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Bridging Citizens and Local Governments: Lessons from Governance Dialogues in Galmudug and Puntland

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Acknowledgments

This synthesis policy paper is the fifth and final output from a series of four dialogues conducted across Dhusamareb and South Galkacyo in Galmudug, and Qardho and North Galkacyo in Puntland. The dialogues aim to strengthen citizen participation in local governance and are supported by funding from the National Endowment for Democracy.

The policy paper was edited by Peter Chonka (PhD), Senior Lecturer in Global Digital Cultures at King's College London and Fellow at Somali Public Agenda.

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Executive Summary

More than a decade into the implementation of Somalia's federal project, aspirations to decentralize fiscal and service delivery powers to local governments remain unrealized. Similarly, the federal project has yet to yield meaningful citizen participation and accountability at the state and local government levels that could improve governance. Notably, limited citizen participation and accountability at the local government level have widened the disconnect between citizens and their local governments, undermining people's trust in and the legitimacy of local authorities.

Local governments collect revenue from a limited number of active sources, despite the wider range of sources that their respective state Local Government Acts authorize them to tax. As a result, they generate insignificant monthly income from these currently active revenue streams. This income has also fluctuated for reasons related to, but not limited to, clan conflicts and prolonged droughts.

Although local governments reported having limited annual budgets approved through their local councils, citizens reported having no knowledge of the existence of a budget for their respective local governments. This underscores the limited transparency of local governments and the limited participation of citizens in local governance.

Local government mayors reported that they provide limited services, mainly because revenue generation remains insufficient to cover even their operational costs, let alone service provision. They also cited the continued centralization of fiscal and service delivery powers in the hands of regional state governments, despite public pledges by state authorities—yet to materialize—to address this issue and gradually enable local governments to assume their core responsibilities.

Mayors admitted that they rarely engage local citizens in critical decision-making processes, leaving citizens unaware of decisions made on their behalf. Similarly, citizens noted that they rarely have opportunities to engage with their local governments on matters of local governance.

Local governments face a range of challenges that impede their effective functioning, including insecurity and clan conflicts, limited public awareness, limited collaboration with businesspeople, low revenue, lack of fiscal transfers from state governments, and high public expectations that exceed local governments' financial capacity to deal with issues such as poor sanitation and waste management, rainwater stagnation, and inadequate street lighting.

This policy paper synthesizes the key findings from four dialogue forums that Somalia Public Agenda (SPA) held with local governments across Galmudug and Puntland—Dhusamareb and South Galkacyo in Galmudug, and Qardho and North

Galkacyo in Puntland—between 20 December 2025 and 12 May 2026. The forums sought to strengthen citizen participation in local governance, particularly in a context where opportunities for direct engagement between citizens and local authorities remain limited.

Introduction

Somalia adopted federalism, in large part, to decentralize services to citizens at the regional and local government levels and respond to the bitter legacy of previous centralized authoritarianism. Federalism was consequently intended to increase citizen participation in governance and create greater opportunities for citizens to hold public office holders accountable. Despite efforts to establish federal structures at the state and local government levels, citizen participation and accountability at both levels—particularly at the local level—remain limited.

Local governments are widely recognized as the level of government closest to citizens and best positioned to respond to local needs. Strengthening local governments was therefore a key objective of Somalia's federal system, which aimed to bring governance and services closer to communities.

Against this background, Somalia Public Agenda (SPA) conducted four dialogue forums in four local government contexts: two in Galmudug State (Dhusamareb and South Galkacyo) and two in Puntland State (Qardho and North Galkacyo). The forums were held on 20 December 2025, 10 May 2026, 25 December 2025, and 12 May 2026, respectively. These dialogue forums brought together local citizens and their respective mayors. A total of 199 participants (77 women and 122 men) attended the forums, representing women, youth, businesspeople, elders, religious scholars, persons with disabilities, and marginalized communities.

These forums were the first-ever citizen engagements with local government officials on local governance issues in most of the target locations. They aimed to strengthen citizen participation in local governance, particularly given the limited opportunities for citizens to engage directly with their local authorities. Such platforms also help raise public awareness of the roles and responsibilities of local governments while promoting accountability.

The forums lasted an average of one and a half hours in each location and were video-recorded. During the discussions, citizens and mayors engaged on critical local governance issues, including revenue collection, service decentralization and delivery, poor infrastructure, citizen participation, transparency and accountability, sanitation and waste management, security, inadequate street lighting, and other challenges facing local governments.

The discussions were subsequently disseminated on SPA's website and social media platforms. The recordings were also shared with the respective local governments for posting on their own social media platforms. This was followed by the publication of a governance brief summarizing the issues discussed in each forum, in both English and Somali, on SPA's website.

