



Examining the Functionality of Jowhar Local Council

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Summary

- » The Jowhar Local Council has struggled to function effectively due to irregular meetings, unresolved clan representation disputes, political interference, and lack of leadership accountability—undermining its intended role in grassroots governance.
- » Seat allocation disputes, and loyalty to clans over institutional leadership have deepened mistrust. State-level meddling in appointments and decisions has further eroded the council's autonomy and credibility.
- » The council lacks independent funding, trained personnel, and basic operational resources. The absence of financial transparency, public engagement, and service delivery has alienated citizens and damaged public trust.
- » To restore functionality and legitimacy, this brief recommends inclusive dialogue, clearer legal mandates for local governance, increased financial and institutional support, and enforcement of internal accountability mechanisms

About Somali Public Agenda

Somali Public Agenda is a nonprofit public policy and administration research organization based in Mogadishu. Its aim is to advance understanding and improvement of public administration and public services in Somalia through evidence-based research and analysis.

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Introduction

The establishment of the Jowhar Local Council marked a positive step in decentralizing governance in Hirshabelle, making it the second district after Warsheekh to have a local council, thereby enhancing grassroots governance and service delivery. In October 2023, Jowhar completed the formation of its local council through an indirect election process. This followed a protracted process that began in mid-2022, was paused later that year, and resumed in early 2023. Clan elders with constituencies in the district nominated five delegates, who then elected 26 councilors, leaving one seat vacant as of July 2025 due to ongoing clan rivalry over local representation.

Council seats were allocated among Jowhar's major clans: Abgaal (9 seats); Jareer (6 seats for Shiidle and 1 for Kaboole); Gaaljecel (5); Moobleen (3); and Hawadle (2). Of the current 26 councilors, only three are women—far below the 30% quota threshold for women - set by the Federal Government and encouraged international donors – that is required for representative bodies. The council was intended to strengthen grassroots governance, deliver essential services, and plan development projects based on community priorities.

This governance brief investigates the challenges facing the functioning of the Jowhar Local Council. The findings contribute to the broader discussion on strengthening local governance in Somalia and highlight the obstacles confronting newly formed councils like Jowhar. The brief draws on eight key informant interviews conducted between March 25 and May 25, 2025, with representatives from the Jowhar District Council, traditional elders, civil society leaders, political analysts, and Hirshabelle State. Some interviews were conducted in person in Mogadishu, while others took place remotely via WhatsApp with interviewees based in Jowhar. These conversations provided firsthand perspectives on the challenges affecting the council's operations and were thematically analyzed to identify key factors hindering its functionality.

To assess the functionality of the Jowhar Local Council, this brief examines six core dimensions:

- Frequency and regularity of council meetings
- Clan representation and power-sharing disputes
- Political interference from Hirshabelle State authorities
- Institutional and resource constraints
- Leadership and administrative capacity
- Public trust, community engagement, and service delivery

Each of these factors is explored in the following subsections.

Frequency and Regularity of Council Meetings

The Local Government Law (No.004, 2018) of Hirshabelle State stipulates that district councils are to hold approximately 20 meetings on a quarterly basis to ensure the effective functioning of council business. However, since Jowhar's District Council was inaugurated in late October 2023, it has failed to meet this requirement. Following the election of the mayor and deputies, the council managed to hold only 9 to 11 meetings. During these, it adopted internal rules, approved key regulatory frameworks, formed basic committees, and initiated preliminary budget discussions. It also passed three regulations—on public finance, procurement, and social service delivery. However, broader legislative or planning work was not undertaken.

Despite the official opening of the third session in January 2025, meeting frequency remained low. One civil society representative noted, “Announcing a session is not the same as doing the work.” A council member admitted, “Every time we held a meeting, it was because someone from the state administration pushed us. We were not operating under our own plan.”

While this external pressure could be seen as political interference, it also had a strategic motivation. Several informants suggested that the Ministry of Interior was under pressure from donors who had supported the council's formation and expected it to function. Pushing the district to convene meetings was, in part, a way to demonstrate progress and secure future funding tied to district performance. Nevertheless, the council continued to suffer from poor leadership, political interference, disagreements, and lack of organization.

Several factors have hindered the overall functionality of the Jowhar Local Council. These include the infrequent council meetings, unresolved disputes over clan representation and power-sharing, political interference from Hirshabelle State authorities, institutional and resource constraints, weaknesses in leadership and administration, lack of public trust, inadequate community engagement, and poor service delivery. Each of these issues contributes independently to the council's dysfunction and is examined in the sections that follow.

