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Finding Peace in Somalia: the Galkaio 'local' Peace Agreement

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Summary

- A better understanding of 'local' agreements vis-a-vis national state-building processes is a strong current in policy and academic circles, with Somalia acknowledged as a context with a rich history in such processes.
- The 2017 Galkaio agreement is a landmark achievement in this history, and one that is located within the recent formation of the Federal system in Somalia. It successfully combined Somali and international actors and resources. As such, it is an important example of an appropriate external intervention.
- The Galkaio agreement-making process took place over 2-3 years, required sensitivity to both the national and local contexts and included a strong Somali identity among the international actors.
- This briefing discusses the blurred boundaries between organisational and personal identities, where, for example, a key individual in this case was able to leverage her multiple identities (in terms of gender, clan, diaspora, UN employee) with skill and sensitivity, in order to support and participate in networks pursuing peaceful outcomes.
- The agreement represents the re-establishment of social relations across a significant border area, a process which is still ongoing, and which remains fragile and unfinished. This social rebuilding process is qualitatively different than the 1993 Mudug Accord that characterised the pre-existing boundary.
- The international engagement, as embodied by a number of the key mediators working for international agencies, represented an activist approach to peacebuilding that was arguably sufficiently powerful to counter underlying grievances and the transactional elite-driven politics that dominates Somalia's political marketplace.

Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, structural shifts in the global landscape of conflict and peace-making have necessitated a review of dominant approaches to managing and resolving violent conflict. Today's armed conflicts are characterized by complexity, the proliferation and fragmentation of actors, the mixture of political and criminal violence, intensified geopolitical and regional involvement, and the presence of ideological and identity-based conflict. These factors challenge linear and binary approaches to conflict resolution, blurring traditional distinctions between 'inter-state' and 'intra-state' armed conflicts largely fought between two or more cohesive sides. While the 'local turn' in peacebuilding helpfully emphasizes the need to engage with local actors, structures and dynamics, there remains a tendency to treat the 'local' as a bounded category and to overlook how local, national and global actors, processes and forces interact to shape and sustain intractable conflicts. Today, understanding how these levels interact and how to design a multi-dimensional approach, is increasingly becoming an urgent challenge for political and diplomatic interventions.

Somalia provides a rich history in peace-making at multiple levels. Since the collapse of the state in 1991, there have been several national reconciliation conferences as well as un-counted numbers of sub-national peace processes; the establishment of Somaliland and Puntland being particularly notable. A number of these processes have been analysed, documented, and compared.¹

This policy brief is drawn from a longer paper based on original research in the areas that examines the Galkaio agreement, signed in December 2017, and which was located within the current and still nascent state-building context in Somalia.² It focuses on the role that external mediators played in supporting the process, with the aim of contributing to the evidence-base on understanding, mediating and supporting local-level agreements. It offers insight into the relationship between local and national levels and the various strategies that external mediators employed to reach an agreement to end violence and create the conditions for local-level peacebuilding. While the Galkaio agreement has received little public attention, it can be considered a major success story in Somalia's social and political history both from a processual and content perspective, and stands in somewhat of a contrast with the political bargain that created the current federal system and the political marketplace that characterises much of elite politics in Somalia.

Background

Galkaio town and the surrounding areas are located in the central rangelands of Somalia and are associated with a pastoral culture and history where several clans live in relatively close proximity.³ Competition for territory and resources, including pasture and water, intersect with long-standing grievances and (re-)emerging state structures. Galkaio town marks a border at multiple levels, including between two of the four major Somali clan families, the Darod and the Hawiye. In the early 1990s, two of the main military insurgent groups, the USC (United Somali Congress) and SSDF (Somali Salvation and Democratic Front), who first fought against the Siad Barre regime and then against each other, agreed to a cessation of hostilities, which became known as the 1993 Mudug (Peace) Accord. This Accord effectively divided northern Somalia from the centre and south, enabling the area now known as Puntland to pursue a reconciliation process which concluded with its inauguration in 1998.