This policy paper therefore synthesizes the key issues raised during the four dialogues and presents recommendations to help address them.

Local Government Revenue Collection

Across the local governments covered by the dialogues, revenue collection was at the forefront of the questions that citizens raised with their mayors. The citizens expressed interest in understanding the scope and scale of the revenue collected by their respective local governments. The mayors, in turn, noted that their local governments collect revenue from a limited number of active sources, despite the wider range of sources that their respective state Local Government Acts authorize them to tax.

The currently active revenue streams for these local governments are largely similar, and the monthly income generated from them is insignificant. Active sources include local transport fees, land title fees, business license fees, birth certificate fees, livestock market taxes, and daily vendor taxes.

On the other hand, these local governments have a significant potential source of revenue—property taxes—that remains inactive and unutilized. This is despite the availability of property data in some districts. In North Galkacyo, for example, the mayor reported that approximately 40,000–50,000 properties had been registered and assigned plate numbers. Mayors attributed the delayed operationalization of this critical revenue source to institutional weaknesses within their local governments and reported that they have ongoing plans to address this.

According to the mayors, local governments collect limited monthly revenue from their active revenue streams. North Galkacyo Local Government generates the highest monthly revenue from its currently active sources, reporting monthly income of approximately USD 84,000–90,000. Dhusamareb and South Galkacyo reported monthly revenues in roughly similar ranges, at USD 20,000–25,000 and USD 18,000–20,000, respectively.

Nevertheless, monthly revenue income for these local governments has fluctuated for reasons related to, but not limited to, clan conflicts and prolonged droughts. This limited revenue has severely constrained the ability of local governments to deliver basic services to their populations.

In addition, local governments operate on limited annual budgets, which mayors said had been approved by their local councils but without citizen participation. Even more concerning, local citizens reported having no knowledge of the existence of these budgets or the amount of revenue their local governments generate. This is largely due to limited engagement between citizens and local government officials and limited access to information on local government revenue, budgets, and expenditure.

Service Delivery and Decentralization

The dialogues between citizens and local government mayors revealed that the local governments concerned face similar challenges in service delivery. These local governments provide limited services, mainly because their revenue generation is insufficient to cover even their operational costs, let alone service provision. They also face the continued centralization of fiscal and service delivery powers in the hands of regional state governments, which have yet to decentralize these powers to enable local governments to fulfill their core responsibilities.

Although basic services such as primary education and health care are administered by the respective regional state governments, local government mayors argued that they provide other essential services, particularly security and intervention in or resolution of clan conflicts in and around their districts.

The mayors reported that responding to security-related incidents and clan conflicts diverts local government attention from other important responsibilities and, according to the mayors, drains much-needed resources. For instance, the mayor of North Galkacyo reported that approximately 20–30% of the local government's resources are allocated to local government security.

As emerged from the discussions between citizens and local government mayors, the limited role of local governments in providing essential public services—such as household waste collection, basic primary education, and health care—presents a significant challenge to their legitimacy in the eyes of local citizens.

Consequently, this has contributed to poor relations with the public, as local governments are currently unable to deliver the core responsibilities that would help establish trust and legitimacy among citizens.

Citizen Participation and Accountability

The current state of citizen participation and accountability in local governments remains limited, as emerged from the dialogues. Mayors admitted that they rarely engage local citizens in critical decision-making processes, leaving citizens unaware of decisions made on their behalf. Similarly, citizens noted that they rarely have opportunities to engage with their local governments on matters of local governance.

The dialogues we convened were, for instance, the first of their kind in Dhusamareb, where the mayor appeared at a town meeting with citizens who directed critical questions and raised long-standing concerns about local matters.

Mayors stated that they do not involve citizens in budget preparation or make public how much revenue is collected and spent. Likewise, they rarely convene public engagements to receive citizens' questions, concerns, and grievances. Most local government mayors were reluctant to engage local citizens on governance issues, mainly because of the poor performance of their administrations in fulfilling their mandates.

The dialogues confirmed the gap between local governments and local citizens. As a result, when citizens engaged their respective mayors, they expressed pent-up frustration over not being included in local government affairs and over having no avenue through which to express and share their concerns and recommendations with local government authorities.

Citizens demanded that mayors arrange regular public engagements to enable them to share information, build trust, and develop enduring relationships that could contribute to better-functioning local governments.

Challenges Facing Local Governments and Citizens

The local governments where we held the dialogues operate under largely similar circumstances and consequently confront similar challenges that impede them from delivering their core responsibilities. Below is a brief overview of the key challenges that local government mayors reported facing, as well as core issues that citizens expected local government to address.