Clan Representation and Power-Sharing Disputes

Clan politics played a central role in the council's formation and unfortunately contributed to its dysfunction. During seat allocation among the constituent clans (Abgaal, Jareer, Gaaljecel, Moobleen,

and Hawadle), some stakeholders expressed resentment over perceived imbalances. The allocation was based on a post-1991 formula that many informants argued did not reflect current demographic realities. Hawadle and some parts of the Gaaljecel clan perceived the distribution as unfair and outdated. As one elder put it, “The council was not born out of full agreement. Some clans accepted it because they had no better choice, but resentment remained underneath.”

Discontent escalated to the point where some clans instructed their representatives to avoid council meetings until their concerns were addressed. One council member stated, “If one major clan is unhappy, it paralyzes the entire council. Nobody wants to move forward unless their grievances are resolved.”

Another source of tension was leadership. The mayor of Jowhar Local Government was elected from the Jareer (Shiidle) community, a historically marginalized group with a significant presence in Jowhar and Middle Shabelle. His appointment was seen as a step toward inclusive governance—he is the only Jareer mayor currently serving in Somalia. However, his leadership faced strong resistance due to both clan dynamics and his perceived political affiliations with Hirshabelle President Guudlaawe. As one observer put it, “They saw him as a symbolic leader, not someone with real power.”

According to council members, frustrations stemmed less from his clan identity and more from his perceived loyalty to the state leadership. This dual perception—both clan-based and political—undermined his authority and effectiveness.

Loyalty was directed not toward the mayor, but toward individual clans. Clannism reigned supreme, and as a result, every action taken or routine decision made was viewed in terms of tribal identity, with most clans seeking control over available resources. As one civil society representative explained, “Every small decision is seen through the lens of clan interest.”

Political Interference from Hirshabelle State Authorities

Another major challenge has been political interference from Hirshabelle State authorities. Although Law No.004 grants councils autonomy, this independence has been undermined in practice. Interviews revealed that state officials influenced the nomination of council members, allowing loyalists of the state leadership to gain a foothold. As one observer noted, “It was not a purely community-led process. There were clear fingerprints of the state leadership.” This interference damaged the council's credibility.

State meddling persisted, with council members seeking informal approval from regional authorities to make decisions—from passing resolutions to setting meeting agendas. Some meetings were postponed or canceled following state directives. A proposal to form a local infrastructure committee was withdrawn after a contrary directive from the Hirshabelle state Ministry of Interior. As one resident explained, “We were told to wait. Sometimes we were not even consulted about decisions that affected our own district.”

Institutional and Resource Constraints

The council also suffers from operational resource shortages and limited governance capacity. Despite Law No. 004, the council lacks independent funding for administrative functions. Councilors reported being unable to cover basic costs such as transportation and communication. One councilor stated, “After our inauguration, we were left with empty promises. We had no office materials, no transport support, not even petty cash for basic meetings.”

The council’s financial dependency on the Hirshabelle state government has also undermined its autonomy. Lacking the authority to collect taxes or generate revenue, the council relies on inconsistent and politically motivated handouts from the state. This dependence has made councilors more susceptible to political pressure.

In addition, the lack of capacity among council members has hindered effective governance. Most members were selected based on clan affiliation rather than qualifications or experience, and many have no background in public administration, legislation, or local governance. One member admitted, “We came into the council wanting to help our people, but many of us had no training on how to run a local government.” The initial training offered by international partners was brief and limited, and as political tensions escalated, opportunities for further capacity building became increasingly scarce.

A political analyst summarized it: “It’s not just that the council didn’t perform, but that it was never properly equipped to succeed.”

Leadership and Administrative Weaknesses

A significant issue identified was the lack of mechanisms to enforce member participation. Although councilors are required to attend meetings, there were no follow-ups when they failed to do so. As one staff member noted, “There was no accountability. If someone didn’t show up, there was no accountability process—no warnings, no penalties, no explanations

demanded.” This made achieving quorums and holding meaningful sessions difficult.

Some councilors became inactive due to unpaid allowances, despite these being contingent on attendance and available funds. Misunderstandings persist among councilors who expect monthly salaries, further discouraging participation.

The council lacked public accountability structures. According to respondents, there were virtually no channels through which residents could engage in council activities, provide feedback, or hold their representatives accountable. “We expected town halls or public hearings after the council was formed, but none were organized. The public has been completely left out,” stated a civil society representative interviewed for this brief. This disconnect left the community excluded and uninformed about local governance issues.