The remarkable longevity of the Mudug Accord along this border mitigated the threat of large-scale conflict for over 20 years. The Accord can be best characterised as a truce or ceasefire as it did not involve a deeper reconciliation process between the divided communities. The border involved a physical barrier with guarded checkpoints but is also imbued with social and psychological dimensions, reflecting the troubled history of the area and its unreconciled character, which continues to be animated by public and social media. While trade continued across the border, other forms of social interaction, such as inter-marriage and everyday social intercourse, have not been taking place.

1 Bradbury, M. *The Search for Peace: A Synthesis Report of the Peace Mapping Study*, Interpeace, 2009; Bradbury, M. and Healy, S., *Whose peace is it anyway? Connecting Somali and International Peacemaking*, Issue 21. Accord, Conciliation Resources in collaboration with Interpeace, 2010; Centre for Research and Dialogue/Interpeace, *Dialogue Not Guns*, 2006; Interpeace/Centre for Research and Dialogue, *Community-based Peace Processes in South-Central Somalia*, 2008; Interpeace and PDRC, *The Puntland Experience: A Bottom-up Approach to Peace and State Building*, 2008; Peace Initiatives in Puntland 1991-2007, 2008; Interpeace and CRD, *A History of Mediation in Somalia since 1988*, 2008.

2 The study included interviews in Nairobi, Mogadishu and Galkaio, with a range of key informants, including elders, staff and ex-staff of government and organisations involved in supporting and mediating the Galkaio agreement. In particular, the research involved multiple in-depth discussions with one of the key mediators, Ms Ilham Gassar, a 'diaspora' Somali woman working at the office of the SRSG who is widely recognised to have played an instrumental role at both the national and local levels.

3 Population estimates for Galkaio vary between 75,000 and 315,000; The Majerteen, Habar Gidir and Marehan are the main local clans, with Dir and Lelkasse clans also significant local actors.

A key underlying tension that developed over the last 20 years in Galkaio town has been the uneven pace and level of development on either side of the border. In the northern (Puntland) area of Galkaio, considerable diaspora and business investment has taken place while the more turbulent southern Galkaio has seen little investment as wealthier populations from the town have invested in Mogadishu instead. This unevenness has been replicated and exacerbated by the unequal presence and distribution of resources by the international aid sector, which has favoured north Galkaio due to its greater security and infrastructure. This imbalance was a catalyst in the two major outbreaks of violence during the period in question and reflects the problematic incorporation of aid and its multiple resources into Somalia's political economy.

The recurrent conflict and agreement-making context in and around Galkaio took place between 2014 and 2017 and coincides with the emergence of the Federal system in Somalia. This political arrangement required the creation of new Federal Member States; Galmudug was therefore constituted as an amalgamation of Galgadud and southern Mudug regions, while Puntland was fully incorporated into the new Federal system.⁴

The agreement to form and recognise Galmudug immediately provoked an antagonistic response from the Puntland leadership, who removed their MPs from Parliament in Mogadishu. One of the major underlying rationales for this reaction was that the incumbent President of Puntland, Abdiwali Gaas (and his allies), feared that the close relationship between Somalia's national President, Hassan Sheikh, and the first Galmudug President, Abdikarim Guled might influence the next Federal election, due in early 2017. Such tensions between central and regional actors include a recognition that Somalia's political elite act within a political marketplace that involves competition and movement between regional and national levels. On the Galmudug side, tensions were in part driven by Galmudug politicians attempting to assert their new political identity and statehood, and where only fragmented clan-based entities had previously existed.

