patrilineal *abtirsinyo* and the fact that the latter is not connected to the former in representing his social belonging in terms of an extended group, confirms the nuclearization of his family that I highlighted above. Equally interesting are the comments of resp. 3 when he elaborated on the families and number of children of his brothers and sisters, all living in war-torn Mogadishu. Contrary to the previous generations, attempts of his brothers and sisters (much more the brothers in reality), all in their twenties to thirties, to form a family and have children were much more uncertain: few of them were still unmarried, or if married, with just a few children. Resp. 3 commented on this, relating it to the extremely uncertain and violent social environment of the capital city.

Against the background of these family movements across space and history, we can try now to gain some insights into family size, fertility and attitudes towards parenthood across generations. As one might expect, in Generations 1 and 2 we find family groups with a consistent number of children and several cases of polygynous families. At the level of Generation 2, families were composed of an average of six to nine siblings with more than 10 in a few cases, and had about the same number of children. Generation 1, from the little feedback given by the young respondents, reported similar data. This is coherent with the size and demands of rural households, but also with trends and possibilities in the urbanisation process which sped up since the 1960s.[17] In relation to the latter, we can only make a few speculations: large family size where consistent with improvements in access to medical care; at the same time, urbanisation coupled with limited jobs and an informal economy of services, as I noticed, is coherent with the maintaining of a

large family size. Conversely, urbanisation connected to modernity, and thus to the idea of having "modern" families with smaller family size is confirmed by a number of anecdotical pieces of knowledge, as well as by the group 2 of my respondents (the "old refugees"), but remained limited to elite families of main national centres.

Less anecdotal knowledge can be derived if we move to the level of Generation 3, represented by the young refugees living in Italy and their siblings scattered in different locations, with the reservation however that for this generational level family groups are still being formed. At a first glance, it would seem that the group of young men interviewed live alone, without wives or children, partly because they are still young, and partly due to the extremely precarious conditions in which they live. But a closer investigation suggests a more complex view. On the one hand, they report to have or have had wives (from whom they divorced or separated at a certain point), but they live elsewhere and separately. In a few cases, they had more than one wife. And they also have, in some instances, children, generally living with the mothers.

Personal stories are of course complex and confused; sometimes partners and children are in contact, other times not; in certain cases, they are visited at times or on a regular basis, but the picture we can draw tells of families whose members live alone in different possible combinations and forms of relationships. Single mothers, translocal (transnational most of the times) families, and mother-focal families with men randomly visiting them exchanging material and emotional support, are frequent occurrences. In all of these cases, the intensity and significance of emotional bonds is changing and relates to individual situations. The context in which this occurs, however, is constituted by a set of overlapping precariousnesses.

Firstly, the migration trajectory, even when spanning five or more years, typically involves prolonged mobility and changes of residence where relationships are often reshaped. Secondly, housing and work precariousness characterises life in Milan as well as other Italian cities, and produces further mobility. Multiple economic and social barriers and discrimination hinder access to housing. In addition, job instability derives from the high segmentation of the labour market in terms of wages, skills and working conditions, and from the assignment of new refugees and low-skilled foreigners to its lowest segments. In the interviews, after having talked about the past generations, the conversation naturally turns to the new one, and to their current situations. In this respect, two elements, among many, deserve specific considerations.

Talking about past generations is in fact not a mere technical exercise of remembrance and reconstruction, but means triggering a process of memory and reconsideration of one's relationship with the past and with the personal and emotional links left behind. In more than one case, at the end of the interview, the small paper outline that we had drawn up relating to past generations was folded up and hidden by the interviewee, and in some cases immediately destroyed. Weighing future prospects, the cultural models of the past regarding the sense of "building a family" within specific life stages, conceived as a necessary passage for social recognition of adulthood, or the models of a large family regarded, from a male view, as a sign of success and as an opportunity to place their sons, and therefore also themselves, within multiple and productive social spheres, are still expressed by the young people interviewed as a reference.[18] Much less present, certainly, is the idea that children are descendants who can perpetuate the construction of a lineage that operates, socially and politically, within a lineage group. These representations, however, clash with a reality in which a precarious and marginal integration into European society prevents not only the immediate implementation of these values, which are thus postponed to a future yet to come, but also the construction of an achievable horizon in which it is possible to place oneself with an attainable life path.