Several informants described a council environment in which key functions—such as setting agendas, documenting proceedings, and following up on decisions—were handled inconsistently and unprofessionally. Meetings were often poorly planned or improvised, with little to no preparation beforehand. As one councilor noted, “Many times we arrived at meetings not knowing what the agenda was. Decisions were made on the spot or postponed because we had no preparation.” This haphazard planning and lack of organization severely hindered the council’s ability to achieve meaningful outcomes.

Lack of Public Trust, Community Engagement, and Service Delivery

The suspension of regular meetings—compounded by weak leadership and political interference—has significantly eroded public trust in the Jowhar Local Council. One civil society representative expressed his disillusionment, stating: “The council was supposed to represent us, but they disappeared before even starting real work.”

Many residents believe the council has become just another politicized body, shaped by clan loyalties rather than serving as a mechanism for inclusive governance. A major factor in this perception has been the council’s failure to hold regular meetings. The unexplained cancellation of sessions and extended periods of inactivity caused citizens to lose confidence in the council’s relevance and effectiveness.

A civil society activist captured this frustration, saying, “At first, we had hope. But after months without action, people gave up. They stopped believing the

council could deliver anything.” This loss of confidence was especially prevalent among women, youth groups, and business owners.

The situation was further aggravated by the council’s failure to manage public funds transparently. Although a regulation on public finance management was passed, the council lacked an independent budget and relied heavily on the Hirshabelle State for funding—without clear or public reporting. This lack of transparency raised serious concerns among citizens. A Jowhar market vendor voiced this bluntly: “Nobody knows what money comes, where it goes, or how it benefits us.”

The absence of financial transparency—marked by suspected misuse of funds, favoritism in decision-making, and a lack of financial reporting—fueled widespread skepticism. Meanwhile, the council’s inability to deliver even basic services dealt a significant blow to its credibility. Essential services such as road repairs, waste collection, education, and healthcare were largely ignored. Simple tasks like cleaning drainage systems or maintaining schools were neglected. As one civil society leader remarked, “There was no sign that the council even existed.” In fact, residents increasingly turned to NGOs, elders, or their own limited resources to address local challenges.

Policy Considerations

To address the challenges discussed, help the council regain public confidence and fulfill its responsibilities to the people, several key steps should be considered:

Facilitate Inclusive Clan Dialogue, Public Engagement, and Political Settlement: The Ministry of Interior of Hirshabelle should invite members of the public—across clans, socio-economic status, age, and background—to participate in broad-based reconciliation meetings and structured dialogue. These forums should bring together elders, civil society, national mediators, and respected figures to openly address grievances related to council seat allocation and leadership. The objective is to reach a binding political agreement that ensures fair representation, rotational leadership, and clear mechanisms for dispute resolution. Without addressing underlying

clan grievances and restoring inclusivity, the council will remain fragile and vulnerable to renewed divisions.

Clarify and Codify Council Mandates and Jurisdiction: Although the current Local Government Law outlines the powers of local governments, Hirshabelle State must take proactive steps to enable councils like Jowhar to fully exercise their mandates. This includes meaningful decentralization—particularly by granting local councils greater authority over taxation and service provision. Legislative or administrative reforms should solidify the council’s roles in community engagement, service delivery management, public finance oversight, and local development planning. Codifying these mandates will reduce ambiguity, limit external interference, and enhance the council’s legitimacy in the eyes of both members and citizens.

Strengthen the Council’s Capacity and Resources: The council requires dedicated funding and tools to effectively carry out its functions. This includes adequate salaries for council members, construction of office facilities, hiring of support staff, and coverage of transport and communication expenses. Part of this funding should also be allocated to continuous training for council members and their support teams to build governance capacity and institutional professionalism.

Improve Leadership and Establish Clear Internal Regulations: The council should adopt internal rules that hold both members and staff accountable. These regulations must include clear guidelines on meeting schedules, attendance requirements, and enforcement mechanisms for addressing non-compliance. Strengthening internal governance will enhance operational discipline and ensure the council functions consistently and transparently.

This governance brief is the fourth in a series of District Council-driven research publications under our EU-funded project, Increased Opportunities for Somali Citizens’ Scrutiny of Fiscal and Financial Governance, which examines critical issues related to fiscal governance and federalism at the district level. The topics explored in this series are identified through close collaboration with District Council members, and Civil Society Organizations’ (CSOs) representatives during workshops held in Bosaso, Adado, and Jowhar on a quarterly basis, ensuring the research remains grounded in local governance realities.



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