



# From Elections to Expectations: Citizen Perspectives and Municipal Governance in Qardho

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## Summary

- » Qardho residents expressed high expectations for improved public services, accountability, and responsive governance following the introduction of democratic local council elections in Puntland in 2021.
- » A multi-stakeholder dialogue between citizens and municipal authorities revealed significant service delivery concerns, including limited access to health services in some neighbourhoods, poor road infrastructure, sanitation challenges, and security risks linked to inadequate street lighting and transportation infrastructure.
- » Municipal authorities acknowledged these challenges but emphasised that the municipality faces severe financial constraints due to a limited revenue base and low tax compliance, which restrict its capacity to finance development projects.
- » Participants also highlighted socio-economic challenges affecting youth, including unemployment, irregular migration, and the growing social impacts of gambling and substance abuse.
- » Despite these challenges, the dialogue demonstrated a strong willingness among citizens to contribute to local development, highlighting opportunities to strengthen participatory governance, improve municipal–community collaboration, and build a stronger local social contract.

## 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

Before the introduction of direct local-level elections in Puntland in 2021, local councils were selected by respective clan elders, denying local people the opportunity to decide who would represent them in the local representative body. This practice was entrenched at all levels—local, state, and federal—giving opportunities to a few while excluding the majority of the population from participation in these processes.

However, Puntland was the first federal member state to embrace and conduct local-level elections in October 2021. The exercise was carried out in three districts—Qardho, Ufeyn, and Eyl—as a pilot to later expand to other districts. These elections were widely praised for advancing decentralization and democratization. Observers saw the one-person, one-vote polls in these districts as an important political milestone. The elections were regarded as free and fair, offering reassurance to those wary of past manipulation (Heritage Institute 2022).

In Qardho, voters elected thirty-three council members, including nine women, reflecting progress in gender representation (MM Somali TV, 2021). In April 2022, the council elected Said Abdi Qaal as Mayor of Qardho, despite him being from the opposition party, Mideeye, which defeated the incumbent candidate from the ruling party, Kaah, Mohamed Burale Abdi. The election of an opposition candidate demonstrates that the mayoral election was conducted fairly and was not manipulated in favour of the ruling party.

While the elections marked an important milestone in Puntland's democratization, they also heightened citizens' expectations for accountability, transparency, and responsive governance from their newly elected leaders. Recognizing the need to bridge these expectations with municipal capacity, Somali Public Agenda, in collaboration with the Qardho Municipality, organized an on-the-record forum in Qardho on 25 December 2025.

The Qardho dialogue, the focus of this brief, was attended by 51 participants (24 women and 27 men) representing women's groups, youth, elders, religious scholars, and local businesspeople to openly discuss governance priorities, service delivery challenges, and development needs. The session began with a presentation of the district's 2026 development plan by the planning department, after which the discussion moved into a panel session where the mayor, Said Abdi Qaal, responded to three opening questions from the moderator, Farhia Mohamud, an SPA researcher. The session then continued with an open Q&A during which participants raised additional questions and comments.

The dialogue lasted approximately two hours, and a version of the video recording is available on [SPA YouTube channel](#). However, due to technical challenges, the uploaded video does not capture the full discussion. Questions and answers from the session were reconstructed from the videographer's recordings and the researcher's notes, which together provide a complete record of the exchanges.

The dialogue revealed three interrelated themes: citizens' rising expectations for improved governance following direct elections; persistent socio-economic

challenges, particularly affecting youth and vulnerable communities; and the municipality's limited capacity to respond to the needs of local people due to limited revenue and declining donor funding. At the same time, participants expressed a strong willingness to contribute to local development through voluntary initiatives, greater tax compliance, and community-led programs. The discussions suggest how participatory governance is beginning to strengthen in Qardho.

This governance brief analyses the exchange between citizens and municipal authorities during the dialogue and explores how public concerns intersect with local government responses. By documenting this interaction, the brief sheds light on the evolving relationship between citizens and municipal institutions in Qardho and identifies policy considerations for strengthening participatory local governance and sustainable urban development.

### Citizen Participation and Municipal Accountability

A central theme of the dialogue was the relationship between citizens and local government. The mayor emphasised that the municipal administration has attempted to maintain open dialogue with residents through regular town hall meetings, neighbourhood consultations, and public presentations of municipal budgets. According to the mayor, these engagements are intended to reinforce the idea that local authorities derive their legitimacy from citizens. Because residents elected the council and local leadership, the administration considers it essential to listen to community concerns and incorporate them into the development of local government plans.

