

# GLOBAL SECURITY PROGRAMME

Horn of Africa Cross-Stakeholder Forum Report • June 2023

## Mitigating the Impact of Conflict on Civilians by Understanding Changing Conflict Dynamics

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### Introduction

After a long delay caused by violence and political instability, the Somali presidential elections took place in mid-May 2022. Soon after, the US announced the redeployment of the special forces to support Somalia's effort to fight non-state armed groups. In addition, the UN Security Council endorsed the new African Union Transitional Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) to further aid the government's effort in dealing with al-Shabaab. While the successfully concluded elections and the continuous support of international partners signal a positive trajectory for the future development in Somalia and the Horn of Africa region, many challenges remain.

Al-Shabaab still poses a serious threat to the stability of Somalia and the wider region, as the group operates in large parts of southern and central Somalia and continues to carry out lethal attacks in Mogadishu. In March of this year, the newly elected president of Somalia, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, initiated the second phase of the military operation against al-Shabaab, intending to remove the Islamists from the last parts of the country under their control.<sup>i</sup>

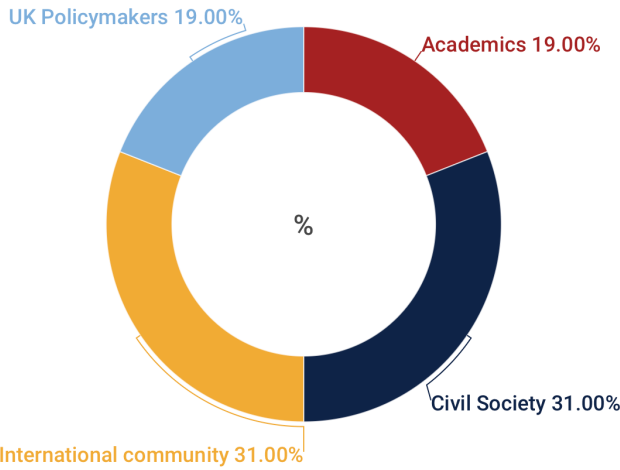
A severe food shortage crisis caused by unprecedented levels of drought and worsened by the war in Ukraine is putting 6.5 million people at risk of food insecurity, including children under 5 facing malnutrition.

It is estimated that over 1.5 million people were forced to leave their homes due to the drought.<sup>ii</sup> The combination of food shortages, five consecutive failed rainy seasons, and increased activity of al-Shabaab, have the potential to further undermine security in the region.

As ATMIS reconfigured and replaced AMISOM,<sup>iii</sup> the Somali government is scheduled to take over the responsibility for the country's security by the end of 2024. The communities in the Horn of Africa might face changes in the security landscape, including the geographical scope of the armed conflict.<sup>iv</sup>

### Cross-Stakeholder Forum

In December 2022, Oxford's Global Security Programme, in cooperation with the Danish Refugee Council, co-organised a virtual cross-stakeholder forum. The forum brought together representatives of civil society, the international community, and academia, to discuss challenges arising from changing conflict dynamics, identify opportunities for cross-stakeholder collaboration, and share good practices conducive to mitigating the negative impact of armed conflict on communities living in the Horn of Africa region. The Global Security Programme's cross-stakeholder methodology allowed us to explore different perspectives on conflict dynamics and their impact on the communities.



On the first day of the forum, the Oxford team presented the Conflict Platform tool, an analytical framework for the analysis of changes in conflict. Additionally, interactive digital visualisations were used to demonstrate the evolution of armed conflicts over time and space. The tool and visualisations helped to provide a broader context for discussion on changes in conflicts.

Figure 1: Distribution of stakeholder groups.



Figure 2: Example of Conflict Platform visualisation, use URL (<https://conflictplatform.ox.ac.uk/cccp/research/conflict-in-the-horn-of-africa>) or QR code to access the visualisations on the Conflict Platform website.

On the second day, the Oxford team shared photoessays that showcased different aspects of armed conflicts. The goal was to emphasise how perceptions play a crucial role in shaping our understanding of changes in armed conflicts and the unique experiences of local communities.

During the forum, the participants shared how they and their communities experienced changes in the locations of violent incidents and in the presence of armed actors. We further discussed “good practices” used by communities to mitigate the impact of armed conflict. Throughout the forum, we identified opportunities for future collaboration across the stakeholder groups.

## Armed Conflict Dynamics and Their Impact on Communities

The forum participants identified the themes listed below as the biggest contributing factors to the suffering of individuals and communities.

### *Al-Shabaab and fragmented society*

Since 2006, the conflict between al-Shabaab, an Islamist armed group, and the Somali state has been key for the security and stability of many communities across Somalia. Although al-Shabaab is not currently focused on holding territory, the group controls parts of Somalia, collects illegal taxes, and, in some regions, runs the justice system.<sup>v</sup>

In the fragmented Somali society, al-Shabaab exploits clan conflicts to increase its power and weaken the state. The clan dynamics feature many intra- and inter-clan disputes. Al-Shabaab’s involvement in these disputes makes them more difficult to resolve, negatively impacts community cohesion, creates new grievances, and deepens the existing ones.

Some of the clans started a rebellion against al-Shabaab. As the clan uprisings continued, clan militias gained control of areas in central Somalia, effectively pushing al-Shabaab out. The uprising received strong support from the newly elected president Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, who initiated a military offensive against al-Shabaab in August 2022.<sup>vi</sup> Al-Shabaab retaliated by targeting civilians in urban areas, including Mogadishu.<sup>vii</sup>

**The Somali government is scheduled to take over the responsibility for its security from international actors in 2024. However, it is uncertain whether they will be able to do so because of persistent security risks such as clan disputes and the presence of al-Shabaab.**

### *Environment and natural resources*

As Somalia's economy heavily relies on its natural resources such as land, rivers, forests, and sea fish, the country's economic growth and livelihoods are directly impacted by the climate and the declining quality of the natural environment.<sup>viii</sup> Frequent droughts caused by climate change and poor land management put pressure on the economy, especially for farmers and pastoralists who heavily rely on land and water. Long periods of drought as well as severe floods from seasonal rainfalls devastate fields and pastures, leading to a decrease in the people’s ability to grow crops and feed livestock.

The problems related to resource management are further exacerbated by the state of land ownership and management in Somalia. There are many competing land claims connected to historical grievances, current clan disputes, and Al-Shabaab’s territorial control.

Many of the land ownership issues can be traced to the presidency of Siad Barre, whose policies disrupted the traditional land ownership system and contributed to political mobilisation along the clan lines that is still present in today’s Somalia.<sup>ix</sup>

Some of the forum participants emphasised the significance of sustainable resource management as a crucial prerequisite for local conflict resolution, economic development, and meeting the basic needs of communities.

**Al-Shabaab tends to position itself near rivers as they provide access to transportation links, food, and water. Those locations, however, are not vacated as they are inhabited by other, often marginalised, groups that become at the mercy of al-Shabaab. Rivers go through multiple communities, including farmers, pastoralists, al-Shabaab groups, clans, and others. The current governmental responses to land management issues include setting up roadblocks in attempts to control natural resources. However, this often leads to the segregation of some communities as travel becomes more challenging. