



# Governance Brief 19

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## Summary

Youth gangs (aged between 15 and 35 years) - known as Ciyaal Weero - emerged in Mogadishu's periphery districts in late 2021. The gangs use small and light weapons as well as pistols (and bright torches to shine in people's eyes) and sometimes bajaj (tuk-tuks) to rob people, mostly at night. Unemployment, the use of drugs, and weak local government are seen as the main causes of the rise of Ciyaal Weero. The powerless judicial system, communications technology, social media, and the use of out-of-court settlements are also believed to have contributed to the rise of Ciyaal Weero in the Somali capital. Although the police forces launched the 'Samakaab' operation against Ciyaal Weero, the government has not yet managed to reduce the threat of the youth gangs. Since its emergence, Ciyaal Weero killed people in Mogadishu including teachers and students and limited the mobility of people in the peripheral districts of Mogadishu. This governance brief examines the factors that contributed to the rise of Ciyaal Weero, its impact on security and mobility in Mogadishu, and puts forward some policy considerations including control of the import of drugs, development of a government strategy to tackle the youth gangs, and the creation of job opportunities.

## 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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## The Rise of Youth Gangs (Ciyaal Weero) in Mogadishu

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### Introduction

Ciyaal Weero are gangs of youth that proliferated in the Benadir region in late 2021. The average age of these groups is estimated to be around 23 years old. Although they initially started as a form of neighborhood rivalry between teenage groups, armed adult gangs later joined them. Somalia's provisional constitution describes a "child" as a person under eighteen years of age. These bandits, armed with small arms, have a particularly profound presence in Mogadishu's peripheral areas. Kaaraan district, which is among these areas, is one of the strongholds of the bandits, and it is believed to be one of the first areas where such gangs emerged. Kaaraan also seems to be the main base of the Ciyaal Weero criminals.

The gangs use different small weapons. These include knives, machetes, daggers, sticks, and various small and light weapons. Moreover, some bandits are armed with firearms, such as pistols, assault rifles, and similar things. In addition, they carry bright torches, which they shine in people's eyes to confuse them when they want to detain and rob them.

There are different ways in which gangs get weapons. Knives, sticks, and machetes, are cheap, can be found easily, and are sold in most of the markets in Mogadishu. On the other hand, it is believed that Ciyaal Weero obtain firearms in different ways. Some government soldiers are understood to have joined gangs with guns and participated in robberies, and they also get a share of the robbed items. Additionally, it is alleged that some of the guns used in these criminal activities are borrowed from government soldiers and returned afterward. Likewise, the soldiers Ciyaal Weero borrows the guns from are given a part of the robbed property. It is also worth mentioning that firearms are easily accessible in Mogadishu.

To understand the causes and contributors of their rise and raise awareness, Somali Public Agenda (SPA) held a forum on the emergence of youth gangs in Mogadishu on September 1st, 2022. The discussion came at a time when the Somali Police Force (SPF) was attempting to deal with the problems of the youth gangs and it launched an operation dubbed 'Samakaab' against them. Although the 'Samakaab' operation has been ongoing for months, the authorities have yet to put an end to the threat of these youth gangs.

Key stakeholders attended the SPA forum, including teachers, students, civil society members, representatives from technical and vocational training centers, youth associations, and the heads of youth associations of at least seven districts in the Benadir region, including some of the most affected districts and suburbs such as Kaxda, Yaqshid, and Darusalaam. This governance brief analyses some of the main issues discussed in the forum.

## Causes of the Raise of Ciyaal Weero

**Unemployment and Substances Use:** Somalia has one of the highest youth unemployment rates in the world. 61% of young males between 14 to 29 are unemployed (Dalmar, et al., 2017). Including unemployed females, the figures go up to 67%, although girls' involvement in gangs has yet to be reported. As a result, idleness and economic necessity could encourage youth to join Ciyaal Weero and the other criminal gangs that terrorize communities in Mogadishu.

The inflow of drugs in Somalia and the Benadir region, in particular, has a massive impact on criminal activities and youth gangs. Doctors, rehabilitation centers, and the Somali Police Force have warned of the increasing addiction to drugs in Mogadishu. According to the former police spokesperson, addiction has become a common phenomenon among youth gangs and robbers in Mogadishu. These drugs include mixed substances and illicit drugs such as taboo tobacco that enter the country illegally and others that enter the country legally but are misused, such as narcotics, psychotropics, and opioids. As per interviewees, most of the drug substances come from India.