The mayor also argued that transparency is necessary to build trust between government and citizens. Municipal authorities therefore present fiscal reports outlining revenues and expenditures to the public. Over the past 3.5 years in office, the municipality has convened 11 such public reporting sessions—roughly three per year. These initiatives are intended to demonstrate accountability and encourage citizens to participate more actively in local governance.

However, the discussion also revealed a gap between public expectations and municipal capacity. Many participants demanded improved services and infrastructure, yet the mayor repeatedly stressed that the municipality faces severe financial limitations.

One of the most significant challenges is low tax compliance. Municipal data indicates that there are approximately thirteen thousand registered properties in Qardho, yet only around three thousand five hundred properties paid municipal taxes in 2025. This gap significantly restricts the municipality's ability to finance development projects.

The mayor suggested that economic hardships partly explain this situation, but he also emphasised that public trust plays a major role. By sharing budget information and consulting citizens about development plans, the municipality hopes to demonstrate transparency and encourage greater participation in local governance, including paying taxes.

The issue highlights the broader challenge of building a social contract at the local level. Citizens expect services from government, while the municipality depends on a limited

revenue base to generate the resources required to provide those services.

### Service Delivery and Infrastructure Concerns

Many citizens' interventions during the dialogue focused on basic service delivery challenges affecting different neighbourhoods in Qardho. Participants described gaps in infrastructure, sanitation services, and health facilities that continue to affect residents' daily lives.

One public health activist, for instance, noted that the Wadajir and Qorya-Cad neighbourhoods lack functioning health centres despite their growing populations. The participant suggested that local residents could collectively contribute to establishing a health facility if the municipality facilitated awareness campaigns and coordination.

A particularly powerful intervention came from a woman living in the Calanlay neighbourhood, who described a recent incident in which two pregnant women went into labour at night. Because the neighbourhood lacked nearby health services and transportation, the women were unable to reach the hospital in time. One of the babies died due to complications during delivery.

The participant explained that a maternal and child health facility had already been constructed in the neighbourhood but remained closed due to outstanding payments to the contractors. She urged the municipality to help resolve the issue and mobilise support from local businesses and organisations so that the facility could begin operating.

The mayor acknowledged the seriousness of the situation and emphasised that the municipality is aware of the need for additional health facilities. However, he also noted that the local government has limited financial capacity and often depends on partnerships with communities and external donors to implement such projects.

Aside from issues in public health, another participant highlighted challenges in the education sector, noting that students face difficulties due to the English-medium curriculum and calling for greater attention to education development in the town.

Road infrastructure was another recurring concern. Several participants reported that their neighbourhoods lack paved roads, making transportation difficult and increasing security risks. One resident from the Xingood-Hoose neighbourhood explained that the area remains poorly connected and has experienced incidents of mobile robbery at night.

Residents also raised concerns about reckless driving by young Bajaj drivers and suggested installing additional speed bumps to improve road safety.

In response, the mayor pointed to recent infrastructure achievements, including the construction of two paved roads and the rehabilitation of existing tarmac roads across the town. Nevertheless, he acknowledged that expanding such improvements to all neighbourhoods will take time due to financial constraints.

## Environmental Management and Urban Planning

Environmental issues were another major focus of the discussion. Participants frequently mentioned sanitation challenges, particularly the problem of residents dumping waste in public areas instead of using existing waste collection services.

The mayor noted that waste management awareness campaigns have been conducted in the town, and a committee of sanitation workers—including a women-led group—has been established to improve cleaning services. However, he argued that behavioural change among residents remains necessary to address the problem effectively.

Some participants offered community-driven solutions. A youth representative suggested that residents plant trees in front of their homes to improve the city's appearance and environmental conditions. If each household planted a tree, she argued, the town could become greener and more attractive.

Another participant proposed that residents install lights outside their homes to complement municipal street lighting efforts. Improved lighting, according to the participant, would enhance security and reduce criminal activity during nighttime hours.

The mayor welcomed these proposals and explained that the municipality is already working to install several hundred new streetlights. Previous solar lighting projects installed in 2015 and 2021 had deteriorated due to technical failures and theft of batteries, prompting the municipality to shift toward conventional electric street lighting systems, which offer better durability and are easier to repair and maintain.

Urban planning challenges also emerged during the dialogue. Rapid urban growth has created disputes over land ownership and limited the availability of public land for infrastructure projects such as cemeteries and public facilities. The mayor explained that the municipality has conducted surveys to map the city and identify spaces for cemeteries, but many potential sites are claimed by private owners.

## Youth Concerns: Employment, Migration, and Social Challenges

Youth participants raised concerns about unemployment and the lack of opportunities available to young people in the town. One participant suggested that funds collected by the district development committee from utilities such as water and electricity could be used to support youth employment initiatives, including training in digital freelancing skills.

