

Understanding the Dynamics of **Somali** Civil Society

Roles, Objectives, Effectiveness, and Accountability



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Executive summary

The concept of civil society is interpreted differently depending on context. Participants in our study conceptualized and contextualized civil society in ways that reflect Somalia's unique social, cultural, and political realities. A female participant from Mogadishu compellingly described Somali civil society by stating, "*Our civil society looks how we look as a society.*" This suggests that Somali civil society is fragmented and shaped by both enduring and emerging social characteristics that range from traditional and cultural elements rooted in the interpretation of Islam and clan identity to the influence of global exposure and governance shifts; these influences include the democratic period, the socialist regime, the mistrust posed by the prolonged violent conflict, the 4.5 clan-based power-sharing arrangement, and other similar local, regional, and global factors.

Participants emphasized the profound impact of Somalia's contested federalism on the evolution of recent civil society. They highlighted how federal-based regional politics have reshaped civil society, since civil society organizations now function largely under the jurisdiction of their respective Federal Member States (FMS). While some participants valued federalism for devolving services and empowering peripheral states, others argued that the Somali model of federalism has weakened national identity and entrenched clan divisions within the civil society. Participants from Baidoa and, to some extent Garowe, were more favorable toward federalized civil society structures, whereas those in Mogadishu viewed federalism as an externally imposed system designed to divide Somalis further. Historically, the Southwest community and Baidoa, its interim capital city, have supported federalism, while Puntland, with Garowe as its current capital, adopted and actively championed the federal system following the collapse of Somalia's central government in 1991.

Additionally, participants demonstrated a deep awareness of the influence of Western international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) on Somali civil society. Many local civil society organizations (CSOs), interchangeably referred to as NGOs, were originally established to implement INGO-funded projects, with their sustainability tied directly to continued external funding. Consistent with the literature, participants in this study noted that modern Somali civil society is primarily urban-based, while rural civil society remains unexplored. Nevertheless, traditional elders and religious leaders – longstanding cultural foundations of Somali civil society – remain deeply embedded in both urban and rural communities.

With respect to the broader literature, definitions and theories of modern civil society are largely rooted in Western contexts. For instance, Western theories frame social accountability as a mechanism to hold public officials accountable through collaboration with institutional checks and balances – parliament, the judiciary, public audit systems, and independent commissions. These institutions create a pathway through which civil society can indirectly hold governments accountable.

By contrast, both our participants' accounts and Somali-focused literature highlight the incompatibility of these Western frameworks in Somalia's current context. Several factors explain this misalignment. First, many Somali civil society organizations were established to distribute humanitarian assistance or implement INGO projects rather than to engage in governance or policy influence; some were even created as profit-driven entities. Second, many organizations lack internal legitimacy, as leaders have often remained in office beyond their mandates without justifiable grounds. Third, the Somali Parliament – expected to collaborate with civil society in accountability processes – is not elected by citizens but rather is selected through clan elders, political elites, and business people who finance their indirect elections. Consequently, parliamentarians are accountable not to the public or to civil society but to those who secured their positions. Fourth, the judiciary is widely perceived as corrupt and under executive control, while the public audit office holds little power. Moreover, there are no credible independent commissions with which civil society can engage to foster accountability.

For these reasons, Western notions of civil society and social accountability are not directly applicable in Somalia. Instead, accountability is shaped by clan elders, political elites, and patronage networks that determine access to state power.

Key Findings

1. The study finds that literature focused on Somali civil society as well as a few participants have conceptualized Somali civil society using multiple terms – CSOs, NGOs, and non-state actors (NSA) – often used interchangeably. Community-based organizations (CBOs), and professional associations such as those of doctors, lawyers and teachers received less emphasis. Traditional structures such as Islamic jamaacooyin (groups/congregations) and clan elders remain the original foundation for civil society in Somalia
2. Civil society organizations have varying objectives. The objectives of urban-based, modern CSOs are to implement international NGO projects on the ground; these projects include humanitarian relief, conflict resolution, peacebuilding, social services, and other activities reflecting the conflict-affected Somalia context. Some CSOs are profit-driven or serve as platforms for employment. Professional associations tend to pursue sector-specific objectives, whereas less formal CBOs often lack clear objectives and direction.
3. Governance practices within CSOs are inconsistent, ranging from individualized, manipulative leadership to relatively open and consultative structures, with indirect clan influence in some cases. Federalism is viewed differently: For some it fragments Somali identity and civil society, while for others it empowers peripheral states and enables localized service delivery.

4. The influence of civil society on government policy remains extremely limited. Accountability mechanisms are almost nonexistent due to weak legitimacy among CSO top leadership, which is caused by internal fragmentation within CSOs, weak governance, and the dysfunctionality of state institutions. Collaboration across CSOs has also been limited by federalism, clan dynamics, poor governance, and competition for scarce resources.
5. Occasional collaboration emerges during consortium projects, donor engagement, or conference participation and during crises such as floods and droughts where different CSO groups come together to help those affected by these disasters.
6. Traditional civil society groups function under customary or Islamic law, but modern CSOs lack a legal framework to define and protect their roles.
7. Finally, the participation of women and youth in CSOs is weak, though the civil society sector offers both groups opportunities to establish independent CSOs to challenge cultural and generational marginalization and, at the same time, to initiate their own activities responding to their needs.

1. Introduction

The origins of modern Somali civil society can be traced back to the independence struggle, with the Somali Youth League (SYL) often regarded as one of the earliest organized modern civil society movements in Somalia. Civil society continued to grow during the civilian government period of 1960–1969. However, under the socialist regime, all civil society organizations and platforms were dismantled, and they remained absent until the collapse of Somalia's central government in 1991. To fill the vacuum left by the collapsed government, civil society reemerged to address urgent societal needs arising from the civil war. Its primary objectives were to respond to humanitarian crises, mitigate violent conflicts, promote peace and social cohesion, and facilitate reconciliation processes. These early objectives have left a lasting imprint on the orientation, identity, and activities of Somali civil society and continue to shape the identity, activities, and approach of the Somalia civil society organization (CSO). Consequently, Somali civil society has struggled since the Arta Conference of 2000 to transcend its initial humanitarian and peacebuilding focus and to adapt its objectives in line with the evolving demands of statebuilding.

1.1 Problem Statement

Research on Somali civil society remains limited, particularly in studies that examine its dynamics from the perspectives of Somali citizens. There is also a lack of comprehensive analysis of the internal and external challenges that shape the effectiveness and progress of Somali civil society. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring these dynamics in greater depth.

1.2 Research Objectives

The overall objective of this study is to examine the dynamics of Somali civil society, the factors influencing its development, and its role in promoting public governance and government accountability in a post-conflict context. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Analyze the dynamics of Somali civil society, including its formation, objectives, internal governance structures, and the challenges it encounters.
2. Examine the impacts – both positive and negative – of federalism and the 4.5 clan-based power-sharing formula on the development and functioning of civil society.
3. Explore the role of civil society in shaping public policies and enhancing government accountability.
4. Assess the participation of women and youth within civil society, highlighting the challenges they face as well as the opportunities available to them.

1.3 Questions Guiding the Research

1. What Factors Have Influenced The Formation And Dynamics Of Somali Civil Society?
2. What Are The Positive And Negative Effects Of Federalism And The 4.5 Clan-Based Power-Sharing Arrangement On The Development And Dynamics Of Somali Civil Society?
3. In What Ways Does Civil Society Contribute To Improving Public Policies And To Holding Government Accountable?
4. What Is The Role Of Women And Youth In Somali Civil Society, And What Challenges May Shape Their Involvement?

1.4 Limitations

The qualitative data for this study was collected from Baidoa, Garowe, and Mogadishu only. In addition, the survey respondents were predominantly highly educated, with 207 (95%) of the 219 respondents holding postgraduate or university-level qualifications, which indicates that their technological literacy and knowledge are relatively high. Consequently, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to other Somali cities or to Somali society as a whole.

Nonetheless, the integration of literature review, qualitative interviews, and quantitative survey data provides valuable insights into the dynamics of Somali civil society and contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the subject.

1.5 Research Structure

In addition to the executive summary, the study is organized into four main sections. The first section is the Introduction, which provides a brief background of the research, the problem statement, objectives, questions guiding the study, significance of the study, and its limitations. The second section is the Literature Review, which is divided into two subsections. The first subsection reviews general literature on the concepts of civil society and social accountability; these concepts are largely rooted in Western thought. The second subsection examines literature focused specifically on Somali civil society, thereby offering contextual insights from existing scholarship. The third section outlines the Methodology adopted for this study. The fourth section presents the Findings and Discussion, where the results are analyzed and interpreted. The study concludes with a set of Policy Recommendations derived from the research findings.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Concept of “Civil Society” and its Objectives

The importance of civil society lies primarily in its effective contribution to improving public institutions. This concept gained prominence following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 because civil society groups played a crucial role in challenging and overthrowing authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe and in promoting democratization. Today, a civil society is widely recognized as critical to good governance and statebuilding and to holding governments accountable, particularly when working with state institutions mandated to oversee the executive branch.

Some scholars argue that various forms resembling civil society did exist throughout history, emphasizing that most societies developed community-based moral commitments that reflected the voices and needs of their people.¹ Civil society is assumed to function effectively in the context of democracy² and to protect citizens against injustice from state institutions.³

Civil society in partnership with the state: In this theory, the state is perceived as inadequate to govern the entire society. Therefore, it is suggested that the state transfer some of its responsibilities and functions to civil society and to non-state actors.⁴

1. Farhad Khosrokhavar, The Civil Sphere and Arab Spring, in *Solidarity, Justice, and Incorporation: Thinking Through the Civil Sphere*, ed. Peter Kivisto, Giuseppe Sciortino, (Oxford University Press, 2015) pp.142–171

2. Roopinder Oberoi, Jamie P. Halsall and Michael Snowden, Introduction: Global Civil Society, in *Contestations in Global Civil Society*, 2022, ed. Oberoi, J. P. Halsall, & M. Snowden (Emerald Group Publishing Ltd 2022), pp.1–11, <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-80043-700-520221003>

3. Simone Chambers and Jeffrey Kopstein, Civil Society and the State, Chapter 20, in *Oxford Handbook of Political Theory*, ed. John S. Dryzek, Bonnie Honig, Anne Phillips, (Oxford University Press, 2006) p.368.

