Community peace processes in south central Somalia

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During the long period that Somalis have been without a viable national government, many different local governance systems have emerged in south central Somalia. These little-known arrangements have been organized at the local level and have fostered degrees of stability and peaceful co-existence between different communities with varying success.

Since 1991 there have been more than 90 local peace initiatives in south central Somalia that have used traditional conflict mediation practices under the guidance of clan elders, Islamic scholars and other key stakeholders. Despite the abundance of such community-based initiatives, a number of factors have worked against the consolidation of peace in the region.

This article outlines different types of governance systems that can be found in south central Somalia and describes different sorts of local and regional peace initiatives. It is based on a fuller study of community-based peace processes by the Center for Research and Dialogue, based in south central Somalia, carried out in 2007.

Local governance systems
Since the government collapsed in Somalia there have been a wide variety of local governance systems in south central Somalia. Five types can be distinguished reflecting their differing origins and purpose.

The first, and earliest, were formed under the auspices of the United Nations peacekeeping operation in Somalia (UNOSOM, 1993-95). Under the terms of the UN-brokered Addis Ababa Agreement in 1993, the UN supported the establishment of district and regional administrations, together with reconstituted police forces in Hiran, Lower and Middle Shabelle and Bay and Bakool regions.

After UNOSOM’s departure in 1995 some of the district administrations continued, for example in Hiran and Benadir regions, but with varying degrees of authority and lacking resources to provide governance or deliver services.
The second type of administrative structures are those set up by powerful faction leaders (‘warlords’) in areas under their control, such as in Lower and Middle Shabelle and parts of Middle and Lower Jubba regions. These administrations levied taxes and provided some security but no public services.

A third type are community-based structures established through consultative processes involving traditional and religious leaders and other local stakeholders. These exist in, for example, Belet Wein in Hiran and Guri’el in Galgudud region.

A fourth kind of local administration is that provided through clan-based Islamic courts. These have existed in a number of locations, such as in north Mogadishu, Belet Wein and Lower Shabelle, and their primary focus has been the provision of security. They were financed through business groups associated with a particular sub-clan and gained the support of the general public by filling the vacuum of governance and security in this collapsed state.

Finally there are governance systems mediated by local traditional and religious leaders, who have taken the lead in resolving local conflicts and maintaining some level of stability. These are often ad hoc institutions established to address a particular crisis, but in some places may become a more enduring structure, as happened in Belet Wein.

Peace initiatives
The CRD study found that peace initiatives in different regions varied in relation to the complexity of relationships among clans and sub-clans, the resources of the region and the impact of national politics. For example, nearly 40 per cent of local initiatives catalogued by CRD took place in Lower and Middle Jubba regions. This reflects the fact that these regions are inhabited by more than 19 Somali clans and are endowed with rich agricultural and pastoral resources.

By contrast only 13 per cent of local initiatives took place in the central regions of Galgudud and South Mudug, which are more homogeneous and which have fewer natural resources to stimulate competition or attract incoming clans. Furthermore, conflicts between clans in this region tended to take place in Mogadishu. The relative military strength of clans in a territory can affect the likelihood of a local peace process being initiated, as can the role of national-level politicians or business figures who may facilitate or obstruct local initiatives.

Political events beyond the local context have also helped to trigger local peace initiatives. Under UNOSOM eight local and regional reconciliation processes in south central Somalia had a significant positive impact on the lives of thousands of people.

In 1999 when the Rahanweyn Resistance Army (RRA) ended Hussein Aideed’s occupation of the Bay and Bakool regions, a series of peace initiatives were undertaken among the indigenous Digil and Mirifle communities. Over five significant local reconciliations were concluded in this period. In late 2004, as the National Reconciliation process in Kenya approached its conclusion, another series of local reconciliation processes was initiated in anticipation of the establishment of a national government.

Local peace initiatives
The majority of local Somali peace initiatives can be described as ‘social’. That is, they address conflicts over shared land, pastoral resources, or clan-related revenge killings. They normally involve communities in a village, town or district and address conflicts within a clan or sub-clans in the immediate area.

An example is the conflict in Hiran region between Afi and Abtisame sub-clans of the Gaalje’el clan over revenge killings and rape, which spread to Belet Wein town and destroyed property in the western part of the town. Clan elders, religious leaders, businesspeople and civil society groups from the area supported a reconciliation agreement between the two parties. This was concluded at Buqda-Aqable village near Bulo Burti in 2005 and still holds.