**Weakness and the Negligence of the Government response:** Disagreements and armed clashes between Somalia's ruling and opposition politicians in Mogadishu in 2021 over the election deadlock partly caused the emergence of Ciyaal Weero. According to an interviewee, this instability provided them with an opportunity to form and operate without a coordinated response from the government and the Benadir Regional Administration. As stated by another interviewee, a similar group of youth gangs (Ciyaal Faa Cali) emerged in Mogadishu in the late 1980s, during which time the government was weakened by rebel groups that eventually caused its collapse in 1991. However, the Ciyaal Faa Cali was described as being less violent than the Ciyaal Weero.

Additionally, as some participants pointed out, the weakness of federal and local government institutions aggravates the problem. Some of the districts that the gangs hit hard are large (such as Yaqshid) and are periphery areas that border the two neighboring regions. Conversely, the number of police units in these areas is relatively small and cannot meet the security needs of these communities.

## Contributing Factors

**Weak Judiciary System:** Somalia has a fragile and wrecked justice system (Heritage Institute for Policy Studies, 2021). The criminal justice system, which was expected to punish and discipline the criminals and gangs that terrorize people, is broken, corrupt, and cannot enforce its decision. Moreover, justice officials are not paid enough, which enables corruption and mismanagement.

During the forum discussion, an overwhelming majority of participants agreed that Somalia's weak judiciary system contributes to the emergency of the youth gangs in Mogadishu. Participants stated that the prosecution of Ciyaal Weero members is rare, and they are often released shortly after they are arrested without punishment and then continue with their criminal activities. The parents and relatives of the youth gangs often protect them from facing justice by bribing police officials at the police stations where the gangs are detained. Further, other participants expressed concerns about the quality and hygiene of government prisons, which, according to them, causes parents to avoid keeping their sons in jail as they are worried about their health and well-being.

Nonetheless, at the peak of the gangs' criminal activities in July 2022, President Hassan Sheikh argued that residents of Mogadishu should not complain about the security forces' performance when traditional elders, parliament members, and parents of bandits come to the rescue of their boys. The President further claimed that some relatives and parents of gangsters caught red-handed come to the police claiming their innocence. Even though the president did not explicitly mention Ciyaal Weero during his speech, it was widely understood that he was referring to them.

**The Negative Impact of Technology and Social Media:** globally, youth post and share content of themselves committing crimes on social media to seek popularity or attract attention. Having one of the cheapest mobile data rates for internet access in Africa and the world, Somali youth are no exception. Violent videos and content could go viral quickly and attract large audiences.

Therefore, it is very likely that technology and social media contributed to the popularity and spread of youth gangs in Mogadishu. Their videos are watched and shared widely across social media platforms. Surprisingly, videos that relate to Ciyaal Weero or contain their content were watched 18.5 million times on TikTok alone. Such attention may inspire them to create even more violent content, leading them to motivate the younger generation to commit these kinds of brutal actions.

**Out-of-Court Settlements:** According to a police deputy commander of one of Mogadishu's districts, a lack of evidence or willingness to use the formal courts encourages robbery and murder. The police officer

argued that when the gangs are arrested, their relatives deal with the victims and their relatives outside of the formal courts. Thus, the victims drop the charges against them. Furthermore, some victims do not testify against the perpetrators who robbed them in front of the courts; instead, they simply take their belongings from the police stations (if the police were able to recover them). Consequently, the police cannot bring these gang members to court because they do not have evidence of their crimes. Ironically, a gang member who robbed people less than an hour before the deputy commander was interviewed was reported to the police. The deputy commander confirmed to the author that the gang member was just released the day before.

**Parental Neglect:** The role of parents is central to this issue. On one occasion, a father brought his son to the police station, accusing him of being part of the Ciyaal Weero gang. However, it is alleged that some parents of gang members do not know about their boys and what they do. The reason could be bad relationships between parents and their sons or the parents' unawareness of their sons' whereabouts. Further, some of the gang members could be teenagers whose families broke down and do not fall under any parental supervision.

### What is the Government Doing in Dealing with the Ciyaal Weero?

To get the situation under control, the Somali Police Forces (SPF) launched the "Samakab operation" in mid-June 2022. The operation has mainly focused on the most affected areas, such as Kaaraan, Yaaqshid, and Dharkenley. It also reached some less affected districts. Several weeks after the start of the operation, the police announced that they had concluded the first phase, arresting tens of gang members and displaying them during the press conference.

However, after months of launching the Samakaab operation and concluding its first phase, Mogadishu residents have yet to experience the change they were promised. Moreover, the whole government focus seems to have switched to the ongoing security operations in the south and central Somalia by SNA forces and the 'Macawisley' militias against al-Shabaab, which indicates that the situation is unlikely to change soon in Mogadishu.

