Can the London conference on Somalia get it right this time?

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The UK government's initiative to host an international conference on Somalia in London on 23 February is welcome. But after a year in which large swathes of Somalia have been hit by famine and continued war, and 21 years since the Somali state collapsed, it is also a testament to two decades of multiple unsuccessful foreign interventions – which have at best proved irrelevant, and have often made things worse. Can the London conference succeed where others have failed?

The odds are stacked against it. The London conference, to be attended by senior representatives from over 40 heads of state, aims to galvanise a "new international approach to Somalia" that will stabilise the country and reduce the threat to international security that it is deemed to pose – a threat underlined this week when the Somali militant Islamist organisation al-Shabaab ('the Youth') publicly renewed its links to al-Qaeda.

Today there is more foreign involvement in Somalia than ever before each with multiple, often competing, security, political and economic interests. Achieving coherence among them will be a tough ask.

Lessons must be learnt from the past

A new approach needs to begin by distilling lessons from past failures and successes.External interventions in Somalia have not solved anything. Premised on international security concerns related to piracy, terrorism, migration and arms control –rather than the needs of Somalis –theyhave often had perverse results, catalysing new political forces that have prolonged crisis.

In the wake of 9/11, as so-called "failed states" and "ungoverned territories" were linked to transnational terrorism, international policy prioritised rebuilding a robust state in Somalia as a bulwark against this international threat over supporting good governance and Somalis' security. Internationally sponsored peace conferences, exclusively held outside Somalia, have consistently produced a succession of unsuccessful attempts to manufacture governments. Sustained through foreign aid, these have failed to gain popular support and legitimacy, or to deliver sorely needed services.

In defending Somalia's Transitional Federal Government and the peace deal that created it, agreed at a conference in 2004, the United Nations, foreign governments and the African Union took sides in a war against the al-Shabaab that caused mass displacement and led to famine in 2011. The humanitarian response of Britain and others was essential and commendable, but there has been no accountability for the international policies that produced those conditions. The London conference could go some way to acknowledging this.

By favouring state revival over reconciliation, internationally sponsored peace processes have largely been reduced to power-sharing deals among political elites. The state-building approach to resolving the Somali crisis, premised on a model of a state with a monopoly on legitimate force and responsibility for delivering basic services, has failed to get to grips with the problematic nature of the Somali state, and address the apparent contradiction between a centralised state authority and the traditionally egalitarian Somali political culture, in which the legitimacy of force is vested in a diffuse clan system.

Stability rests on addressing the underlying drivers of conflict

For many Somalis the prospects of a revived state over which they have no control is seen as a potential threat. State-building and stabilisation strategies need to allay fears by providing checks on state power and its control of force.

But the conflict in Somalia has not solely been over control of the state – of which a growing percentage of the predominantly young population has no memory. Numerous armed groups with little care for states, borders or sovereignty have fought over resources, territory and commercial monopolies. Piracy is not simply a product of poverty and marginlisation within Somalia, but also of Somalia's marginalisation in the global economy. Deals struck in foreign capitals over power-sharing and constitutional arrangements do nothing to address the deep issues that perpetuate conflict.

The lives of Somalis tell a complex story that in fact provide room for optimism. In the past 20 years Somalis have rebuilt towns, schools, medical facilities and universities, and have developed multi-million dollar businesses, mostly through their own ingenuity and resources. And, beyond the scope of international diplomatic and military interventions, Somalis have demonstrated a capacity to create durable political structures.In Somaliland, in the northwest, which broke away from Somalia in 1991, and in the semi-autonomous Puntland to the east, Somalis have established forms of government, based on a hybrid of Somali and Western democratic traditions,that provide security, law and order.

This is the story that seldom makes its way into Western media. Formed through inclusive and accountable peace processes that have been locally designed, managed and financed, these administrations have proven successful at delivering governance, stability and a basis for reconstruction. *Whose peace is it anyway?* – a report by Conciliation Resources and Interpeace – argued that external actors have much to learn from the success of these and other local processes and need to find ways to work with them. Its findings remain true today.

While experiences of Somaliland and Puntland cannot easily be replicated elsewhere in Somalia, they show Somalis' clear demand for government and the restoration of law and order, and provide insights for the international community: stability cannot simply be engineered through more and better coordinated aid programmes, but needs to be underpinned by a locally negotiated political solution in which resources and authority are distributed in a manner that is seen as inclusive and fair.

Inclusive political processes and local ownership are key

The mandate of the current transitional government ends in August. The existing administrative institutions are irrelevant or inimical to many ordinary people in Somalia. New institutions need to tap into genuine sources of legitimacy and authority, to move beyond elites and support inclusive political processes.

The people living in the midst of the violence often have the greatest insight into its causes. Yet they are often excluded from efforts to find a resolution. It is vital to engage with non-state actors and promote broad public participation in reconciliation, constitution-making and security.

Difficulties of access in Somalia means that the Somali diaspora is increasingly consulted in international policy discussions. The division between the accessible and educated diaspora, and citizens inside Somalia who are unreachable to foreign diplomats, can be exploited by militants. The international community needs to be careful in relying too heavily on the diaspora to the neglect of those in Somalia, and must rethink its military engagement to place the security of Somalis first and prioritise protecting civilians.

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To find out more about recent peace initiatives in Somalia and what solutions are proposed, read
Accord 21: *Whose peace is it anyway?* www.c-r.org/accord/somalia

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