Another example is the territorial conflict over the village of Kulan Jareer, near Baidoa, and its surrounding grazing land, which has traditionally been shared by the Jiron and Hadame sub-clans of the Digil-Mirifle clan. In the early 1990s, the two groups clashed over ownership of the village and grazing rights. Traditional and religious leaders and women mobilized to support a reconciliation process to restore harmony, which was concluded successfully in 1994 at the neighbouring village of Labatan Jirow.

Regional peace initiatives
Reconciliation processes involving people from two or more regions have occurred in several parts of south central Somalia. These represent a significant investment by the communities involved and can have a concomitant positive impact for many people when they succeed. An early example was the 1993 Mudug peace agreement between Habar Gedir clans in Galgudud and South Mudug and Majeerteen clans in north Mudug, which ended large-scale confrontations of militia across this clan border.

Another significant regional peace initiative was the 1994 Kismayo conference sponsored by UNOSOM in which representatives of all nineteen clans from Middle and Lower

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Jubba regions participated. The Bardhere peace conference in 1993 was initiated by elders of the Digil-Mirifle clan in Bay and Bakool regions and the elders of the Marehan clan, in order to end serious fighting over pasture and water resources. The communities have continued to co-exist harmoniously, with the Bardhere agreement being used as the reference for any issues that arise between them.

Another significant regional peace conference amongst the Hawiye clan was held in Belet Wein from October 1998 to June 1999. This was organized and hosted by a well-respected titled traditional elder, the late Ugas Khalif of the Hawadle clan. Over 650 clan representatives participated with the aim of fostering reconciliation within the Hawiye clan and with other clans. In its final stages, politicians contested the leadership of the process and the initiative ultimately failed. Nevertheless, it did improve trade between the regions and demonstrated the potential of bottom-up reconciliation processes.

More recently the reconciliation process from February 2006 to February 2007 between Sa’ad and Saleman sub-clans ended the protracted violent conflict between the two groups in Galgudud and South Mudug.

**Political reconciliation**

Some local peace processes are overtly political, concerned with power sharing and focused on the control of local administrations and strategic resources. The high stakes and the large number of players involved can pose significant challenges to mediation and many such efforts fail. For example, in 1994 representatives of all the clans of Middle Jubba region met with veteran politicians with the aim of resolving differences and forming a regional administration. Ultimately no agreement was reached.

Another example was the 1996 Garbaharrey conference among the Sade sub-clans of the Marehan clan in Gedo region, aimed at establishing unity and forming a local administration. Again clan elders and leaders of the armed faction, the Somali National Front (SNF), failed to reach agreement. The following year a peace conference near Bulo Hawa worked towards a power-sharing arrangement between the SNF and the armed group, Al-Ithhaad Al-Islamiya, but also ended in failure.

There are also examples of successful political reconciliation occurring at a regional level. An example is the 2006 Wajid Peace Conference, when agreement between two factions of the RRA led to social reconciliation between the clans supporting them.

Conflict had broken out within the Digil-Mirifle clan because of splits within the RRA leadership. These also reflected a broader rift within the TFG over its relocation to Baidoa (rather than the capital Mogadishu). It led to intense fighting between the two wings of the RRA, which then degenerated into a wider clan conflict involving most of the Digil-Mirifle sub-clans.

The titled elders of the clan (Malagaca), elders from the Asharaf, religious leaders, intellectuals and women’s groups all intervened and sponsored a political reconciliation between the rival factions at Sarmandhere village, which concluded successfully.

A second phase of this reconciliation process was organized for all three leaders of the RRA at Wajid, followed by a regional meeting of all the sub-clans of the area, to consolidate unity and peace amongst the Digil-Mirifle clan community. The successful outcome of the process enabled the TFG to relocate to Baidoa, hosted by all factions and communities in the area. This is an interesting example of a political reconciliation process transforming into social reconciliation between communities.

**Obstacles to consolidating peace**

Despite the abundance of local peace processes in south central Somalia, they have not led to the establishment of more durable government structures of the type that have emerged in Puntland and Somaliland. Certainly traditional elders have played a critically important role in mediating and regulating the interactions within and between local communities. However a number of factors have made their task more difficult.