The concept of waithood, imported from literature on the youth condition in Africa (Honwana 2012), has been recently used also in demography to hint at the delays and prolonged transitions from one life-stage to another deriving from lack of economic opportunities. The existential dimension of these contradictions is one of inflating expectations and dreams nourishing passivity, but also imaginaries to be (and to go) elsewhere. As such, the concept is posed, in demographic accounts (see for example Bonci and Cavatorta 2021), as an element capable of making sense to peculiar forms of demographic transitions, resulting in the decline in birth rates and fertility rates. Waithood, however, takes on extremely different implications according to the contexts. In a migration situation, specifically in Italy in this case, waithood does not mean waiting without activity, physical inertia and imaginative agency, but it rather expresses a sort of presentism that absorbs all other temporalities (past and future). Instead of lack of action, it means ongoing precarious fabrications, frequently frustrated by difficulties in accessing housing, permanent or well-paid jobs and legal statuses, all contradictions that produce further in-Europe mobility. Waithood in this logic does not even coincide with the sense of a "frozen time" institutionally created in reception centres for refugees and pointed out

in recent literature on the subject (Jacobsen et al. 2021, Giudici et al. 2023).

The effects of a similar social condition can be appreciated more clearly by making comparisons. I've called into question, as mentioned, the generation of "old refugees" of Somali origin living in Italy as a kind of control group, with specific regard to family formations and attitudes towards parenthood. If we look at the outcome, from a limited sample but quite generalisable drawing on anecdotical knowledge, the number of children per couple is much closer to the Italian standards than to the area of origin, that is to the generation of their parents, thereby resembling the "new refugees". However, the motivations and the family contexts which produced such outcomes are quite different.

First, the "old refugees" represent a group that has been settled in Italy for longer and has built families for some time; the picture we can obtain from them is therefore more stable. More pertinently, the reasons given to explain reproductive behaviours relate, certainly, to host society's prevalent representations, but also to the urban modernist culture that matured in Somalia in the 1970s and 1980s, of which this generation is an expression. In fact, their stay in Italy, which as mentioned was primarily a place of transit for Somali refugees immediately after the start of the war, is linked to pre-existing connections between Italy and Somalia and to contacts with Somali communities. Those among the "old refugees" who arrived immediately after the war but could not boast similar connections, moved in many cases to other European countries. Of course, this cultural orientation towards family size is also well suited with the costs of living in Italy, emphasised by integration into society starting from a marginal position.[19]

Even though large evidence is not available, it is possible to hypothesise that this orientation is not fully shared by other long-standing Somali communities in Europe, where we can presume higher fertility levels,[20] both because of different integration conditions and for other prevailing modernist cultures – those more connected, for instance, to the urban Islamic cultures emerging in Somalia. A final comparison can be drawn from recent research on other foreign communities living in Italy, which were formed in extremely different historical and social conditions. Alessandra Gribaldo for instance (2016) reports of research she conducted with women coming from Morocco, a nationality that in Italy presents fertility rates much higher than the rest of society. Although the research shows an extreme heterogeneity in terms of models, behaviours and choices, an interesting element of difference with the Somali case is that family choices as well as childcare in the case of many Moroccan women are conducted in a transnational sphere that includes Italian and Moroccan society,

where parents and relatives provide support to women living in Italy, wherever family groups are formed or partially live.

Conclusions

A dramatic break in the forms of social life as well as, we have seen, in family structures characterizes the extended time of the Somali war and protracted instability. For the young refugees who find themselves in Italy and who live in precarious conditions, looking at their past family relationships is an extremely painful operation as it exposes the subject to a merciless reflection on the gap between aspirations and possibilities. From a more socio-structural point of view, this rupture highlights the long-term consequences of war and the changes it creates in the forms of reproduction of social and family groups, not only in the country of origin but specifically in the areas of refuge.

Within the various arenas of socio-demographic change here produced, forms of family making and reproductive behaviours mirror the precarious social and economic conditions in which refugees live. Such changes, however, cannot be generalized but reflect people's resettlement contexts.

In the cases I discussed, referred to Italy, the socio-demographic change manifests itself in nuclearized and poorly interconnected groups and in low fertility rate, both if we look at the new and old generations. Motivations and consequences however are different for the two groups; whereas in the former case the lags emerging in the family groups' reproduction correspond also to extreme difficulties in contributing to the social reproduction of the groups to which the refugees belong, both in the country of origin and in the transnational sphere, in the second case the family's reduced size is disconnected from the actual ability to participate in the social reproduction of broader spheres of belonging, which is instead linked to economic inclusion.

Insights from other European countries bring in further variabilities, despite the fact that in recent years trends towards increased securitization and exclusionary policies emerged throughout the continent, even in countries with traditionally well-structured asylum systems (such as Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands or UK).

Certainly, the cases here discussed are left with many open questions, much more than the answers given, the scope of my discussion however was more geared to assess methodologies and perspectives for the construction of a non-deterministic political demography grounded on case-study analyses (arenas of change) and on interdisciplinary collaboration.

The fluidity of outcomes above highlighted, surely, leads to context-specific analyses of life conjunctures, circumstantial navigations, social becoming. Here, the possibility for a dialogue and cooperation between micro and macro perspectives and between social sciences and demography lies in showing how specific demographic variables (fertility, reproductive choice, family seize) take shape not within a uniform path of modernization but from multiple and diverse contexts, and therefore from extremely heterogeneous causes, or from a combination thereof.