4. Chambers and Kopstein, “Civil Society and the State,” p.374.

2.2 Social Accountability

Accountability is one of the cornerstones of good governance.⁵ In the context of civil society–government, accountability is defined as an obligation of power-holders in public office to take responsibility for their actions and performance.⁶

Social accountability: Social accountability is defined as the process through which citizens, as in civil society organizations, directly or indirectly hold state officials and service providers accountable for their actions to ensure that those in power are responsive to the needs and rights of the public. The goal of social accountability is to enhance the legitimacy, trust, and confidence that citizens have in state institutions.^{7, 8} Social accountability is exercised in different ways that include participatory mechanisms such as scrutiny of state governance, public budget analysis, expenditure tracking, monitoring of service delivery, and investigative journalism that exposes government mismanagement.⁹ These “horizontal” citizen-driven accountability measures complement and reinforce conventional mechanisms to hold executive branches of government accountable.¹⁰ Horizontal accountability is a mechanism of checks and balances within governmental institutions where legislative bodies, government auditing systems, legal procedures, independent judiciaries, and public commissions – who all are citizens’ agents – check executive performance, and practices.¹¹ Horizontal accountability is a relationship between more or less equal institutions that are different branches of government in contrast to “vertical accountability,” which is a relationship between unequals: the government and citizens. Most times, the success of social accountability depends on collaboration with citizens’ agents such as parliament, the judiciary, and independent commissions.¹² In contexts such as Somalia, where these horizontal accountability institutions are weak, contested, or lack public legitimacy, social accountability mechanisms have limited effect because civil society pressure has no credible institutional channel through which it can be translated into enforcement or reform. As mentioned earlier, to effectively hold public officials accountable, civil society groups should work with horizontal accountability mechanisms.¹³

It is worth explaining that there is no formal obligation for the executive and public officials, such as ministers, to be held accountable directly by civil society. Instead, the executive branch, public servants and other public officials are primarily accountable to parliament and are supported by legal mechanisms and other government institutions such as public audits and independent commissions.¹⁴

5. Anna Luhrmann, Kyle L. Marquardt, and Valeriya Mechkova, “Constraining Governments: New Indices of Vertical, Horizontal, and Diagonal Accountability” (May 20, 2020), Published online by Cambridge University Press, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-political-science-review/article/constraining-governments-new-indices-of-vertical-horizontal-and-diagonal-accountability/7C790A7E00B4279C60BB8F4CD8A6DEC5>

6. Carmen Malena, and Reiner Forster Janmejay Singh, “Social Accountability: An Introduction to the Concept and Emerging Practice” World Bank, paper No. 76, December 2004. Also see: Anna Luhrmann, Kyle L. Marquardt, and Valeriya Mechkova, “Constraining Governments: New Indices of Vertical, Horizontal, and Diagonal Accountability” Cambridge University Press, 2020, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-political-science-review/article/constraining-governments-new-indices-of-vertical-horizontal-and-diagonal-accountability/7C790A7E00B4279C60BB8F4CD8A6DEC5>; and UNDP, “Chapter 1: Social Accountability” 2012, https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/arabstates/Chapter1_Social_accountability_changing_region_Report_English_Gov_Week_Cairo_March_14.pdf.

7. . UNDP, “Chapter 1: Social Accountability” 2012), accessed at: https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/arabstates/Chapter1_Social_accountability_changing_region_Report_English_Gov_Week_Cairo_March_14.pdf

8. UNDP, “Chapter 1: Social Accountability.”

9. Malena, and Singh, “Social Accountability.”

10. UNDP, “Chapter 1: Social Accountability.”

11. Luhrmann, Kyle L. Marquardt, and Valeriya Mechkova, “Constraining Governments.”

12. Luhrmann, Kyle L. Marquardt, and Valeriya Mechkova, “Constraining Governments.”

13. Malena, and Singh, “Social Accountability.”

14. UNDP, “Chapter 1: Social Accountability” 2012), accessed at: https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/arabstates/Chapter1_Social_accountability_changing_region_Report_English_Gov_Week_Cairo_March_14.pdf.

This institutional arrangement assumes the existence of functional and independent state bodies capable of exercising oversight, an assumption that does not hold in Somalia's current political context.

Mechanisms of social accountability: The different mechanisms of social accountability include meaningful elections to elect legislative bodies, which are a major form of social accountability in democratic societies.¹⁵ In the absence of elections, the level of social accountability is low.¹⁶ Elections, however, do not facilitate continuous accountability in the periods between election cycles. For this reason, beyond voting, social accountability is an ongoing process through which citizens, communities, civil society organizations (CSOs), and independent media can hold public officials accountable in partnership with conventional accountability bodies.

Alongside elections, mechanisms of social accountability include public demonstrations, protests, dialogue between civil society and government officials, advocacy, and investigative journalism. Mechanisms also include participatory public policymaking, citizen involvement in public commissions, and citizen advisory boards. Social accountability mechanisms are therefore intended to reinforce conventional mechanisms of accountability.¹⁷

Social accountability and governance: Research findings show that social accountability leads to improved public governance and to public service delivery shaped by informed policy design. Nevertheless, the effectiveness and sustainability of social accountability mechanisms are improved when these are “institutionalized” and when the state's own internal mechanisms of accountability are more transparent and open to civic engagement.¹⁸ When the state has the capacity to provide a democratic environment coupled with the enforcement of the rule of law, then it can set up clear rules and an appropriate environment for civic engagement.¹⁹ Understandably, social accountability makes little change or sense where state institutions – like those of Somalia – have collapsed or are dysfunctional.²⁰ Thus experts argue that functioning public institutions and some form of effective interaction between civil society and the state are prerequisite for social accountability.²¹

2.3 The Evolution and Dynamics of Somali Civil Society

After the collapse of the military regime in 1991, Somalia remained without a functioning central government until 2000, marking the longest period of a complete state collapse in the postcolonial era. This unprecedented situation posed immense challenges for Somali civil society, which had to operate in the absence of formal or functional state structures.²²

15. UNDP, “Chapter 1: Social Accountability” (2012), accessed at: https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/arabstates/Chapter1_Social_accountability_changing_region_Report_English_Gov_Week_Cairo_March_14.pdf.

16. Luhrmann, Marquardt, and Mechkova, “Constraining Governments.”

17. UNDP, “Chapter 1: Social Accountability” and also Malena, and Singh, “Social Accountability.”

18. Malena and Singh, “Social Accountability.”

19. John Ackerman, “Human Rights and Social Accountability” World Bank, (2005), <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/250451468048914790/pdf/330110HR0and0SAc0paper0in0SDV0format.pdf>. See also World Bank, “The Role of Civic Engagement and Social Accountability in the Governance Equation” World Bank, Note No. 75 (2003).

20. Malena, and Singh, “Social Accountability,” and also Ackerman, “Human Rights.”

21. Ackerman, “Human Rights,” p.14. and Alos Malena, and Singh, “Social Accountability.”

22. Ken Menkhaus with Hassan Sheikh, Shane Quinn, and Ibrahim Farah, “Somalia: Civil Society in a Collapsed State,” in *Civil Society & Statebuilding: A Critical Assessment*, ed. Thania Paffenholz, (published in the United States of America in 2010 by Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2010) pp.321–350.

2.4 The Background of Somali Civil Society

In its modern sense, the concept of modern “civil society” in Somalia started after the collapse of the military regime. However, like other societies, Somalis had their own civil society that reflected their cultural context. The two main Somali social institutions mentioned in the literature are Islamic and clan-based institutions. Islamic institutions clearly fall within widely accepted definitions of civil society. For instance, Duruq Sufiyah (traditional Sufi orders) and fuqahaa (jurisprudent groups) have historically played a central role in civic life, serving as educators, mediators, arbitrators, and community leaders. Similarly, modern Islamic NGOs are undeniably integral components of Somali civil society.²³

In addition to these two main social institutions, there were and still are poets who play critical roles in mobilizing, composing and reciting poems that contribute to public awareness and to shaping social thinking. Recently, some forms of urban-based Somali literature, such as songs and theater, have expressed the feelings and aspirations of the Somali society. Such Somali civic culture, influenced by Islam and by the power of poetry, remain effective today.²⁴

2.5 Understanding the Concept of Modern Somali Civil Society

Like anywhere else in the world, in Somalia the definition of “civil society” is contested. For instance, a study focused on Somalia’s civil society interviewed some Somalis who described all non-state actors (NSAs) as civil society.²⁵ The concept of NSA refers to almost all social groups outside government institutions and includes such CSOs as unions and associations, for example, students’ associations, journalists’ unions, training centers, think tanks, farmers’ unions, and doctors’ and lawyers’ associations.²⁶ These informal groups are deeply rooted in the grassroots and can easily mobilize their local communities.²⁷ However they lack clear vision, structure, resources, organizational skills, and the individual capacity to analyze and advocate for local needs.²⁸

After the collapse of the central government in 1991, Somali CSOs – particularly Islamic NGOs and charities – gained prominence. These organizations stepped in to fill the gap vacated by the state, and developed reasonable service delivery capacities.²⁹ They have relied mainly on funding and support from Islamic countries and international Islamic organizations.³⁰

23. Menkhaus, Sheikh, Quinn, and Farah, “Somalia: Civil Society in a Collapsed State.”

24. Abdulkadir Osman Farah, “The Politics of Civil Society and Language” in Taxanaha Darsidda Afka iyo Suugaanta Soomaalida Somali Language and Literature Studies series. 1, vol. 1, AGA- ed. Akadeemiya Goboleedka Af Soomaaliga, (Djibouti, 2015), pp. 166–182.

25. The EU Somalia Unit and DfID, Strengthening Civil Society in Somalia: Developing a Comprehensive Strategy, Final report, March, 2012.

26. Menkhaus, Sheikh, Quinn, and Farah, “Somalia: Civil Society in a Collapsed State,” p.326.

27. Nur, “The Role of Civil Society on State Building in Somalia.”

28. The EU Somalia Unit and DfID, “Strengthening Civil Society in Somalia.”

29. Feysal Osman, “The Role of Civil Society in Somalia’s Reconstruction: Achievements, Challenges and Opportunities” Safeworld, accessed at: <https://www.safeworld-global.org/resources/news-and-analysis/post/775-the-role-of-civil-society-in-somaliaas-reconstruction-achievements-challenges-and-opportunities>

30. The EU Somalia Unit and DfID, Strengthening Civil Society in Somalia: Developing a Comprehensive Strategy, Final report, March, 2012.

31. Menkhaus, Sheikh, Quinn, and Farah, “Somalia: Civil Society in a Collapsed State.” Also see The EU Somalia Unit and DfID, “Strengthening Civil Society in Somalia” and also Abdiwahid Ali Ahmed, “The Role of Civil Society in Peace Building in Somalia” (Master diss., Istanbul Commerce University, 2020).”

Furthermore, Islamic NGOs' interactions with the Somali government have been minimal, with limited efforts to influence public policy. Instead, they have tended to operate separately and independently of other organizations or the government.³¹

In terms of social dynamics and composition, the NGOs run by Islamic groups and by women have, to some extent, demonstrated an ability to transcend clan divisions, serving as bridges across various clans and social groups. In contrast, most other NGOs have had difficulty transcending clan or regional divides.³² Regarding finance, Somali civil society organizations (CSOs), particularly NGOs, remain primarily project based, and many continue to struggle with building long-term institutional cultures and sustainable organisational foundations.³³ Traditional clan elders play key roles in Somali society. However, whether they are part of civil society is contested. A report on Somali civil society argues that traditional clan elders cannot be considered as part of civil society because they are organically linked to clan structures.³⁴ However clan elders are effective at maintaining clan cohesion and clan identity and at governing communities through traditional customary law (Xeer) in the absence of the state, resolving and mediating clan conflicts.³⁵ As a result, traditional clan elders are part and parcel of Somali civil society as demonstrated by their civic role in society.³⁶ For the purposes of this study, traditional clan elders are analytically included in the civil society landscape because of their civic and governance functions but without the implication that they meet the normative standards of modern civil society organizations.

2.6 From the Pre-Colonial to the Colonial Era

Before the colonial era, religious leaders and traditional elders maintained structures that resembled organized aspects of civil society, operating under Islamic Shariah law and customary law (xeer), respectively. They served their communities on a voluntary basis, which earned them widespread respect and legitimacy. However, during colonial rule, some traditional clan elders began receiving payments from colonial authorities. This practice undermined their social standing and generated suspicion within their communities.³⁷ Conversely, colonial powers sought to suppress the activities of emerging urban-based professional associations that appeared to hold anti-colonial sentiments.³⁸ This strategy, however, proved counterproductive, as it galvanized various social groups, particularly under the leadership of religious scholars, to organize resistance movements. Islamic learning centers and mosques became central hubs for anti-colonial mobilization. Some of these movements, such as the Daraawiish led by Sayid Mohamed Abdulle Hassan and the Biyamaal movement, eventually transformed into armed resistance against colonial domination.³⁹

31. Menkhaus, Sheikh, Quinn, and Farah, "Somalia: Civil Society in a Collapsed State." Also see The EU Somalia Unit and DfID, "Strengthening Civil Society in Somalia" and also Abdiwahid Ali Ahmed, "The Role of Civil Society in Peace Building in Somalia" (Master diss., Istanbul Commerce University, 2020)."

32. Menkhaus, Sheikh, Quinn, and Farah, "Somalia: Civil Society in a Collapsed State."

33. The EU Somalia Unit and DfID, "Strengthening Civil Society in Somalia."

34. The EU Somalia Unit and DfID, "Strengthening Civil Society in Somalia."

35. Ahmed Osman Nur, "The Role of Civil Society on State Building in Somalia, Scientific Research, an Academic Publisher," 2024, accessed at: <https://www.scrip.org/journal/paperinformation?paperid=138545>; also The EU Somalia Unit and DfID, "Strengthening Civil Society in Somalia."

36. Menkhaus, Sheikh, Quinn, and Farah, "Somalia: Civil Society in a Collapsed State."

37. Oxfam Netherlands, "Mapping Somali Civil Society" n(o)vib, Oxfam Netherlands, ISBN 99669746-3-6.

38. SIDRA Institute, "The Enabling and Disabling Environment for CSO Operations in Somalia: A Case for Garowe and Galkacyo" (July 2019), p.2. Accessed https://sidrainstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/SIDRA_CS0-Study-Report_2019.pdf; also check: Oxfam Netherlands, "Mapping Somali Civil Society" n(o)vib, Oxfam Netherlands, ISBN 99669746-3-6, p.11.

39. Oxfam Netherlands, "Mapping Somali Civil Society" n(o)vib, Oxfam Netherlands, ISBN 99669746-3-6, p.11.

That said, colonial powers adopted the policy of “divide and rule,” which weakened the ability of the traditional and emerging Somali civil society to collectively confront the colonial project. Historically, women, youth, and poets were among the effective activist social groups that played a critical role during the struggle for independence.⁴⁰

2.7 Civil Society during Civilian Democratic Government 1960–1969

Despite the fact that information on the period is limited, some forms of civil society existed during the civilian democratic government that preceded General Barre’s military regime, which ousted the democratically elected government. Nascent, urban-based seeds of modern Somali civil society began to emerge through vibrant cultural life, political debate, and social discourse in public spaces, youth clubs, gatherings, and restaurants in Mogadishu and other major cities. The National Theatre, constructed by Chinese engineers in the 1960s, played an important role in modernizing Somali arts and literature in the capital city.

The theatre added an urban dimension to popular culture and served as a platform for plays that addressed pressing political and social issues such as Shabeel Naagood (The Leopard among Women). At that time, Mogadishu was described as one of the most vibrant cultural centers in the sub-Saharan African countries. This flourishing artistic expression enriched the public imagination and enabled the civil society to formulate and express ideas and opinions, contributing, in one way or another, to the early stages of building a democratic state.⁴¹

Alongside civil society activities, there were checks and balances within state institutions during the civilian, democratic system. The country had an elected parliament to which the government was answerable. The judiciary was also independent. Additionally, an active and effective set of newspapers was in place; these included Yuusuf Duhul’s Dalka, “once hailed as the model of free press in sub-Saharan Africa.”⁴² These newspapers were published in three languages – Arabic, English, and Italian – and contributed to monitoring government policies. The Somali language had not yet been written. Some of these newspapers were published daily, some weekly, and some monthly.⁴³

2.8 Civil Society during the Socialist Regime 1969–1991

The military regime suspended the constitution and dissolved the Parliament, political parties, and all forms of democratic aspects adopting a model of scientific socialism (hantiwadaag cilmiyeysan). Similarly, the military regime banned all forms of independent civil society organizations that operated under the democratic system.⁴⁴

40. Abdulkadir Osman Farah, “The Politics of Civil Society and Language.”

41. Maxamed Rashiid Sheekh Hassan, “The Collapse of the Civil Society and the New Somali Order,” The European Association of Somali Studies, and Centre of African Studies, and Department of African Languages and Culture, First Conference, 23rd–25th September 1993, SOAS, University of London.

42. David D. Laitin and Said S Samatar, Somalia: Nation in Search of a State, (Nations of Contemporary Africa, 1987. p.154).

43. Hassan, “The Collapse of the Civil Society and the New Somali Order” p.5.

44. Hassan, “The Collapse of the Civil Society and the New Somali Order” p.5.

Instead, the military regime established state-controlled associations including Iskaashatooyin; these were directly linked to and guided by the socialist military regime. These associations cannot be considered genuine civil society organizations. In fact, when the regime collapsed in 1991, these state-invented associations disintegrated too because they were part of the regime. Meanwhile, civic-minded individuals, including intellectuals and activists, were either imprisoned or fled the country.⁴⁵

During the military, socialist regime, some forms of informal civil society groups operated secretly and underground, often organized along traditional, clan-based, or religious lines. Following the collapse of the military regime and during the period of statelessness from 1991 to 2000, several of these informal groups, particularly religious ones, transformed to formal or semi-formal civil society organizations.⁴⁶

2.9 The Shape of Civil Society since 1991 and Onward

From 1991 until today the international community played a significant role in shaping and reshaping many urban-based CSOs, partnering with them as implementers of humanitarian aid, relief efforts, and local development initiatives.⁴⁷ International organizations needed local partners to implement their projects on the ground, which led to the emergence of many local NGOs without proper governance structure. The majority of these local NGOs became defunct or existed only on paper once donor-funded projects ended.⁴⁸

Among those CSOs, particularly NGOs, that managed to sustain themselves, women-led organizations, in particular, thrived and benefited from the engagement with international NGOs.⁴⁹ However, some local reports argue that Somali women's groups are largely "side-lined in the highest circles of decision-making."⁵⁰ Recently, women's groups, focused on internally displaced people (IDP) were aided by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in establishing diverse Income-Generating Activities (IGA) across four targeted locations: Garowe, Baidoa, Kismayo, and Dollow. This activity benefited sixty women from twelve Community-Based Protection Committees. The IGA promoted women's self-reliant economic activities and empowered these women to "safeguard themselves against threats such as gender-based violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, and the risks associated with displacement and climate change."⁵¹

Although civil society played a prominent and visible role in the 2000 Arta Reconciliation Conference, its influence in Somalia's subsequent statebuilding process has declined significantly.

45. Laitin and Samatar, *Somalia: Nation in Search of a State*. Also see Farah, "The Politics of Civil Society and Language." Also see: The EU Somalia Unit and DfID, "Strengthening Civil Society in Somalia."

46. Farah, "The Politics of Civil Society and Language."

47. Farah, "The Politics of Civil Society and Language." Also see Feysal Osman, "The Role of Civil Society in Somalia's Reconstruction: Achievements, Challenges and Opportunities" Safeworld, June 14th 2018, <https://www.saferworld-global.org/resources/news-and-analysis/post/775-the-role-of-civil-society-in-somaliaas-reconstruction-achievements-challenges-and-opportunities>.

48. Abdiwahid Ali Ahmed, "The Role of Civil Society in Peace Building in Somalia."

49. Farah, "The Politics of Civil Society and Language."

50. Osman, "The Role of Civil Society in So malia's Reconstruction: Achievements, Challenges and Opportunities."

51. IOM Somalia, *From Strength to Strength: The Women-Led Initiatives Transforming Lives in Somalia*. Accessed: <https://somalia.iom.int/stories/strength-strength-women-led-initiatives-transforming-lives-somalia#:~:text=One%20of%20the%20project's%20most,Photo:%20IOM%20Somalia/2024>

This decline is attributed primarily to the adoption of the 4.5 clan-based power-sharing formula that limited the space for civil society actors in formal political processes. In contrast, the role of traditional clan elders and of the business community has grown stronger since Arta. Unlike civil society organizations, traditional elders and business elites have considerable influence in Somali politics. The business community, in particular, represents one of the most powerful social groups in the country. Their operations are often organized along clan, regional, and ideological lines, enabling them to exert substantial control over both the political and economic landscapes.⁵² Another key issue is that Somalia's statebuilding process has primarily followed a top-down approach rather than a bottom-up one. As a result, local governance remains weak or entirely absent in many municipalities and districts. This lack of effective local governance has hindered the organic growth and development of civil society organizations (CSOs) at the grassroots level.⁵³

2.10 Somali Civil Society: Organizational Culture and Accountability

Many Somali CSOs, including NGOs, are led and managed by individuals who apparently own these organizations. As a result, these leaders often operate with limited transparency and limited accountability, and not only to members within the organization but also to the broader Somali public. Instead, these CSOs are primarily accountable to their international NGO funders.⁵⁴ This lack of accountability, to their own members and to the Somali citizens in general, undermines the credibility of CSOs as inclusive platforms that represent the interests of their organizations and the society at large. These organizations are viewed as representing only individual interests. Perceived as vehicles for individual gain rather than as agents of collective action, these organizations are rarely seen as drivers of social change, influencers of public policy, or advocates for the common good.⁵⁵ A study on Somalia's civil society in the context of state collapse found that some of the most effective local NGOs relied heavily on charismatic leadership, which hindered the development of sustainable institutional capacity.⁵⁶ Somali civil society organizations are generally expected to mobilize communities around shared interests, or at times, around group-specific interests; they are not expected to advance the private agendas of organizational leaders. Despite these concerns and suspicions surrounding such CSOs, it is worth noting that over time a few have gradually developed a degree of institutional capacity.⁵⁷

On the other hand, it is argued that many Somali NGOs have evolved into sources of income generation, employment, and revenue; these are often referred to as "pocket NGOs" because they function similarly to profit-making businesses.

52. Farah, "The Politics of Civil Society and Language."

53. The EU Somalia Unit and DfID, "Strengthening Civil Society in Somalia"

54. The EU Somalia Unit and DfID, "Strengthening Civil Society in Somalia"

55. The EU Somalia Unit and DfID, "Strengthening Civil Society in Somalia"

56. Menkhaus, Sheikh, Quinn, and Farah, "Somalia: Civil Society in a Collapsed State."

57. The EU Somalia Unit and DfID, "Strengthening Civil Society in Somalia"

This phenomenon is not necessarily the fault of these organizations but rather a consequence of widespread poverty, underdevelopment, and the lack of alternative means for survival, livelihood, and access to basic services. Therefore, when defining CSOs in Somalia, it is imperative to consider the unique local context rather than to apply external standards. Even more concerning is the emergence of disingenuity established by politicians, militias, warlords, and certain business leaders who often use CSOs as tools to divert humanitarian aid and foreign funding to their personal enrichment.⁵⁸

3. Methodology

This study employed both qualitative and quantitative methods. Relevant literature was first reviewed, with particular emphasis on literature addressing Somali civil society. For the field component, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven key informants (KIIs): two from Mogadishu, two from Baidoa, and three from Garowe. In addition, three focus group discussions (FGDs) were held consisting of 11 participants from Mogadishu, 9 participants from Garowe, and 9 participants from Baidoa. The focal groups were organized in these three cities between July 20, 2025 and July 29, 2025. A total number of 36 persons participated in the KIIs and FGDs. In terms of gender representation, 14 were female and 22 were males. All interviews were recorded and stored securely at the facilities of the Heritage Institute for Policy Studies (HIPS).

Prior to the interviews and FGDs, participants were informed about the objectives and nature of the research. They were asked to provide informed consent for the use of their contributions in publications and forums. All participants signed consent forms. Despite this, some challenges were observed. The contribution of certain participants, particularly women, was less than that of men. Some participants arrived late or left before the discussions concluded.

All interviews and FGDs were conducted in Somali. The principal investigator reviewed the recordings multiple times, transcribed selected quotations and took detailed notes to support report writing. A thematic analysis approach was employed. Themes emerged at various stages: during interviews and FGDs, while reviewing recordings, in the process of transcription, during data analysis, and in the literature review and research-design stages.

For the quantitative component, a structured questionnaire with multiple-choice questions was developed using Google Forms. The survey was distributed through civil-society networks and relevant individuals, with the condition that only residents of Somalia could participate. Each respondent was allowed only one submission, and access was restricted after submission. A total of 219 valid responses were received, exceeding the initial expectation of 150.

58. Menkhaus, Sheikh, Quinn, and Farah, "Somalia: Civil Society in a Collapsed State," p.330.

Table 1: FGD and KII Coding Examples

FGD coding examples	Description	KII coding examples	Description
BFGDW1	Baidoa focus group discussion, woman 1	GM1	Garowe man 1
GFGDM2	Garowe focus group discussion, man 2	MF2	Mogadishu female 2
MFGDW5	Mogadishu Focus group discussion, women 5	BM2	Baidoa male 2

Demographic characteristics of survey respondents

Survey questionnaires were completed by 219 respondents. In terms of gender representation, 125 respondents (57.1%) were male while 94 respondents (42.9%) were female. Regarding age, 108 respondents (49.5%) were 30–50 years old, 87 (39.9%) were 18–30 years old and 24 (10.6%) were 50+ years old. In level of education, 119 (54.6%) were at the postgraduate level, and 88 (40.4%) were at the university level, while only 7 (3.2%) were at the primary school–high school level. The question about education was optional and the remaining respondents did not mention their level of education. The employment question was also optional; only 163 respondents stated that they were employed and the rest did not indicate their employment status.



125
MALE (57.1%)



94
FEMALE (42.9%)

4. Results

4.1 The Challenge of Defining Civil Society

Participants conceptualized civil society in varying ways. A male participant from Mogadishu defined civil society as an organized, nongovernmental social group that aims to serve the wide Somali community.⁵⁹

Others defined it narrowly, equating civil society with nonprofit organizations such as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), which are formally established to pursue specific objectives.

⁵⁹. MFGDM9, Mogadishu.

“A civil society organization is a nongovernmental organization established to achieve the founders’ objectives, such as education or development... . It is a voluntary-based organization.”⁶⁰ This view is in agreement with the EU Somalia Unit and DfID report focused on the Somali civil society.⁶¹

Other participants, however, articulated a broader understanding of Somali civil society. They argued that it encompasses all citizens and groups outside government structures and includes religious and traditional elders, business associations, and professional organizations such as unions of lawyers, doctors, teachers, and students. These entities, whether formally or informally organized, may share a collective focus on advancing the common good and social interests such as human rights, peace, stability, and development. A male participant from Garowe explained:

Civil society groups are citizens who are not public officials and do not have any government job... . They can be informal or formal associations including professional-based organizations such as doctors’ associations, teachers’ associations, and lawyers. There can also be community-based foundations such as religious groups, women’s associations, youth associations, and business associations. Culturally, sheikhs and religious groups, who are very influential, as well as traditional clan elders, are also part of civil society. Formally or informally organized intellectuals are also part of civil society.⁶²

According to Article 16 of Somalia’s provisional constitution, every individual possesses the fundamental right to freely associate with others, whether as individuals or within groups. This encompasses the right to establish and join organizations, such as trade unions and political parties.⁶³ Despite this, several participants emphasized the difficulty of defining Somali civil society, primarily due to the absence of a legal framework that formally delineates its scope and actors.

Interestingly, a minority of participants contested the notion of a modern Somali civil society, arguing that it is predominantly urban-based and influenced by Western models. They maintained that such forms of organization do not exist in rural areas. Literature on Somali civil society also confirms the modern Somali CSO as urban-based.⁶⁴

At the same time, other participants contended that Somalia had locally relevant forms of civil society long before Western influence. For instance, a male participant from Garowe pointed out that traditional clan elders and religious orders (jamaacooyin) represented the earliest civil society structures in Somali society.⁶⁵

60. BFGDM1, Baidoa.

61. The EU Somalia Unit and DfID, (2012).

62. GM1

63. Federal Republic of Somalia: “Provisional Constitution,” (August, 1st 2012), Mogadishu, Somalia. Accessed <https://hrlibrary.umn.edu/research/Somalia-Constitution2012.pdf>.

64. The EU Somalia Unit and DfID, (2012).

65. GM2

A female participant from Mogadishu offered a different perspective, arguing that the Somali Youth League (SYL), established in 1943, was the first urban-based civil society organization in the country, describing them as genuine and the first modern, real civil society Somalis ever had.⁶⁶

Several participants from the three cities highlighted the fact that modern civil society started after the catastrophe of the central government collapse in 1991, explaining that during the warlords' era, there were quite active civil society groups that had stamina. This is because the situation at that time necessitated the emergence of civil society, as there was no government to solve social problems. However, as time has passed, some CSOs have transformed into ganacsato (business people). This account is in line with literature focused on Somali civil society.⁶⁷ On the other hand, our participants argued that there was no independent civil society during the military regime that continued over 21 years.⁶⁸

4.2 Civil Society Objectives, Activities, and Effectiveness

When asked about the objectives, activities and effectiveness of civil society, participants provided a range of perspectives. They noted that the establishment of civil society organizations (CSOs) and groups was driven by different objectives, which in turn shaped their activities and service delivery. These objectives can be broadly classified into general objectives and group-specific objectives.

General objectives emerged in response to the collapse of the Somali central government in 1991 and sought to address the social needs and governance vacuum. These objectives included promoting peacebuilding and education, improving health services, advancing development and humanitarian assistance, protecting human rights, increasing public awareness of social issues, digging water wells, and amplifying the voices of marginalized groups in decision-making processes. Similar to our participants' findings, studies conducted on the role of civil society in Somalia's reconstruction have confirmed the abovementioned Somali civil society objectives and activities, adding that some CSOs collaborated with the international community and urged them to pressure the Somali government to develop policy reforms such as implementing a women's quota in Parliament. However, women's issues are often perceived locally as foreign-driven initiatives with hidden agendas. In some regions, such as Puntland and Somaliland, CSOs have contributed directly to elections.⁶⁹ In general, modern Somali CSOs have primarily engaged with and been supported by the international NGOs and Western embassies involved in Somalia affairs; they have developed some similar approaches, and their activities have been influenced by their international funders.⁷⁰

66. MF2

67. Ahmed, "The Role of Civil Society in Peace Building in Somalia" (2020).

68. MFGDW3; BEGDW2

69. Ahmed Osman Nur, "The Role of Civil Society on State Building in Somalia" Benadir University, 2024, <https://www.scirp.org/journal/paperinformation?paperid=138545>.

70. The EU Somalia Unit and DfID, "Strengthening Civil Society in Somalia."

Group-specific objectives, by contrast, reflected the particular priorities of individual organizations, such as advancing women's rights, promoting youth empowerment, or addressing sector-specific concerns. Some participants emphasized that certain objectives were externally driven, shaped largely by donor agendas that required Somali CSOs to align their activities with specific funding priorities; these may include, for example, climate change, community services, humanitarian aid, or any particular projects. This view is in line with findings from a 2010 study titled "Somalia: Civil Society in a Collapsed State."⁷¹

Many also argued that Somali civil society often lacks clearly defined objectives related to politics, policymaking, and governance, with CSOs frequently adopting short-term, project-driven goals linked to available donor funding. As a female participant put it "Most civil society organizations (CSOs) are not homegrown. Rather, they have been established primarily with the objective of attracting international NGO funding, making them largely accountable to external donors.... The foundations of their agendas are not rooted in the local context."⁷²

A counterargument was provided by another female participant from Mogadishu who contested that, like anyone else, members of CSOs need an income to support their families and to carry out their activities.⁷³ Therefore, there is no problem in receiving funding from international NGOs. She continued by explaining that the concern arises when CSOs blindly accept external donors' agendas and templates to secure funding. Instead, she argued, CSOs should demonstrate creativity by designing projects that address locally identified needs and then persuade international NGOs to provide support. She also suggested that CSOs should explore mechanisms to mobilize domestic resources, encouraging Somalis themselves to contribute, in order to strengthen their independence and sustainability.

In general, the qualitative findings regarding the objectives of CSOs were further substantiated by survey responses. Of 219 respondents, 65 (29.7%) stated that the primary objective of CSOs is to serve citizens in general. Meanwhile, 62 respondents (28.3%) believed that CSOs are primarily focused on generating income for themselves. Additionally, 49 respondents (22.4%) indicated that CSOs aim to hold the government accountable, whereas 43 respondents (19.6%) argued that CSOs lack clear objectives altogether.

Participants also expressed diverse opinions regarding CSO effectiveness. Quite a significant number of participants argued that organized CSOs are reasonably active and effective. For instance, two female participants believed that CSOs are active in areas where the government is unable to operate due to insecurity.⁷⁴

Other participants highlighted the fact that CSOs are active in facilitating dialogue on key issues, such as electoral processes in Puntland. They also work on humanitarian aid, education, health, and every sector.

71. Menkhaus, Sheikh, Quinn, and Farah, "Somalia: Civil Society in a Collapsed State."

72. MFGDW2

73. MFGDW3

74. BFGDW2, and GFGDW4.

At that time, civil society organizations were a kind of government in Somalia, because there was no formal government. Even though their effectiveness has slowed lately, what they are delivering is still much better than the government's work.

In contrast to the views expressed by participants in the qualitative interviews, survey respondents expressed relatively negative perceptions of the effectiveness of CSOs. For instance, of 104 respondents (47.7%) of 219 indicated that CSOs are not active, whereas only 72 respondents (33%) believed that CSOs are active and effective. The remaining respondents expressed uncertainty or provided no clear opinion.

4.3 Contested Views on Civil Society Governance

Qualitative participants in this study expressed divergent perspectives on the governance of civil society organizations. A female participant⁷⁵ argued that civil society “reflects how we look like as a society,” indicating that all these social contradictions are visible in the civil society. However, two major and opposing views emerged from their interviews.

The first group of participants argued that CSOs are often dominated by individual leaders or small cliques with vested interests who exercise influence informally behind the scenes.⁷⁶ This is primarily because there is no oversight body to which they are accountable. Ostensibly, CSOs look democratic. But when you get to know them, then you realize that specific individuals decide behind the door. There could be some sort of election, but pre-decided individuals will emerge and get elected.⁷⁷ The board, executive members, and other committees often do not have power.⁷⁸ Literature has also demonstrated that Somali CSOs lack an internal democratic governance and accountability to their constituents. Additionally, their collaboration and networking skills are poor.⁷⁹

In contrast, the second group of participants argued that a small number CSOs are democratic, transparent, and to some extent, accountable to their members, particularly when they operate as large umbrella organizations. Such organizations, which bring together diverse groups including youth, women, teachers, and students, were described as more open and participatory since no single individual can dominate them. This is because large CSOs normally operate with relatively established governance structures. As a result, they tend to be more democratic, transparent, and consultation-oriented, as such mechanisms are essential for their functioning. Moreover, access to good external funding generally requires CSOs to demonstrate institutional capacity through the presence of effective boards, constitutions, and strategic plans. Consequently, large organizations are less likely to be dominated by a single individual.⁸⁰

75. MFGD2.

76. GFGDM5.

77. MF2; BFGDW6.

78. GFGDM1.

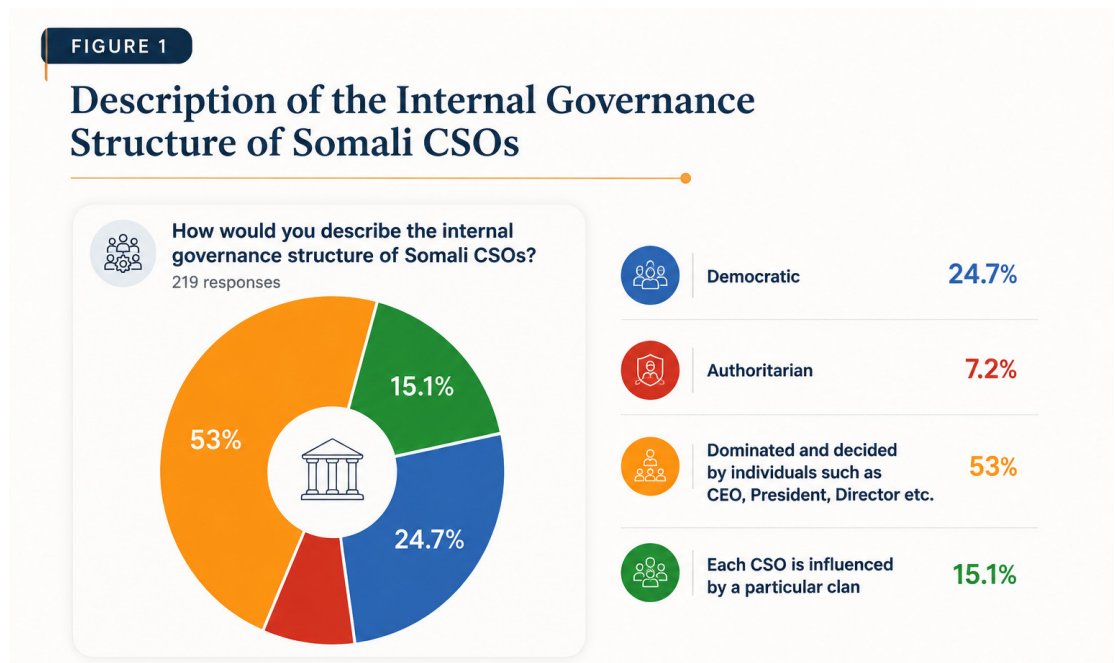
79. Osman, “The Role of Civil Society in Somalia’s Reconstruction: Achievements.”

80. BFGDM1; MFGDW3.

Particularly, membership-funded civil society organizations are generally democratic, transparent, and consultation-based, as equal financial contributions empower inclusive decision-making. In contrast, externally funded CSOs often concentrate authority in top leadership, since members lack financial input.⁸¹

With regard to the influence of clan dynamics on civil society governance, the majority of interviewees asserted that clan influence is limited. However, a minority of participants highlighted that civil society organizations sometimes incorporate clan representation within their governing structures, primarily to project an image of inclusivity. “It is obvious that Somali cultural aspects influence the structure and management of civil society organizations. This means that civil society groups deal with very sensitive issues in order to maintain clan balance in line with social expectations. Somalis expect civil society organizations to reflect and mirror the representation of different clans on one hand, while on the other, they must also involve competent members. This is a very challenging issue.”⁸²

The survey findings almost corresponded with the views expressed by qualitative participants. For instance, a slight majority of 116 respondents (53%) of 219 indicated that CSOs are dominated by individuals. In comparison, 54 respondents (24.7%) stated that CSOs operate democratically, while 33 respondents (15.1%) believed that the governance of CSOs is influenced by clan affiliations. Only a small minority of 16 respondents (7.3%) perceived CSOs as having an authoritarian governance system. Figure 1 explains the survey responses.



81. MFGDM8.

82. GM1.

4.4 The Influence of the 4.5 Clan-Based Power-Sharing Formula on Civil Society Participation in Governance and Statebuilding

When asked whether the clan-based 4.5 power-sharing formula undermines civil society participation in the statebuilding process, the majority of participants from Baidoa rejected its negative impact on civil society's effectiveness and activities.

In contrast, several participants from Garowe and Mogadishu emphasized that the 4.5 clan-based power-sharing formula hinders meaningful civil-society engagement in statebuilding. For instance, a few participants from Garowe and Mogadishu argued that the 4.5 system contradicts the mission of civil society because it is discriminatory, suggesting that some communities are regarded as “half human beings.”⁸³

Similarly, other participants expressed the view that the 4.5 formula deprives ordinary citizens of their power, transferring authority instead to a small group of clan elders who oversee indirect elections. A male participant from Garowe further stressed that the 4.5 arrangement fosters social divisions and undermines accountability. He explained that the formula enables clan elders to select Members of Parliament (MPs), thereby weakening citizens' ability to exercise their political rights to elect their representatives. He elaborated: “We know that currently, MPs are elected indirectly by their clan leaders. So, for instance, if you criticize an MP, his clan members may respond by accusing you of targeting their representative. That annuls accountability. It also entrenches clan sentiment and tribalism, preventing citizens from electing the person they want regardless of clan membership.”⁸⁴

Survey respondents also reinforced the views stressed by qualitative participants, with a significant proportion (40.6%) strongly believing that the 4.5 clan-based power-sharing formula undermines the role of CSOs in politics, governance, and statebuilding; 22.4% agreed that the clan-based power-sharing formula undermines the role of CSOs in politics, governance, and statebuilding. In contrast, 16% disagreed and 14.6% strongly disagreed, while only 6.4% were not sure. The survey posed the following question: Do you agree that the 4.5 clan-based power-sharing formula undermines the role of civil society in politics, governance, and statebuilding? Table 3 shows the responses of the 219 survey participants.

83. GFGDW; MMI.

84. GMI.

Table 2: Survey Respondents' Perceptions of the Impact of the 4.5 Clan-Based Power-Sharing Formula on the Role of Civil Society in Politics, Governance, and Statebuilding

Response	Number/Percentage
Strongly agree	89 (40.6%)
Agree	49 (22.4%)
Not sure	14 (6.4%)
Disagree	35 (16%)
Strongly disagree	32 (14.6%)

4.5 Divergent Perspectives on the Impact of Federalism on Civil Society

Similar to their views on the impact of clans on the governance of civil society, participants expressed divergent opinions regarding the impact of federalism on civil society in Somalia. Some respondents from Mogadishu, Baidoa, and Garowe argued that, in principle, federalism is beneficial for both Somalia and civil society. They explained that federalism enables the devolution of power, services, and resources from the center to the regions, peripheries and districts.

According to this group, federalism can positively influence civil society if the federalism is based on political ideologies, principles, and coherent policies rather than on clan-based divisions. While endorsing the concept of federalism in principle, they criticized the current Somali model as a clan-driven and dysfunctional federal system. Some participants observed that this distorted federalism has fragmented civil society in ways that mirror the political fragmentation. They emphasized that civil society organizations are often confined to the jurisdictions of their respective Federal Member States, making them vulnerable to clan-driven regional politics. Consequently, the same distortions and divisions evident in the federal political structure are reflected within civil society.

Similarly, some participants acknowledged the potential benefits of federalism by noting that it empowers local and regional CSOs to address community needs. However, they cautioned that civil society structures currently mirror the fragmented federal system, where CSOs remain divided along regional lines suggesting the creation of a federated civil society body that connects CSOs at a state level with the national level, enabling collaboration and strengthening civil society's overall role. Without such collaboration, they warned, civil society will remain fragmented and powerless.

In contrast, another group of participants considered federalism to have a negative impact on civil society, reflecting its overall negative effects on Somalia's political system. They argued that federalism is designed for countries with deep ethnic, religious, and linguistic divisions – such as Ethiopia – where autonomous regions can manage diverse cultural identities. Somalia, they noted, is culturally homogenous, with a shared language, religion, and traditions, and thus does not require such a system. They further contrasted Somalia's federalism with Ethiopia's, noting that while Ethiopia's federal states remain under the authority of the central government, Somali Federal Member States often ignore national institutions and even seek foreign mediation for disputes with the federal government.

Some participants, particularly those from Mogadishu, critiqued the federal system, arguing that it has negatively affected the identity of both civil society and the Somali people more broadly. They explained that if an individual is a member of a civil society organization from Galmudug, Puntland, Southwest State, or any other Federal Member State, he or she is often associated with the majority clan of that region, even if they do not belong to it. Moreover, civil society members from outside a particular state are generally not welcome to engage in activities there, restricting them to operating only within their own state. Even when they bring useful initiatives, their presence is often met with discomfort simply because they are perceived as outsiders. This rejection, participants argued, is rooted in a clannish mentality that identifies individuals primarily through the clan affiliation of their state of origin. Regardless of personal merit or contribution, individuals are judged through the lens of clan identity. As a result, participants contended, federalism has undermined collaboration and has eroded creativity and a shared sense of identity – both the collective 'Somaliness' and even the principles of Islamic brotherhood.

With regard to survey responses, when asked whether the federal system is an obstacle or benefit to the progress of civil society, a majority of 142 respondents (64.8%) of 219 viewed it as an obstacle, while 77 respondents (35.2%) considered it beneficial for CSOs.

4.6 Civil Society's Influence on Government Policies: Different Perspectives

Participants expressed different perspectives regarding the extent to which Somali civil society influences government policies. Several participants argued that civil society has only a limited impact due to structural and political constraints. This is because politicians are generally unwilling to involve civil society in policymaking, except in areas related to social issues such as education and health. Furthermore, international donor funding for civil society is restricted primarily to service delivery in these sectors.

Similarly, while governments may occasionally invite civil society representatives to provide input on policies, this engagement often serves as a symbolic gesture – using civil society as a token or “rubber stamp” to create an impression of inclusivity.⁸⁵

From a different perspective, a female participant explained that if civil society organizations had sought to influence the executive branch of government, they could have collaborated with parliamentary subcommittees tasked with developing legislation in various sectors. Through such collaboration, civil society would have had the opportunity to shape legislation and influence government policies by scrutinizing policies that directly affect the lives of ordinary citizens. However, this kind of relationship between the Parliament and civil society does not exist, she lamented, as neither institution is currently active or effective.⁸⁶ Literature on this issue explains that citizen-driven accountability measures complement and reinforce conventional “horizontal” mechanisms to hold executive branches of government accountable.⁸⁷ By contrast, several participants from across FGDs presented a counterargument, emphasizing that Members of Parliament are not elected by ordinary citizens and, consequently, do not represent specific districts. Instead, they are selected by clan elders and are often financially supported by business leaders or influential political elites during indirect elections, or in some cases, are self-financed. As a result, these participants argued, there is no genuine connection between civil society and the so-called parliamentarians.

