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The ambiguity of khat in Somaliland

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Abstract

Aim of the study

This article presents an analysis of the economic, political and socio-cultural significance of khat in Somaliland, highlighting both its positive and negative effects.

Materials and methods

Thirteen months of anthropological fieldwork in Somaliland, two months of anthropological fieldwork among Somalis in London, four months experience from the Somalia Joint Needs Assessment working as a development specialist on khat, as well as available and relevant literature.

Results

The recent growth in khat consumption in Somaliland is linked to dispersal, unemployment, socio-cultural changes caused by the civil war, and the massive inflow of remittances. Consumption takes place because of an encouraging socio-cultural environment, few opportunities for education and employment, lack of care and support

from parents, as well as widespread availability. Khat represents a significant economic drain on the Somaliland economy, but is also an important source of income for the state and an employment opportunity for thousands. The consumption of khat among government employees challenges the efficiency of state institutions, but also provides a participatory and peaceful political environment that is vital to the democratic transformation of Somaliland. Khat causes the breakdown of families and seriously challenges Somali socio-cultural identities, values and practices. However, khat also strengthens male networks, communities and senses of belonging to Somaliland.

Conclusion

The article argues that khat has both negative and positive effects on Somaliland society. Comparing the role of khat in Somaliland with khat in Puntland and South-central Somalia it is clear that khat in itself does not determine if it contributes to state building and peace, or state failure and violence. Rather, it is the socio-cultural, political and historical context in which it is consumed that determines its larger societal effects. A nuanced analysis of the positive and negative aspects of khat that builds on local perceptions and practices is necessary in order to work with khat from a regulatory and developmental perspective.



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Keywords

Catha edulis; Somaliland; Societal effects; Regulation; Development

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