First the powerful clan-based faction leaders (the ‘warlords’) that have emerged from the conflict in south central Somalia have consistently challenged traditional elders’ authority. During the prolonged period of chaos and lawlessness, such leaders, along with politicians and business people, recruited armed militia to further their own interests. They also promoted their own choice of elders, who lacked local legitimacy and undermined the existing system of leadership.

Before the collapse of the state, power in the rural communities was mediated through traditional chieftains and elders, supported by government security institutions. The effectiveness of customary law and codes of behaviour was weakened by these ‘merchants of war’, who used tactics of divide-and-rule among the clan elders in pursuit of their own agendas.

The reliance of the international community on armed faction leaders as their primary interlocutors in Somalia and apparent representatives of clan constituencies has compounded the problem and further eroded the standing of traditional authorities. Dahiye Uulow, a prominent elder in Belet Wein, has stated that “the emergence of armed warlords and business people during the anarchy of the civil war period is the
primary reason for the failure of attempts to settle local Somali conflicts’.

A second difficulty has been that fragmentation and distrust within the main clan families, which has led smaller sub-clans to identify their own leaders. Traditionally clan elders were seen as responsible for ensuring the peaceful co-existence of the community as a whole and for working to resolve local conflicts. However the circumstances of the civil war led some elders to mobilize their own clan militia for inter- and intra-clan fighting and to side with their kin, even when they were the aggressors.

In the Somali cultural context, the declaration of responsibility – “I am an aggressor” – by the relevant party is critical to the success of traditional conflict resolution. If the responsible party declines to confess to being the aggressor, the reconciliation initiative usually fails.

Another important feature of the civil war period in many areas of south central Somalia has been the breakdown of traditional customary law (xeer) between pastoral and agricultural communities. In rural communities disputes over access to shared grazing or water sources and agricultural land are common and can become violent.

In most cases a xeer exists between co-habiting groups that governs social relations and access to communal resources. Before the collapse of the Somali state these kinds of conflicts were generally arbitrated successfully by elders using xeer. Any clan member (or clan) who challenged the arbitration faced sanctions (Maraado-Ta’siri) by the clans concerned.

The efficacy of customary law in these circumstances rested on a relative balance in power between clans. However the arming of different clans during and after the Siyad Barre regime typically left agricultural communities at a military disadvantage to better-armed pastoralist groups.

Furthermore, during the initial years of the war agricultural communities faced occupation by militarily stronger clans with whom they had no established relationship or xeer. In these circumstances, and in the absence of state protection, the rights of the weaker party were overrun.

A significant imbalance of power between the parties in conflict can be an obstacle to reconciliation as the stronger group may impose unreasonable conditions, provoke confrontations or otherwise act as spoilers in the reconciliation process.

In a case where pastoralists are the aggressors, elders of the agricultural community will tend not to ask for a meeting to discuss the issue because they expect little recompense from the more powerful group. However, if the aggressor is from the agricultural community, customary law will be applied and compensation paid to restore the peace.

The application of customary law and traditional practices has helped to shore up stability in some places in south central Somalia, but in many cases where there is an unequal relationship between the communities it falls short of genuine reconciliation.

A particularly damaging effect of the civil war has been the undermining of the xeer that protected vulnerable groups – Birmageydo, ‘those who are spared from the spear’. This includes women, children, the elderly, titled elders and religious leaders, and peace delegates. Repeated violations of such codes have weakened this important function of traditional governance and resulted in the deaths of those who would normally be considered ‘safe from harm’.

Long-term peace
Social conflicts over local resources increased significantly during the war due to the breakdown of traditional codes governing social relations, the forced displacement of people, the occupation of land by armed groups and the ready availability of weapons. The imbalance in the acquisition of weapons has meant that better-armed clans dominate weaker ones and have captured resources that had previously been used communally.

The past two decades have seen fierce competition between communities to accumulate heavy weapons and become the dominant force in their area. And, as even weak clans have gained access to some weapons, violent clashes have continued.

A common theme running through peace processes in south central Somalia is the need for a functional state authority for sustaining reconciliation agreements at both a local and national level. However if that state authority is not governing in the interests of the people, it can also be a cause of conflict.

Local peace processes have proven effective in managing security in many parts of south central Somalia. But experience shows that hard-won local peace accords reached through traditional conflict resolution mechanisms are vulnerable to being undermined by armed factions, business leaders and other powerful stakeholders. In the long term, peace needs a viable state authority to sustain it.

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