Distinctively, participants from Garowe highlighted Puntland’s civil society as comparatively more influential in shaping public policy. They explained that Puntland’s civil society, led by the Puntland Non-State Actors Association (PUNSAA), maintains regular engagement with the Puntland Parliament and cabinet ministries on key policy matters.

For instance, civil society groups are routinely consulted by the Ministry of Finance during budget deliberations, particularly on allocations for social services.

Beyond budget and sectoral policies, Puntland’s civil society was also credited with playing a critical role in the state’s electoral process and conflict mediation. During the most recent election, when tensions between government and opposition nearly escalated into violent conflict, civil society including religious leaders, traditional elders, and business figures intervened to mediate and promote dialogue.⁸⁸

Survey responses on the influence of CSOs on government policies were divided too. When asked about the level of positive impact Somali CSOs have had on government policies, 74 (33.8%) of 219 respondents perceived their influence as medium/moderate. In contrast, a nearly equal number, 71 respondents (32.4%), considered the influence to be low, while 38 respondents (17.4%) assessed it as very low.

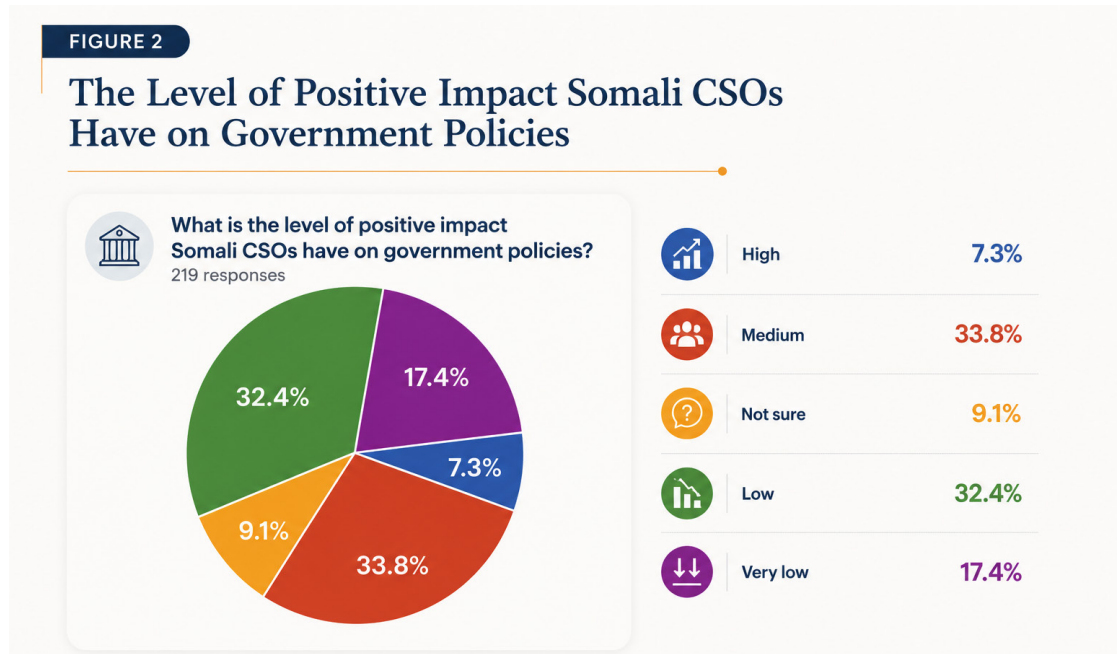
85. BM1; MM1; GFGDM8.

86. MFGDW3.

87. UNDP, “Chapter 1: Social Accountability.”

88. GFGDW7; GFGDW2.

Overall, the number of respondents (109 or 49.8%) who responded negatively (low and very low) was greater than the number (90 or 41.1%) who responded positively (medium and high). This indicates that, overall, CSOs are largely perceived as having limited influence. Finally, 9.1% respondents were unsure of CSOs' influence on policies.



4.7 Civil Society's Limited Role in Government Accountability

Participants from the three cities (Baidoa, Garowe, and Mogadishu) overwhelmingly agreed that civil society has very limited influence in holding different levels of government – local, Federal Member States (FMS), and the federal government (FGS) – accountable for corruption, mismanagement, and misuse of public resources.

Throughout this section, references to Parliament, the executive, and the judiciary refer to Somalia's existing institutions as experienced by participants, rather than to these bodies as abstract democratic ideals. The resources mentioned by participants include taxation collected from airports and ports as well as international donor funding. Several obstacles were identified by participants as hindering the accountability role of civil society.

First of all, participants emphasized that ordinary citizens do not directly elect government officials – whether parliamentarians, the executive, or other decision-makers. Instead, politicians and public officials in general are indirectly chosen through clan elders and elite leaders at the federal and state levels. Consequently, politicians and public officials remain accountable primarily to those who finance or facilitate their indirect election, rather than to the wider public.

Second, despite the fact that Somalia's provisional constitution grants every Somali citizen freedom of expression and association, our participants identified civil society as lacking legitimacy or a specific legal framework endorsed by Parliament that could empower it to hold government accountable from a legal perspective. Without such protections, civil society remains vulnerable to political interference. However, a female participant argued that in terms of legal frameworks, civil society can be categorized into two types: modern civil society and traditional civil society. The latter encompasses religious groups and traditional elders, who operate under Islamic Sharia law and customary law (xeer) frameworks, respectively. In contrast, modern civil society lacks a clearly defined legal framework, which presents a significant dilemma.⁸⁹

Third, participants described government institutions as weak and less effective; this limits civil society's access to essential information or meaningful engagement to question officials.

Furthermore, participants noted that the government often collaborates with international donors to restrict funding for civil society organizations perceived as critical of the state. This dependency undermines the independence of civil society. As a female participant from Mogadishu explained:

It is very hard to find any civil society that holds government accountable. This is because government can block you from getting funds from the international community. If you are critical, the government tells donors that you are difficult to work with. It is paradoxical that international funders ask civil society to hold government accountable while simultaneously requiring government approval for funding applications.⁹⁰

Some participants further argued that civil society itself suffers from limited accountability, as many CSOs extend leadership terms without reelection. This lack of internal legitimacy undermines CSOs' credibility in demanding accountability from government officials.

In contrast, clans were seen as more capable of holding government accountable by demanding political representation and resource allocation, although this is often pursued from narrow clan-based interests rather than from national interests.

A minority of participants highlighted the fact that media outlets occasionally expose critical issues, compelling government responses. However, journalists remain vulnerable to harassment, interrogation, and arrest by security agencies. Others observed that while some civil society groups produce reports, these rarely translate into policy change due to the absence of enforcement mechanisms.

⁸⁹. MFGDW1.

⁹⁰. MF2.

On the question of accountability through elections, the majority of participants emphasized the importance of a “one person, one vote” (OPOV) system to hold government accountable. As one man noted, “Election is the tool [with which a] citizen can punish an incompetent and a failed politician.”⁹¹ Most participants believed OPOV could empower citizens, strengthen their confidence, and provide a sense of ownership in governance. However, some participants expressed skepticism, arguing that elections alone will not transform Somalia’s governance landscape. They reasoned that democracy functions best in literate societies where citizens understand electoral processes and responsibilities. As a female participant stated:

OPOV won’t bring a miracle. Democracy benefits literate societies. What do you think about Somalis’ literacy? Elections here will be dominated by clan sentiment, corruption, and unrealistic expectations. This could lead to disappointment and make people vulnerable to exploitation by criminal or violent groups.⁹²

Some participants stressed the view that civil society would be empowered if Somali citizens were able to directly elect their representatives. They argued that, under such a system, each Member of Parliament (MP) would be elected from a specific district, thereby making the MP accountable to his/her constituency. This would enable MPs to engage with their constituents, understand their needs, and receive their suggestions. Nevertheless, she expressed little optimism that such a system would materialize until credible elections are organized.⁹³

However, some participants questioned the legitimacy of the recently publicized elections in Mogadishu, characterizing them as coerced rather than genuine. A female participant recounted her experience: “What is happening now is that they pull people out of a bajaaj (rickshaw) or stop them while walking on the street and then force them, at gunpoint, to register for a voting card. What kind of election is this? What benefit do I gain? Who can I vote for?”⁹⁴

Another female participant from Mogadishu provided an insightful perspective on the current electoral process, stating that the government is fully aware of the importance of civic awareness but deliberately seeks to prevent it. According to her, the ruling elites perceive the maintenance of the status quo as advantageous. She explained that if citizens were adequately informed and engaged in a transparent electoral process, they would likely elect leaders who address their needs. However, leaders of both Federal Member States (FMS) and the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) recognize that civic awareness and genuine democratic practices would jeopardize their reelection prospects. Consequently, they prefer to sustain either a state of disorder or a manipulated electoral process that serves their interests.

91. MFGD8.

92. MF2.

93. MFGDW3; GFGDW7.

94. MFGDW5.

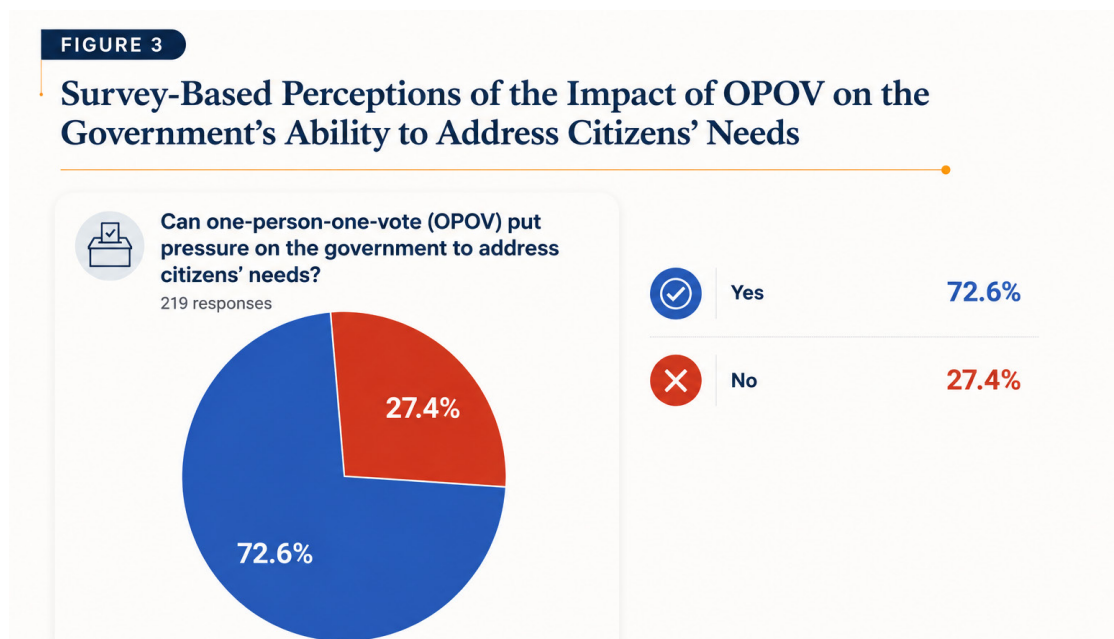
She predicted that the consequences of clan-based mobilization, in which clans are encouraged to vote for their clan representatives “even if they are shayaadiin (satans),” as commonly expressed in public discourse nowadays, could prove worse and more detrimental than the indirect elections previously managed by clan elders.