1. Insecurity and Clan Conflicts

Local government mayors concurred that dealing with security incidents in and around their respective districts presents a profound challenge, as this consumes significant resources—namely money, energy, and time—that could otherwise be directed toward other core responsibilities, despite security falling under the jurisdiction of regional state governments.

Local officials reported that they intervene in clan conflicts that sporadically erupt in villages and settlements under the authority of their local governments. They work to defuse tensions and bring the parties together to reach ceasefire agreements, although such agreements are often temporary and unenforceable.

They said that undertaking these efforts—mostly on their own initiative and without support from their state governments—usually incurs costs, including deploying security forces and elders from the respective fighting clans or sub-clans to help ease tensions and bring the parties to the negotiating table.

Mayors reported that their repeated involvement in these situations has affected the daily operations of their local governments, since their presence is important to day-to-day administration. The mayor of North Galkacyo, for instance, noted that revenue generation declined for a period due to his involvement in such matters. Likewise, the mayor of Dhusamareb said that local people dubbed him a “clan elder” because he was so occupied with intermittent clan conflicts around the city.

Mayors agreed that this responsibility lies with regional state authorities, but they stressed that they cannot overlook this because the fallout from clan conflicts in rural areas adjacent to their jurisdictions directly affects the social and economic livelihoods of people within their areas of responsibility.

2. Limited Public Awareness

Citizens who attended our dialogues demonstrated limited awareness of the roles and responsibilities of their local governments. They have a limited understanding

of what a local government is and how it differs from other levels of government. Furthermore, they are not fully aware of the services their local governments (should) provide or the tax revenues they collect.

Part of this problem lies with local government officials, who have made limited efforts to educate citizens about the roles and responsibilities of local government, leaving a wide gap between the two sides. This undermines effective engagement and affects citizens' cooperation with their local authorities.

This calls for coordinated efforts by state and local governments to raise citizens' awareness of local government and enhance cooperation between citizens and their local governments.

3. Limited Collaboration with Businesspeople

Local government mayors complained about limited collaboration with businesspeople and claimed that this has significant implications for local government revenue.

Although businesspeople represent one of the most important stakeholder groups for local governments, some mayors in our dialogues faulted them for avoiding collaboration with local government authorities on tax revenue collection.

In particular, the mayor of South Galkacyo accused utility companies of being reluctant to charge a USD 1 fee on household water and electricity bills to fund development projects managed through the district development committee.

4. Lack of Fiscal Transfers

Local government mayors expressed concern that they receive no fiscal transfers from state governments, either from domestically collected revenue or from donor grants channeled through the federal government. Their concerns are further compounded by the fact that regional state governments retain the majority of revenue sources allocated to local governments under their respective Local Government Acts.

The combination of limited tax revenue collected by local governments and the lack of fiscal transfers from state governments continues to constrain the functioning of local governments. This also perpetuates challenges related to the legitimacy and trustworthiness of local governments, as well as the gap between local citizens and local authorities.

5. Declining Revenues

Local government mayors reported declining revenue from already limited active revenue streams, placing further strain on their operations. They attributed the decline in revenue to prolonged droughts, clan conflicts, and limited collaboration between businesspeople and local administrations.

This has prompted local governments to adopt coping measures, including reducing operational costs.

6. High Expectations of Local People

Despite the limited financial capacity of local governments, local people in general—and those who attended our dialogue forums in particular—expressed high expectations of local authorities. These included expectations that local governments would deliver primary education and health care, services that local authorities currently lack the resources to fund.

This deepens the existing gap between the two sides and limits the legitimacy of local authorities in the eyes of local people. However, these unmet expectations could also help local governments build pressure on regional state governments to expedite the long-delayed devolution of local-level fiscal and service delivery powers that they currently retain.

Taking concrete measures on this long-overdue decision would therefore help connect local governments with local people, allowing citizens to experience, in practice, the value of local government.

7. Poor Street Lighting

Participants raised concerns about the poor condition of streetlights in their districts. They complained that solar-powered streetlights are not operational, either because they are in disrepair or because their batteries have been stolen, leaving some affected neighborhoods dark at night. Participants alleged that this has contributed to a rise in security incidents in these neighborhoods.

Participants also criticized their respective mayors for failing to compel electricity companies to install lamps on electricity poles along main streets and in neighborhoods to illuminate the districts and improve citizens' safety and security.

For their part, mayors pledged to address the problem of poor street lighting in their districts by collaborating with local electricity service providers and communities. They also noted that new solar-powered panels would soon be installed in their locations through donor-funded projects.

8. Sanitation and Waste Management

Citizens in the four districts raised similar concerns about sanitation and waste management issues affecting their communities. They noted that companies contracted by local government authorities to collect household waste do not collect it regularly. When they do, they often dispose of the waste improperly within neighborhoods or use open vehicles that scatter litter along the streets, adding to the problem rather than resolving it.

Citizens demanded that their mayors act quickly to address these issues. Mayors, particularly the mayor of Dhusamareb, responded that their administrations were taking steps to tackle the problem. The Dhusamareb mayor reported that his administration had acquired a one-kilometer dumping site after the previous landfill became full.

Mayors also pledged to hold the companies contracted for waste collection accountable for improving their services.

9. Rainwater Stagnation

Citizens in three of the local governments—Dhusamareb, South Galkacyo, and North Galkacyo—raised similar concerns about rainwater repeatedly stagnating on the streets of their districts during the rainy season, obstructing the movement of people and vehicles.

They expressed frustration that this longstanding issue, which they considered a priority, had not been addressed by successive district administrations. Furthermore, citizens in Dhusamareb who participated in the dialogue alleged that some households and restaurants dispose of waste in the water flowing along the streets. The waste then accumulates in potholes along the main road, creating sanitation and public health problems.

Mayors acknowledged the challenge and admitted that resolving it was beyond their fiscal capacity, while anticipating projects that could help address the problem.

At the time of the dialogue in Dhusamareb, construction of the main road cutting through the city was ongoing through a World Bank-funded project. The project, which had yet to be completed, included a drainage system.

The mayor pledged to address rainwater stagnation on the streets once the road was completed and to take measures against anyone caught disposing of waste into the drainage system.

Conclusion

The four dialogues held in the four local governments represented an important vehicle and opportunity for citizens and mayors to engage on critical local issues for which both sides have lacked a regular avenue to discuss local governance matters.

During the dialogues, both sides discussed a range of issues relevant to their respective districts, including revenue collection, expenditure, service delivery, citizen participation in local government decision-making, and other challenges facing local governments.

The discussions contributed to raising citizens' awareness of their local governments and created space for citizens to hold their mayors accountable by asking critical questions.

Consequently, mayors expressed interest in and committed to arranging regular meetings with local citizens to discuss the issues for which citizens want answers and solutions. Fulfilling this commitment will help narrow the gap between the two sides, address low levels of trust in local governments, and strengthen citizen participation in local government decision-making.

Policy Considerations

1. **Institutionalize Regular Citizen Engagement Forums:** Local authorities should convene regular public dialogues with diverse community groups to discuss decisions that affect residents. Such engagements can help build trust, enhance legitimacy, and strengthen cooperation between authorities and citizens.
2. **Strengthen Municipal Revenue Collection and Tax Compliance:** Local governments should implement public awareness campaigns explaining the importance of municipal taxation and how locally generated revenues support public services. Improving transparency in municipal budgeting and linking tax payments to visible service improvements may encourage greater compliance among residents.
3. **Strengthen Cooperation Between Neighborhood Authorities and Communities:** Local governments should enhance collaboration among neighborhood commissioners, police, and community members to address insecurity. Commissioners should be selected based on their ability to effectively engage with and represent their communities.
4. **Enhance Transparency and Public Access to Information:** The dialogues revealed limited public awareness of government revenues, expenditures, budgets, and development priorities. Local governments should therefore proactively disclose key financial and administrative information through accessible channels to strengthen accountability and enable informed citizen oversight.
5. **Strengthen Collaboration with the Business Community:** Relations between local governments and the business community remain limited in several areas. Local administrations should work to establish stronger partnerships with local businesses to mobilize resources, support community development initiatives, and promote shared responsibility for local development.
6. **Improve Transparency in Public Financial Management:** Local governments should proactively publish key financial information, including annual budgets, revenue performance, expenditure reports, procurement information, and year-end financial statements. Making these documents publicly accessible would strengthen transparency, enable citizens to monitor how public resources are managed, and improve accountability. Greater financial openness could also increase citizens' willingness to pay taxes by demonstrating how locally generated revenue is being utilized.



Better Governance for Brighter Somalia

Somali Public Agenda (SPA) is a non-profit public policy and administration think-and-action tank based in Mogadishu, with the mission to advance responsive, evidence-based, and inclusive governance and public services in Somalia through research and analysis (through SPA Research), dialogue (through SPA Forums & SPA Podcasts), co-design of evidence-based policies and services (through SPA Policy Lab), and capacity development (through SPA Learning Lab).

SPA has established a unique reputation as a credible, neutral, and influential think-and-action tank across Somalia; has networks spanning the political landscape, including government institutions, opposition actors, and civic stakeholders; and has a strong track record of influencing policy at the highest level, as evidenced by our Success Stories and Testimonials pages on our website.

Our team is regularly called upon to provide analysis and commentary in the media, as well as to Somali government officials and the international community.

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