

PEER-TO-PEER EXCHANGE IN PUNTLAND: REFLECTING, LEARNING, AND SHARING ON DEMOCRATISATION, LOCAL GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

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Expectations for better local governance grow, but many district councils and administrations in Somalia are nascent institutions that are grappling with how to expand and improve service delivery. In order to improve local governance, states are encouraged to delegate essential service delivery to local authorities that are situated closer to population centres. However, state ministries and departments continue to struggle with limited capacity, resources and reach. This has led to disgruntled constituents and opened the space for bad actors to politicise unmet expectations, challenging government legitimacy and authority.

Working in the local governance space across districts in three states, Somalia Stability Fund Phase III (SSF III) partner, the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG), recognised that district councils are at different stages of development. This presented an opportunity for exchange and peer-to-peer learning on what works in local governance – from district council formation to domestic resource mobilisation.

To address this, in May 2025, SSF III co-funded a series of events led by VNG, who are implementing democratisation and local governance projects in Puntland, Jubaland and Southwest states. The events brought together stakeholders from these three states – including government at different levels, private sector, universities, civil society organisations and individuals – to reflect on the work and share best practices in local governance.

The five-day series of events kicked off with a research conference, titled 'Enhancing Responsibilities of Social Services in Somalia', organised by the Association of Puntland Universities (APU). The conference provided a platform for stakeholder engagement on accountable service delivery. SSF III partners, both government and non-government, attended the conference to share their experiences from their respective states. The conference provided a rare opportunity to bring stakeholders from different states together to discuss challenges and best practices in local governance. The conference helped to facilitate open discussions and allowed attendees to reflect on their shared goals.

Participants stressed that local governance structures must minimise the gap between governments and communities to foster a sense of belonging and inclusion, strengthening the social contract, thus increasing opportunities for domestic resource mobilisation. Attendees encouraged participatory processes, such as community planning and open forums to allow diverse groups to engage, mediate differences, and collectively shape their environment. When communities feel heard and represented, social cohesion increases, which is a key ingredient for stability.



WORKSTREAM 3: DEMOCRATISATION & LOCAL GOVERNANCE

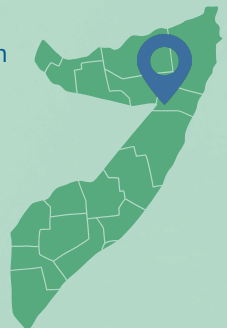
AT A GLANCE

PARTNER

The Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG)

ACTIVITY DETAILS

A series of events brought together key stakeholders from Puntland, Jubaland and Southwest states to share learning and ideas on local governance.



LOCATION

- Garowe, Puntland State



ARFOON ABDI DHAQANE

**Local government representative
from Dhobley district, Jubaland**

"This conference has taught me so much. I hope women will be included in the new local council in Dhobley to ensure its success."



"We explored the deeper meanings of terms we used to hear but never fully understood. For example, 'transparency', 'daah-furnaan' in Somali or 'accountability', 'isla xisaabtan' are more than just words; they are the foundations of good governance. I used to think stability meant carrying a gun. Through the training, I realised true stability comes from meeting people's basic needs; without that, no one can feel truly secure." **Muktar Abdi Ahmed (centre), local council member, Badhan district**

A participant from Badhan, Puntland, stated, "To me, good governance means a strong, respectful relationship between leaders and the community. With that kind of understanding, the community can freely express their needs, and leaders won't see the people as a threat or burden. That's what I believe good governance is all about."

Arfoon Abdi Dhaqane, a local government representative from Jubaland's Dholeby district; a strategic district that straddles a main supply route and a transit point for both businesses and security sector forces, stated "As a woman, I saw how the local council in Afmadhow failed due to misunderstandings among its members [and the exclusion of marginalised groups]." Throughout the week, she saw successful examples of inclusive district councils, which gave her hope, "I hope women will be included in the new local council in Dholeby to ensure its success".

In addition to the conference, the week of events included a peer-to-peer exchange session with all partner districts; a training on social accountability; and a site visit in Puntland to see accountable local governance in practice. SSF III also shared preliminary findings from a pilot research study conducted in Puntland and Southwest states on public perceptions of confidence in institutions.

The social accountability training sought to capitalise on the experiences and learning from the conference, allowing partners from local councils to delve deeper into accountability for improved local governance. Many district councils struggle with resource mobilisation, service delivery and community engagement due to being outside of the periphery of state governments. Service delivery is often

hampered by security threats, including high levels of intracommunal conflict.

Muktar Abdi Ahmed, a local council member from a newly constituted Badhan District in Puntland, stated: "It's crucial to raise awareness among both society and leaders so they can better understand one another. I used to think stability meant carrying a gun. But through this training, I realised true stability comes from meeting people's basic needs; without that, no one can feel truly secure, regardless of external threats."

The training gave participants the tools to define good governance – a positive starting point for many participants who had never received training. One participant said, "This training taught me so much. We explored the deeper meanings of terms we used to hear but never fully understood. For example, 'transparency', Daah-furnaan in Somali or 'accountability', 'Isa xisaabtan' are more than just words; they are the foundations of good governance."

On the fourth and final day, the peer-to-peer learning and reflection session allowed district government representatives to share the work they have been doing under SSF III, reflect on what they have learned over the preceding days, and develop an action plan to implement when they return to their duty stations.

As part of SSF III year three activities, VNG is assisting each district council in the development and implementation a seven-step inclusive social accountability framework. VNG will continually monitor the implementation of the action plans, recognising that ongoing monitoring is critical for identifying challenges early, making necessary adjustments, and ensuring the sustainability of the frameworks.

Why is this work important?

Peer-to-peer exchanges allow local government officials to access specialised knowledge that can improve institutional competencies and service delivery by enabling quicker and better-informed decisions. Evidence-based policymaking and collaborative governance aligns better with community needs and improves public service outcomes.

Previously, most local governments operated in isolation, with resources concentrated at the state level, limiting needs-based resource allocation. Many attendees lacked access to best practice examples of local governance that could facilitate 'leapfrogging' - avoiding the repeat of past mistakes. These sessions helped to build trust and a culture of knowledge exchange, fostering collaboration and social identity among members, essential for the future flow and transfer of knowledge between districts and states.