The views of survey respondents regarding the role of CSOs in holding government accountable were more positive than those of qualitative interview participants. Parliament was ranked first as the primary institution responsible for overseeing and holding the executive government accountable, followed by civil society. Judiciary was ranked third selected by 17 respondents, followed by Media selected by 14 respondents and finally business people selected by 13 respondents. Table 4 reports the answers of 219 survey respondents to the question: Which group is expected to check and hold the Somali government accountable for mismanagement, corruption, and poor governance?

Table 3: Groups Expected to Hold Government Accountable for Mismanagement and Poor Governance (Survey-Based Perspective)

AGENT HOLDING GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABLE	PERCENTAGE
Parliament	100 (45.7%)
Civil society	75 (34.2%)
Judiciary	17 (7.8%)
Media	14 (6.4%)
Business people	13 (5.9%)

Consistent with the views of qualitative interview participants, a majority of survey respondents (159 or 72.6% of 219) affirmed the importance of the “one person, one vote” (OPOV) system in holding the government accountable; 60 respondents (27.4%) disagreed. The survey results are presented in Figure 3.



4.8 Weak Collaboration within CSOs

Participants from the three cities overwhelmingly confirmed that collaboration is very weak among civil society organizations (CSOs) across Somalia. They argued that relationships between CSOs in different Federal Member States (FMS) are weak due to the federal system, which separates and confines CSOs within state boundaries, mirroring the political fragmentation introduced by federalism.

Additionally, participants noted that although some CSOs claim to operate at the national level, their engagement with FMS-based civil society organizations is either very low or entirely absent. However, most participants from Garowe and Baidoa acknowledged that collaboration among CSOs within individual states—such as Puntland State or Southwest State—is reasonable. For example, in Puntland, participants highlighted the Puntland Non-State Actors Association (PUNSAA), an umbrella organization comprising 22 local CSOs, as the main platform that facilitates collaboration and networking for different CSOs in Puntland.

In general, participants identified several factors that promote collaboration. These include:

- joint consortium projects,
- situations where CSOs receive funding to implement activities outside their home state (requiring partnerships with local organizations),
- participation in conferences or umbrella platforms such as PUNSAA in the case of Puntland
- international donors also seen as facilitators of collaboration by occasionally bringing CSOs together to explain how to secure funding and apply together, which creates opportunities for collaboration and networking.
- and finally, different CSOs coming together during natural disasters such as floods and droughts to help those affected by the disaster.

The weak collaboration among Somali CSOs, which was overwhelmingly highlighted by interview participants, was similarly confirmed by survey respondents. A majority of 139 respondents (63.5%) of 219 described collaboration as weak.

4.9 Participation of Women and Youth in Civil Society

Participants expressed diverse perspectives on the involvement of women and youth in civil society activities. While some emphasized that the participation of these groups remains weak and limited, the majority argued that women's engagement is stronger than that of youth.

According to participants, women's involvement in CSOs has increased significantly since the collapse of Somalia's central government in 1991. Women were among the most affected casualties of the civil war, and their lived experiences of violence, displacement, and marginalization motivated them to pursue peacebuilding, social change, human rights advocacy, and child protection.

In addition to defending women's and children's rights, women were also reported to campaign for the needs of minority groups. This was attributed to their profound awareness of social problems, vulnerability, and exclusion – issues they personally endured during the war and its aftermath. Women are very much involved in civil society because they are the ones who have most experienced discrimination, injustice, and violations of their rights. So women want to defend the rights of women and marginalized groups and to bring their issues to the government and international bodies.⁹⁵

With regard to youth, several participants highlighted their strength in leveraging social media and technology. They suggested that, if these skills are utilized positively, youth could contribute significantly to accountability, public awareness, and social transformation.

Some participants also pointed to historical common ground between women and youth, referencing their substantial contributions to the Somali Youth League (SYL) during the independence struggle. Nonetheless, civil society was viewed as a unique space that enables women and youth to establish their own organizations, design initiatives, and introduce new ideas without the constraints of cultural norms, gender discrimination, or age-based exclusion.

Finally, a minority of participants argued that the current form of civil society – particularly women-led organizations focused on gender issues – is largely shaped by Western influences introduced through international donors after the collapse of the central government in 1991.

The survey findings are also consistent with the interviewees' responses. When asked in the survey, What do you think about the participation of women and youth in civil society governance and activities?, the majority (138 or 63% of 219 respondents) indicated that women's and youth's involvement in CSOs was weak, while 57 respondents (26%) considered it strong. The remaining participants were uncertain.

4.10 Challenges Facing Somali Civil Society

According to participants from Mogadishu, Garowe, and Baidoa, Somalia's civil society confronts a wide range of challenges that reflect the country's broader complexities. While some challenges are common across the Federal Member States (FMS), others are context-specific, varying from region to region. The key challenges identified by participants include the following:

95. BFGDM1; GFGDW7.

1. **The short term of the vision:** Several participants underlined CSOs' lack of vision to develop long- term institutional capacity. This is because the vast majority of these CSOs are project based and dependent on international donors. CSOs do not have a vision beyond these projects and, if the projects were lost, the CSO could disappear or become defunct. This account agrees with two studies: "Strengthening Civil Society in Somalia" and "The Role of Civil Society in Somalia's Reconstruction: Achievements."⁹⁶
2. **Political challenges:** CSOs face significant political obstacles. First, political fragmentation driven by clan-based politics often undermines collaboration. For example, CSOs in Hargeisa may find it difficult to work with their counterparts in Las Anod due to ongoing clan-related political tensions and previous violent conflicts. Secondly, politicians often pressure CSOs to align with their political agendas. Third, some politicians attempt to influence CSOs by nominating their supporters to top leadership positions. In addition, governments at local, regional, or national levels sometimes recruit senior CSO members as advisors to advance government interests rather than those of the civil society. Finally, some politicians perceive CSOs as threats to their authority and seek to undermine them.
3. **Absence of a legal framework for civil societies:** Participants emphasized the lack of a clear legal framework governing CSOs. They argued that an appropriate legal structure would protect CSOs from government interference while strengthening their ability to serve as defenders of public interest. Without such a framework, CSOs lack the legitimacy and authority to hold the government accountable.
4. **Resource constraints:** Limited resources were identified by most interview participants as a major impediment to the effectiveness of CSOs. Resource scarcity undermines their ability to achieve organizational goals or to implement meaningful programs.
5. **Security challenges:** Security concerns were repeatedly highlighted. Participants noted threats from both al-Shabaab and government security forces. As one female participant from Mogadishu explained: "Civil society also faces security challenges. For instance, if you criticize the government, they may call you 'Qaran dumis' (nation destroyer), and you might be investigated by security forces. On the other hand, al-Shabaab also poses risks – you cannot speak freely or criticize them, nor can you discuss religion in a way that contradicts their interpretation."⁹⁷ Similarly, another female participant from Mogadishu acknowledged particular security issues facing women: "Security is one of the main factors preventing women from contributing to civil society organizations. As a woman, whenever I want to go somewhere, I fear harassment from men. I especially feel unsafe in unfamiliar places. For example, in cases of rape, girls are silenced and discouraged from speaking out because it is considered ceeb [shame]."⁹⁸

96. The EU Somalia Unit and DfID, "Strengthening Civil Society in Somalia"; also check Osman, "The Role of Civil Society in Somalia's Reconstruction: Achievements."

97. MF2.

98. MFGDW5.

6. **Geographical confinement:** As a direct consequence of the civil war and ongoing violent conflict, security and trust remain concerns for Somali CSOs. To deal with these challenges, many local NGOs operate primarily in villages and areas inhabited or controlled by their own clans. Alternatively, they collaborate with individuals with whom their clans reside in the specific territories where they seek to work.⁹⁹
7. **Challenges of cultural norms:** Some female participants highlighted cultural aspects that prevent women from participating regularly in civil society activities. Family members, her husband, relatives, and even her clan elders may discourage a woman from going outside and being away from home for several hours. Additionally, Somalis often have many children and women are expected to take care of the children. Child care and family chores force women to stay home. Moreover, in relation to the challenges faced by marginalized groups, a female participant expressed, with deep emotion, the neglect of persons with disabilities within civil society and argued that women and youth are relatively visible in civil society.¹⁰⁰
8. **Clan exclusion mindset (“Looma dhamma”):** A number of participants argued that the emphasis on clan balancing within CSO governance structures undermines organizational performance. Instead of recruiting governing members on the basis of merit and competence, CSOs often prioritize clan representation.
9. **Polarization:** The adoption of a federal system has also further polarized the already fragile civil society organizations (CSOs).¹⁰¹
10. **Poor mobilization:** Mechanisms and ineffective participation in the policymaking level is another challenge reported by participants.
11. **Elitism:** Somali civil society groups as well as politicians are generally viewed in the eyes of the Somali public as elitists with a low-level connection to the grassroots.¹⁰²
12. **Weak government institutions:** Some participants highlighted the weakness of government institutions as a major structural barrier. The less-effective state institutions leave civil society organizations (CSOs) without credible partners for constructive engagement. For example, the lack of a functioning parliament, an independent judiciary, a public audit authority, or oversight bodies such as a human rights commission severely limits opportunities for collaboration. Had such institutions existed, CSOs could have worked with them to hold the executive branch accountable.

99. Menkhaus, Sheikh, Quinn, and Farah, “Somalia: Civil Society in a Collapsed State.”

100. MFGDW6.

101. Abdiwahid Ali Ahmed, “The Role of Civil Society in Peace Building in Somalia” (Master diss., Istanbul Commerce University, 2020). Also see Osman, “The Role of Civil Society in Somalia’s Reconstruction: Achievements.”

102. Abdiwahid Ali Ahmed, “The Role of Civil Society in Peace Building in Somalia” (Master diss., Istanbul Commerce University, 2020). Also see, Menkhaus, Sheikh, Quinn, and Farah, Somalia: Civil Society in a Collapsed State” p.334.

- 13. Mistrust:** Mistrust persists among Somali CSOs, with many operating in their own world, which indicates weak coordination. Similarly, their relationships with donors and regional and international NGOs are often strained, reflecting donor skepticism about the actual performance and accountability of the CSOs and of local NGOs in what is described as an “accountability-free zone.”
- 14. Language barrier:** Some participants indicated a language barrier between the CSOs and the wider population. Literature on Somali civil society also confirms this challenge.¹⁰³ The Somali language was officially adopted in its written form in 1972. Prior to this, English was the dominant language among the Somali elite in northern Somalia, while Italian gained a similar status in the south. These foreign languages were primarily used by the urban elite, leaving the wider population linguistically marginalized. Arabic has historically been, and remains, the major language for Islamic teachings and for those educated in the Arab world. Since the collapse of the military regime in 1991, the use of English has increasingly dominated urban life, further excluding the majority of the population who lack proficiency in the language. Today, Somali CSOs often use English as their primary language in written communication, especially in presentations, reports, and conference materials such as PowerPoints. While these materials are often explained verbally in Somali during forums, seminars, and conferences, the content written in English remains less accessible to the majority of the audience. Therefore, this language barrier contributes to a growing disconnect between civil society elites and the wider Somali population. Language is more than a communication tool. Like other languages, the Somali language is a carrier of culture, history, identity and memory of Somali society. Reliance on a foreign language alienates the broader society. It also disconnects CSOs culturally from their constituents, limiting their ability to resonate with and mobilize the public. As Omar stated “It is through language, literature, myth, and symbols we understand and construct societies.”¹⁰⁴

5. Discussion and Implications

This section situates the empirical findings within Somalia’s broader political settlement, drawing out their implications for governance, accountability, and external engagement.