These concerns reflect broader national trends in which youth unemployment is a major driver of irregular migration. Participants noted that many young people in Qardho are attempting to migrate abroad despite the risks involved.

An elder participant also raised concerns about the social impact of gambling and substance abuse. He estimated that gambling platforms such as 1XBET, along with drugs and migration expenses, may have drained around ten million dollars from the town's economy in just 2025.

The mayor acknowledged that gambling and drug use represent growing social challenges across Somalia. He emphasised that addressing these problems requires cooperation between government institutions, religious leaders, and community organisations.

Regarding migration, the mayor argued that many young people hold unrealistic expectations about life abroad. He pointed out that migrants often face difficult conditions and uncertain legal environments in foreign countries. Encouraging youth to recognise opportunities within their own communities, he suggested, should be part of broader awareness campaigns.

## Economic Opportunities and Local Development

Despite the challenges highlighted during the dialogue, participants also discussed potential economic opportunities that could strengthen Qardho's local economy.

Several speakers noted that the town's geographic location places it near major trade routes connecting different cities in Puntland. One participant suggested that Qardho could serve as a storage and logistics hub for goods that are affected by the high temperatures of the coastal city of Bosaso.

The mayor expanded on this idea by discussing the potential of the livestock sector. A livestock quarantine facility has already been established in the town, equipped with veterinary treatment units, inspection areas, and holding enclosures. However, the facility currently operates on a relatively small scale.

According to the mayor, the facility could develop into a major livestock market where pastoralists and traders from surrounding regions conduct transactions. Such a market could reduce transportation costs for traders who currently travel long distances to purchase livestock directly from rural areas. The mayor also invited citizens to invest in the facility, encouraging local participation in its development and growth.

Other participants suggested establishing fish storage and processing facilities to support traders who bring fish from coastal areas. Developing such supply chains could expand local economic activity while generating additional municipal revenue.

## Governance Constraints and Institutional Challenges

While many participants focused on development opportunities, the mayor repeatedly emphasised the structural constraints facing the municipality. The district government relies heavily on internally generated revenue because external development assistance has declined in recent years. In addition, political dynamics at higher levels of the Federal Government and the Puntland State affect the implementation of development projects, leaving municipalities dependent on self-reliance strategies and community partnerships.

One participant also raised concerns about internal disagreements within the local government. He urged the mayor and council members to resolve their differences in order to focus on delivering services to citizens. Such comments

reflect broader public expectations that elected leaders should prioritise cooperation and unity in addressing community needs.

## Policy Considerations

Based on the dialogue, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen citizen participation and improve local governance in Qardho.

- 1. Expand citizen engagement and participatory governance:** The municipality should organise regular public dialogue forums bringing together community members, civil society organisations, youth groups, and municipal officials to discuss local governance issues. Institutionalising such engagements can improve transparency, strengthen trust between citizens and authorities, and ensure that development planning reflects community priorities.
- 2. Strengthen municipal revenue collection and tax compliance:** The municipality should implement public awareness campaigns explaining the importance of municipal taxation and how local revenues support public services. Improving transparency in municipal budgeting and linking tax payments to visible service improvements may encourage greater compliance among residents.
- 3. Improve access to basic health services:** Local authorities should work with community organisations, businesses, and development partners to operationalise existing health facilities and expand primary healthcare services in underserved neighbourhoods. Resolving administrative or contractual obstacles preventing the opening of completed health facilities should be prioritized.
- 4. Develop neighbourhood infrastructure and road safety measures:** The municipality should develop a phased infrastructure improvement plan that prioritises road construction, drainage, and street lighting in rapidly growing neighbourhoods. Installing additional speed bumps and traffic management measures could also help address concerns about reckless driving and road safety.

- 5. Strengthen sanitation and environmental management:** Local authorities should expand waste collection services and environmental awareness campaigns to address sanitation challenges. Community initiatives such as tree-planting programs and neighbourhood clean-up campaigns could improve environmental conditions while encouraging citizen participation in urban management.
- 6. Address youth unemployment and migration pressures:** The municipality should collaborate with local organisations and the private sector to support vocational training, entrepreneurship programmes, and digital skills development for youth. Awareness campaigns about the risks of irregular migration may also help address the growing trend of youth leaving the town in search of opportunities abroad. Religious leaders (sheikhs) should also be engaged to raise awareness among young people about the dangers of gambling and its forbidden status in Islam.
- 7. Promote local economic development opportunities:** Qardho's strategic location provides opportunities to strengthen its role as a regional trade and livestock market hub. Expanding livestock trading facilities, improving storage infrastructure for goods and fish products, and encouraging private sector investment could help stimulate local economic growth and generate additional municipal revenue.

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