However, working between micro/macro perspectives and between disciplines (demography and anthropology in this case), so that the language and scale of one can be applied to the other, also implies, for anthropology and social sciences, an increase in scale and a specific contextualisation, one that focuses on structural transitions and interconnects their multiple dimensions, related to demography, mobility and socio-economic systems. For the Somali case, this would allow a deep reflection on the directions taken by the expanding urban economies and the relationships between urban and rural areas, after the transition from the traditional agro-pastoral systems to the postwar society and after the political shocks and related massive displacement. In the diasporic Somali communities, last stage of a series of mobility transitions – from rural to urban, from internal to international, from labour-driven (in the Gulf states in the 1970s) to war-driven, from legally recognized to irregularised – this implies reflecting on the forms in which these worlds abroad will remain pivotal in reproducing local societies back in Somalia.

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Notes

1 - The reference here is to the debates on political arithmetic started by Swift and later taken up by Condorcet and Malthus: see Sussmann 2004. Clearly, classical reference on the birth of demography and governmentality is Foucault 2005.

2 - The model is in reality more complex: the relationships inside the domestic communities are regulated according to specific social categories based on age (elders vs youth) and gender (males vs females) since the domestic community is encapsulated within a lignatic mode of production, progressively integrated with the capitalist one.

3 - Specific accounts of this transition can be found in Ciabarri 2010a, 2010b, 2017.

4 - Three classical study of rural society in the 20th century are Cassanelli 1982, Lewis 1961, Samatar 1989.

5 - UNFPA, *Population Estimation Survey for the 18 pre-war Regions of Somalia*, October 2014, Nairobi.

6 - A synthesis of these transformations can be found in Ciabarri 2010b.

7 - UNDP, *Human Development Report for Somalia*, 2001, Nairobi.

8 - On situations of protracted conflict and crisis see FAO, *The State of Food Insecurity in the World. Addressing food insecurity in protracted crises*, 2010, Rome. For Somalia see Ciabarri 2010a, 2010b, 2017.

9 - The post war Somali urbanism is explored in Bakonyi, Chonka 2024.

10 - UNFPA, *Population Estimation Survey for the 18 pre-war Regions of Somalia*, October 2014, Nairobi; The Federal Republic of Somalia, The Somali Health and Demographic Survey 2020 (SHDS 2020), Report produced with support from the United Nations Population Fund, Somalia and key donors, Mogadishu.

11 - Indeed, both UNFPA and SHDS reports show how households' size and composition in rural and urban areas are similar; confirming the insights on the isolation of rural marginalized groups mentioned above, household size of nomadic groups is slightly smaller. Total fertility rates are also akin, with a slight increase in people living in rural and nomadic areas (SHDS 2020). Likewise, the age structure is quite similar compared to past decades, both in urban and rural contexts. Lower fertility rates are just correlated with high education: average total fertility rate is 6,9 children and 3,7 for women with higher education (SHDS 2020).

12 - Although data on fertility rates differ depending on educational level (see note 9), it is interesting to note that Somali women's fertility preferences are homogeneous, reporting the ideal of 6 children per family (SHDS 2020) both in rural and urban contexts. Clearly, however, living in urban areas is potentially correlated to an easier access to higher education.

13 - Ethnographic studies on the impact of diaspora on urban contexts at home are provided by Lindley 2010 and Galipo 2018.

14 - Two important studies on this topic: UNDP, *Somalia's Missing Million. The Somali Diaspora And Its Role In Development*, 2009, Nairobi; Dagane, Ali Ibrahim; Peter Hansen; Cindy Horst; Ken Menkhaus; Lynette Obare; Laura Hammond & Mustafa Awad (2011) *Cash and Compassion: The Role of the Somali Diaspora in Relief, Development and Peacebuilding*, Report of a Study Commissioned by UNDP Somalia.

15 - The analysis draws on more extended ethnographic research on young Somali migrants in Italy, conducted together with Elia Vitturini in the framework of the research project "Traces of mobility, violence and solidarity. Re-conceptualizing cultural heritage through the lens of migration" - https://tracesofmobility.unimi.it.

16 - To maintain their anonymity, I will simply call them respondent 1, 2 etc.

17 - As noted, current data (SHDS 2020) draw a similar picture.

18 - An ideal family size was reported as being composed of about 6 children. Not surprisingly, the same attitudes towards family and similar fertility preferences are reported in surveys conducted in Somalia (SHDS 2020).

19 - Social context and historical trajectories of "new" and "old" refugees in Italy are analyzed in Ciabarri 2023, Proglio 2020.

20 - Examples of ethnographic studies in European countries include Bjork 2017, Liberatore 2017, Moret 2020, Zoppi 2021.

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