### Impact of Ciyaal Weero on the People in Mogadishu

The emergence of the Ciyaal Weero youth gangs has significantly impacted Mogadishu residents. The youth gangs brutally kill, torture, and rob people. The total number of victims killed by the Ciyaal Weero is unknown. However, the former police spokesperson, Abdifatah Adam Hassan, confirmed that the gangs killed

at least three people early this year. Nonetheless, the criminal gangs have killed many people since the police spokesperson reported these cases, including a university lecturer, a teenage student, a Qur'anic teacher, and others. Most of these people have been killed in robbery incidents.

Moreover, armed robbery has become common in many parts of Mogadishu. Gangs armed with pistols, knives, and assault rifles terrorize people, rob them, and assault them. In some places, it is quite likely that gangsters will rob you if you go out after dark, and you could be killed if you resist or try to escape. In some cases, the gangs use bajaj, pretending to be taxis. After getting into the bajaj, people are kidnapped and taken to specific places to be robbed.

On the other hand, some people fled from their homes to avoid these gangs and moved to other districts that they felt were more secure. According to an interviewee who lives in one of these areas, Kaaraan, Dharkeynley, Wadajir, and other periphery districts are among the areas where security has deteriorated due to the active violent activities of the Ciyaal Weero. Additionally, residents are forced to come home early as the threats and insecurities posed by the Ciyaal Weero gangs increase.

Further, the gangs have hugely impacted the mobility of people in Mogadishu. To escape the youth gangs and avoid being caught while on the move, some Mogadishu residents restrict their movements and no longer visit mosques in the evening. During the holy month of Ramadan, people in some areas could not go to mosques for the nighttime and midnight prayers (Tarawih and Tahajud prayers) and were forced to remain at home until dawn.

As a result of the insecurity that devastated some parts of Mogadishu, some communities started to organize vigilantes who patrol their neighborhoods. In July 2022, a group of community elders organized themselves and formed a group of vigilantes in the Ceel Wardheere (Dayniile district) neighborhood. The vigilantes start patrolling after 11:00 p.m. and stop and question young men walking around. The salaries of the vigilantes are collected from the local people, and each house is charged \$5 per month, as witnessed by the author.

### The Way Forward

The Federal Government of Somalia (FGS), the Benadir Regional Administration (BRA), and the community in the Benadir region could consider taking the following steps to address and develop long-term solutions for this new Ciyaal Weero phenomenon:

1. The importation and use of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances should be strictly controlled and regulated. All import goods should be checked





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thoroughly at the ports, airports, and land customs stations by the customs authorities to prevent unregulated drug smuggling. As stated by doctors, these are the common substances used by Mogadishu youth, in general, and gangs, in particular, extensively. Furthermore, a mixture of these substances is also widely used. In some cases, it has been reported that overdosing on these drugs has caused deaths. The Somali Bureau of Standards (SoBS), established under the Somali Standards and Quality Control Act Lr27 and became operational in 2020, should actively work in controlling imported goods. There is also a need to monitor and inspect the customs stations. Regulation of pharmacies is also equally important.

2. The government should develop a comprehensive strategy to tackle gangs. It is not wise to look for solutions when the problem has reached such an overwhelming scale that responses are limited. The 'Samakaab operation' that the police launched in early 2022 came at a time when the damage had already been done. The strategy should include pre-emptive measures, including addressing the causes and contributors to the emergence of the gang. Secondly, a detailed plan of action on how to approach them should be put in place. The plan, for instance, would explain how gang members should be dealt with during operations, considering that there are minors involved, including improving the conditions and capacity of detention centers. Thirdly, the strategy should also have post-operation measures.
3. The Benadir Regional Administration (BRA) should formulate a bottom-up approach to deal with Ciyaal Weero, where each district is decentralized into departments and branches. In that case, it would become easier for the Benadir districts and the police forces to interact with the residents, raise awareness, identify everyone involved in these criminal activities, and, with the help of each neighbor's elders, apprehend the perpetrators. Also, youth representatives and associations should raise their voices and inform the people in charge of the impending danger. As this issue concerns the public, their safety, and properties, all stakeholders, including parents, teachers, youth, business people, educational institutions, Benadir Regional Administration, and the Federal Government, should take this seriously and raise awareness. They should also take pre-emptive measures to prevent these gangs from spreading into the whole city and the other regions. It seems that for many people, this problem is the peripheral districts' problem and only becomes a common problem when the gangs hit the center of the city or emerge in other cities.
4. Job creation is essential to tackle youth gangsterism and crimes. It is the duty of the government, business people, and other stakeholders to create jobs for these young people. They are very energetic, and their energy needs to be utilized and directed to the nation's best interests by creating jobs for them and equipping them with vocational and technical skills. There is hope that some of the Ciyaal Weero members can be persuaded to stop committing crimes if job opportunities are created for them since, as several participants indicated, some of the gang members do attend schools.

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