Elite-level tensions led to military confrontations in Galkaio town and fuelled underlying grievances. Major outbreaks of conflict took place in November 2015 and October 2016, with many deaths and large-scale displacement. Underlying tensions, including revenge killings, media hate speech and an emerging smuggling economy continued while ceasefires negotiated in December 2015 and again in October 2016 mitigated larger-scale conflict. The focus of this brief is on the process from October 2016 which marked a renewed effort at reconciliation leading to the signing of the Galkaio Agreement in December 2017. The period in which the substantive agreement process took place began with another major violent incident that prompted the involvement of the office of the UN Special Representative to the Secretary General (SRSG) and Interpeace.

Support and engaging in agreement-making

The study identified a number of different themes, which are explored in more detail in the longer paper/s.

- *Acting at different levels*

While the Galkaio agreement-making process concerned a specific locality, the primary international actors involved in the process appreciated its inter-dependencies with regional and national dynamics and interests. An elite level agreement, signed in Mogadishu and publicised, was initially pursued in order to create the space for meaningful engagement with different stakeholders at the local level in Galkaio town.⁵ Throughout the process, the office of the UN SRSG coordinated and moved between local, regional and national levels to successfully reach an agreement.

- *The credibility of international actors*

The credibility of international actors in Somalia is deeply problematic where those actors, whether individuals or organisations, are typically implicated in the political economy of aid in the country and/or pursue their own strategic interests. In the Galkaio agreement making process, the office of the UN SRSG assembled, coordinated and worked with a team of Somali and international personnel that brought an understanding of local political dynamics and sensitivities, access at different levels, and sensitivity to their own personal positionality. This was particularly notable in the case of Ms Ilham Gassar who, paradoxically, did not have a professional history of mediation but brought considerable skill and sensitivity to her role. Complementing the SRSG's office, the role of Interpeace, organisationally and through key staff, was critical and brought an

4 Puntland was established in 1998 as part of a future Federal Somalia.

5 This agreement included a commitment to remove roadblocks, move troops/militia back to their original positions and to train a joint police force. Although only a verbal, informal agreement the fact that it was recorded and publicised meant that it was meaningful.

unparalleled weight of experience. The knowledge and commitment to the process of key individuals from these international actors demonstrated their credibility to local participants.

Moreover, managing the different external actors helped increase coherence and support to a locally-owned process. A key concern in international engagement in peace-making is the involvement of multiple actors that can work at cross-purposes and confuse the mediation space. From the start, the SRSG's office helped to limit and order the aid landscape and stress its facilitatory role, enabling local actors to feel empowered, rather than part of an external project.

- *Reframing the interests of spoilers*

Mediators were able to re-frame the interests of potential spoilers, turning underlying grievances into the creation of new opportunities and leveraging missing taxes that could be collected. One example provided, was that of a senior commander from the Galmudug side who had seen a group of elders killed in a mistaken attack – the mediators encouraged him to meet his 'enemies' in a foreign military base where he could instead build relations and help to avoid future mistaken attacks.

- *Inclusive network building and strengthening local mechanisms*

Key mediators acted as part of a core network of peacebuilders playing their part behind the scenes rather than at the forefront. This informal coalition included committed political elites at the local, regional and national levels, as well as businesspeople and prominent women and youth groups. Moreover, they supported and strengthened existing mechanisms, such as the Joint Ceasefire Committee, rather than create parallel structures.

Key elements of the agreement

- *Stopping violence and re-building trust and social relations*

The importance of meaningful reconciliation – of rebuilding social relations - has been emphasised in analyses of peace processes in Somalia, especially at the local level.⁶ A long breakdown of social relations and a culture of disrespect had developed between populations on either side of the border. A Joint Ceasefire Committee established earlier in the conflict was expanded in membership to include different identity groups while elders took personal responsibility to limit breaches of the emerging peace and obtain compensation where this did happen.

- *Opening up the town and toning down the language*

Enabling physical interaction and mingling was a critical component towards overcoming a long history of antagonistic posturing and language. Different initiatives took place to secure venues for meetings and events, bringing together different sets of actors from either side. A decision by political leaders to ban hate speech by local media was enacted.

- *Creating joint security forces*

The creation of joint security and joint police forces took place. The security forces were tasked to guarantee the safety of the Galkaio market which had been a focus of tension. These forces were paid by the Federal Government. A joint police force was also created with some success although it encountered more difficulties due in part to payment problems.

Discussion

This briefing (and the accompanying paper/s) does not provide a comprehensive description and analysis of the Galkaio agreement-making process, which involved many actors and activities, over several years. Instead, it adds to previous learning and documentation on Somali peace-making by focusing on the role that external mediators played in influencing the process and outcome in Galkaio.

The Galkaio agreement can be considered a major success story in Somalia's social and political history, both from a process and content perspective. Its inclusive approach created widespread buy-in and involvement, with the agreement signed by a range of political, military and civil society figures, including prominent women in Galkaio town as well as the highest customary authority. Its content is more far-reaching than previous agreements and includes provisions on the norms and rules for dispute resolution on issues or incidences that might arise in the future as well as provisions banning

6 Ibrahim Ali Amber "Oker" and Su'aad Ibrahim H. Habibullah, *Community-based Peace Processes in South-Central Somalia*, Interpeace and the Center for Research and Dialogue, 2008.

the media hate speech that exacerbated tensions. Moreover, it built on existing structures and provided immediate community programs to both sides in order to demonstrate the peace dividends of the agreement, and in part, sought to address some of the underlying inequalities that drove the conflict. As a consequence, it began a process where social relations across the border could be repaired and rebuilt, evidenced by further inter-clan agreements being forged between different clans in the area during 2020.

Resolving any conflict is a dynamic process that involves a mix of subjective and objective factors which can change over time, creating opportunities for different strategies and interventions. For example, the overall process to reach an agreement in Galkaio became significantly smoother in May 2017 when President Ahmed Gelle Haaf was elected to Galmudug.⁷ The Somali business community provided substantial resources for many of the activities, particularly for transportation and security. An important factor was the significant Somali and international interest and pressure to resolve the crisis, given the wider hope around the creation of a new Government and political system after three decades of its absence. As Menkhaus has observed, external mediation support in Somalia works when international interests are aligned with Somali interests.

External mediation approaches and strategies adopted a more peace-building orientation with the emphasis on facilitation, coordination and coalition-building. These approaches sought not simply to end violence but also to restore social relations between clans and address underlying conflict drivers at different levels. From the start, there was a deep appreciation of how different levels inter-related and interacted. The SRSG's office – particularly through the role of Ms Ilham Gassar – understood it needed work at multiple levels, and first to reach a public agreement at the inter-state level to create space for local efforts to be supported. Experimentation with different approaches to sequencing, linking and moving between the multiple levels helped ensure its viability. Moreover, the UN SRSG's office took a leading role to cohere external actors in support of a locally-owned process, while Interpeace, with a long history of engagement in this area, played a critical role in working locally and linking to international actors.

In addition, political economy analyses and granular knowledge of the landscape enabled external actors to incentivise key stakeholders and potential spoilers, whether by facilitating access and networking or reframing problems as opportunities, while also building coalitions of civic-minded and peacebuilding-oriented individuals. The 'activist' approach recognised the importance of women activists and youth groups already playing a role in peace and bringing them in to the official process extended the reach of discussions from military figures to civil figures and participation. According to De Waal, elite politics in Somalia can be described as a political marketplace which is characterised by the ascendancy of personal and transactional relationships over institutional norms. Applied to the mediating world, this personalised environment is also important as the political entrepreneur can be contrasted with the civic/peace-building activists; both are acting in the same environment but following different agendas and norms.

Another key element was the importance of personal mediator characteristics and their relationship to the strategies employed and outcomes achieved. Both personnel in the SRSG's office and Interpeace were deeply committed and had knowledge of local drivers of conflict and peace, and the capacity to network extensively with a wide range of figures across clans, from the military to civil society, and at elite levels and local levels. The role and history of Interpeace, with its partners, is a critical aspect to this story. Its engagement reflects its own history and continuity in Somalia, institutionally and with its leadership, staff and partners for many years. It also employed an impressive participatory research model that has brought together international and Somali expertise to produce significant pieces of work and identify lessons learned.