Participants expressed diverse understandings of the concept of civil society. While some equated civil society exclusively with nonprofit organizations, others argued that all non-state actors should be considered part of civil society. The first definition is narrow and focuses on NGOs, whereas the latter is problematic, as it implicitly includes armed groups such as al-Shabaab, gangs, pirates, and warlords.

103. Farah, “The Politics of Civil Society and Language” p.175.

104. Farah, “The Politics of Civil Society and Language” p.175.

A few participants offered a more balanced definition, suggesting that civil society encompasses organized civilian groups such as associations of professionals (e.g., teachers, doctors, and lawyers) in addition to conventional CSOs. Despite concerns that many CSOs are profit-driven, participants still classified them under civil society. Some also included business associations – particularly trade unions – within the civil society framework. The dominant perception of CSOs as the primary representation of civil society was attributed to their visibility and presence in society, in contrast to professional associations, which are less organized and often focus on sector-specific concerns rather than broad social needs.

Several participants argued that modern Somali CSOs are largely urban-based and heavily shaped by Western donors and values, noting that most emerged after the collapse of the central government in 1991. This position was reinforced by the literature reviewed, demonstrating participants' awareness of global debates. In contrast, religious groups (jamaacooyin) and traditional elders were described as the indigenous, historical, and cultural foundations of Somali civil society. Religious groups were highlighted as among the most organized social groups, while traditional elders were recognized as custodians of customary law (xeer). These two groups were seen as having enduring influence on Somali social norms, relationships, and expectations. A few participants also identified the Somali Youth League (SYL) as a genuine civil society movement of its time, given its central role in the struggle for independence with minimal resources. Conversely, the period under the military regime (1969–1991) was cited as the darkest era for civil society because it was characterized by authoritarianism that dismantled independent civic engagement.

Regarding CSOs' objectives and activities, most participants emphasized that the objectives and activities of Somali CSOs were shaped by the legacies of conflict and state collapse. The primary roles of CSOs have included providing humanitarian services, promoting peace, resolving violent conflicts, and filling gaps left by the absence of collapsed government institutions. However, several participants argued that CSOs have also served as mechanisms for employment and income generation. This dual role was confirmed both by the literature and by survey results from 219 respondents. Puntland was frequently cited as having comparatively more effective civil society organizations; this is attributed to its relative stability and to the active umbrella association, PUNSAA, which has positively influenced CSO performance.

Governance and internal dynamics were also explained differently by participants when describing CSOs' governance as fragmented and negatively shaped by Somalia's distorted federal system and clan-based politics. While some participants believed that a properly functioning federal system could strengthen CSOs, most argued that the current model has reinforced divisions within civil society. Since CSOs are subject to the jurisdiction of their respective Federal Member States (FMS), they are often pressured to align with local political agendas. This dynamic has led to political interference that undermines civil society cooperation, both across Federal Member States and within individual CSOs in the same FMS.

Some participants, particularly those from Baidoa and Garowe, nonetheless believed that, to some extent, federalism enables CSOs to address localized needs more effectively. Others argued that CSOs, much like political institutions, replicate the 4.5 clan-based power-sharing formula to avoid accusations of being exclusionary organizations (*loomadhama*). Therefore, similar to the political culture, CSO leaders want different clans represented in the governing bodies. This emphasis on clan representation within CSOs, often at the expense of merit and competence, reflects how civil society mirrors broader clan-based Somali political practices.

Participants also shared divergent views on the internal governance of CSOs. Some, especially those from Baidoa, argued that CSOs operate democratically, while others described them as dominated by authoritarian leadership styles, where power is concentrated in the hands of a leader and close allies. This was seen as paralleling the country's broader political culture, where leaders frequently make unilateral decisions with minimal consultation.

The extent of CSOs' influence on government policies was another aspect on which participants provided mixed perspectives. The dominant view, however, was that CSOs are often invited by government officials merely to provide symbolic endorsement or to serve as a "rubber stamp" to demonstrate inclusivity to domestic and international audiences. Nevertheless, Puntland CSOs under the PUNSAA umbrella were acknowledged as having successfully influenced government policies in some sectors.

Across the three cities studied (Baidoa, Garowe and Mogadishu), participants generally agreed that civil society becomes more visible during political crises. However, they noted that such engagements are rarely productive, as Somali governments tend to prioritize the demands of armed groups over those of peaceful civil society groups. For instance, participants cited the violent confrontations in Mogadishu during President Farmaajo's attempted term extension and the 2023 electoral conflict in Puntland as cases where governments engaged primarily with armed opposition groups, sidelining CSO voices advocating peaceful dialogue.

Another recurrent theme was that CSO influence on government policy is often indirect, mediated through international donors particularly on the policies related to women and other marginalized communities. Interestingly, while donors were praised for supporting CSOs, they were also criticized for double standards: donors expect CSOs to hold governments accountable yet simultaneously require CSOs to secure government approval for funding applications. This dynamic compels CSOs to self-censor to avoid jeopardizing their access to donor resources.

Similar to civil society's limited impact on government policies, its role in holding government accountable is described as limited due to different factors. One critical factor that undermines the ability of CSOs to hold the government accountable is the lack of legitimacy among the CSO's own leaders. In many cases, when the terms of CSO leaders expire, they remain in office without being reelected by their members.

Consequently, such leaders lack both legitimacy and accountability within their own organizations. CSO leaders who are not answerable to their own constituencies are, therefore, ill-positioned to demand legitimacy and accountability from others, including the government.

Furthermore, several participants highlighted the lack of a legal framework protecting civil society as severely undermining CSO capacity to hold government accountable. Such a framework, they argued, could institutionalize CSOs' role in shaping policy and safeguarding civic freedoms. Instead, politicians are largely accountable to business people, clan leaders, and elites who finance their indirect election campaigns.

Unlike clans, civil society lacks the power to hold the government accountable or to speak on behalf of the citizens in defending their rights. In contrast, the influence of clans is rooted in the clan-based power-sharing formula. Notably, while civil society remains politically marginalized, clans are able to exert pressure on the government, particularly when they perceive that their share of political positions or public resources has not been met. In such cases, aggrieved clans may threaten to withdraw their support from the government or challenge its legitimacy. To avoid this, the government often accommodates clan grievances by allocating positions and resources through clan-affiliated Members of Parliament and ministers within the administration.

The role of the anticipated one-person-one-vote (OPOV) electoral system in holding government accountable was viewed ambivalently. While in principle OPOV could strengthen accountability and broaden political participation, participants feared that in practice the anticipated OPOV could deepen clan polarization, given Somalia's fragile political culture, weak civic education, and erosion of social trust due to prolonged conflict.

With regard to the participation of women and youth in civil society, the dominant perspective among participants was that the involvement of both groups is relatively weak. However, several participants differentiated between the two, arguing that women's participation is relatively stronger than that of youth. Notably, women's engagement in civil society has increased steadily since the collapse of the central government in 1991.

A common aspect shared by both women and youth in overcoming marginalization – gender-based in the case of women and age-based in the case of youth – is their ability to establish their own independent civil society organizations, such as women-led and youth-led associations. Nevertheless, participants highlighted the idea that women have generally succeeded in forming relatively active organizations, while youth-led initiatives have often been less successful.

Despite this, participants noted that members of Generation Z, in particular, show strong engagement with social media and digital technologies. If provided with appropriate guidance and direction, this capacity could enable them to effectively mobilize communities, hold government accountable, and contribute meaningfully to social transformation.

6. Recommendations

The findings of this study highlight critical gaps and opportunities for strengthening Somali civil society, particularly in relation to accountability, legitimacy, collaboration, and engagement with both the federal government and international partners. Addressing these gaps requires a multilevel approach in which civil society organizations (CSOs), the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS), and international partners all play constructive roles. The following recommendations are directed to each of these actors.

6.1 To Civil Society

- Strengthen internal accountability and legitimacy:

Many CSOs face internal governance challenges, such as leaders overstaying their mandates without legitimate elections. This undermines their credibility and weakens their ability to hold government accountable. CSOs should therefore establish clear internal governance structures that promote transparency, accountability, and leadership renewal.

- Expand objectives beyond the civil war era:

While peacebuilding, conflict resolution, reconciliation, and humanitarian assistance remain relevant and important, CSOs should broaden their mandates to address contemporary challenges. These mandates include contributing to statebuilding, influencing public policy, advancing human rights, and monitoring government accountability in partnership with formal oversight government institutions.

- Enhance CSOs' collaboration across federal states:

Apart from Puntland's PUNSAA umbrella, collaboration among CSOs remains weak and often limited to donor-driven projects, crisis responses, or ad hoc consortiums.

CSOs should invest in sustainable inter-organizational collaboration at both state and federal levels. Stronger collaboration will improve effectiveness, enhance credibility, amplify their voices, and enable them to tackle collectively those challenges they cannot handle individually.

- Establish a federal-level umbrella body:

To strengthen representation and coordination, CSOs should consider creating a federal-level civil society body with representatives from all Federal Member States (FMS) and the Benadir Region, while maintaining state-level civil society structures. Such a platform must remain non-political, with representatives nominated on merit, to ensure inclusivity and legitimacy.

- Utilize Somali language:

CSOs are advised to use the Somali language in both written and spoken levels. Additionally, since Somali society is traditionally oral, it is crucial for CSOs, and social movements to master and utilize the Somali language and Somali literature such as gabay (poetry), maahmaah (proverbs), murti (wisdom sayings), and sheekooyinka Soomaalida (traditional stories) to engage, inspire, mobilize and communicate meaningfully with the broader Somali population and to provide educational and awareness programs regarding citizens' involvement in public life to influence policy makers and hold public institutions accountable

6.2 To the Federal Government of Somalia

- Develop a legal framework for civil society:

Somalia currently lacks a legal framework governing CSOs. Such a framework should safeguard CSO rights, clarify their roles in policymaking and accountability, and formalize partnerships with Parliament and relevant institutions. The drafting process should involve inclusive consultations with civil society and experts. This approach also applies to the FMS level.

- Strengthen institutional checks and balances:

Oversight institutions such as Parliament, the judiciary, public audit bodies, and independent commissions should actively exercise their constitutional mandates. In partnership with civil society, they must monitor and hold the executive accountable for corruption, financial mismanagement, poor governance, and inadequate service delivery.

6.3 To International Community and Somali CSOs

- Reduce dependency on donor-driven templates:

Many Somali CSOs were established primarily to implement donor-funded projects, often using rigid templates that suppress innovation and foster dependency.

The international community and INGOs should prioritize building the capacities of Somali CSOs through training and skills development that encourage innovation, resource diversification, and financial self-reliance.

- Promote equal partnerships:

North-South power imbalances in NGO relations still reflect colonial legacies and hinder genuine collaboration. International and Somali CSOs/NGOs should cultivate equitable partnerships, where Somali organizations are trusted to contribute meaningfully from project design to implementation. Somali CSOs, in turn, should demonstrate professionalism and accountability in managing such partnerships.

- Adopt bottom-up approaches:

Somali CSOs possess deep local knowledge and cultural understanding, while international organizations bring technical expertise and global perspectives. Partnerships should therefore adopt bottom-up approaches that integrate local insights with international expertise, ensuring that projects are both contextually relevant and sustainable.

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