At the same time, unpacking the identity of 'external' actors is revealing, and highlights the importance of personnel and staffing. Interviewees pointed out the importance of the 'passion' and commitment of those involved in the mediation process. For Ilham Gassar, for example, this was a deeply personal project. As a Somali diaspora woman from one side of the frontline, she occupied a different position than Interpeace and some of its staff. Despite her limited experience in mediation or peace-building processes, she brought deep commitment and considerable skills to the team. She was also attentive to her positionality and used her different identities - as a UN staff member, a woman, a member of her family and clan and as a diaspora individual - to enable progress in the process. Leveraging these different identities became a key part of negotiating this environment.

7 Haaf had good relations with Puntland and was supportive of a peace process.

Key Recommendations

The interest in the surge of agreements being forged at local and sub-national levels is increasingly reflected in the development of new approaches and tools by international institutions. The relatively new term ‘sustaining peace’, for example, describes how the different parts of the UN should work together with national and local stakeholders and with the support of a wide range of partners to develop coherent and comprehensive responses to complex and interrelated challenges. Our findings seek to add to efforts to develop new approaches and tools that can address the constantly evolving complexities of peace-making. While every external mediation process and conflict context has its own particularities, learning from the Galkaio agreement process should be more widely captured and discussed by different audiences, Somali and non-Somali, given its historical importance and contemporary relevance.

We highlight several recommendations that can support external engagement in these processes.

- *People Matter*: Many of those involved in this agreement-making process have been part of the institutional memory of peacebuilding in Somalia; getting the right people with the right skills and experience seems obvious but is often very difficult to obtain.
- *Donor/agency coordination*: where international agencies and resources can crowd out the space for local actors and distort incentives, coordination and agreement on ways of working is essential.
- *An ‘activist’ or peacebuilding orientation and approach*: Engendering an ‘activist’ approach to peacebuilding is an important counter strategy to the short-term political calculus of many actors. Often, external mediators are focused on reaching a settlement or agreement, which is especially evident in national-level processes where prestige and reputation of the mediators may be at stake. Adopting a more activist approach can achieve both a settlement as well as create space for a longer-term transformation of relations at the local level. This is particularly important when approaches consider both the incentive structure of different actors as well as the historical, emotional and symbolic roots of conflict, which involve a wide range of stakeholders.
- *Need for more flexible funding and risk-taking approaches*: Agencies supporting mediation and peacebuilding efforts in insecure ‘local’ environments should develop flexible and risk-taking approaches. Security and bureaucratic constraints often restrict and limit the ability of mediators to work in these environments, diminishing both their credibility and the opportunities to progress the process. More flexibility, decentralized decision-making locally, and an increased appetite for risk-taking would enable mediators employed by multilateral institutions and NGOs to pursue peace. Moreover, flexible funding mechanisms that can rapidly disburse funds are important for covering logistical and transportation costs for actors across conflict divides to meet and can also support confidence-building measures.
- *Inclusive Processes*: The involvement of civic actors can be critical at the level of mediation.⁸ In the case of Galkaio, civic actors and civic activists, most notably women but also youth, were able to keep the momentum of the process, pressuring actors and shaping an agreement whose benefits could be more widely enjoyed by the community.

8 We suggest a slight difference between a civic actor and a civic activist, where the former is a civic-minded, unarmed actor, concerned about the public interest but not necessarily an activist, whereas the latter represents a more pro-active personal commitment and engagement in or to a cause. Across the CRP we are exploring the notion of ‘civicness’, as a logic of public authority that we contrast with identity politics and the political marketplace, see: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/crp/2019/05/22/kaldor-civicness/>



This policy brief is part of the CRP theme on Local Agreements.

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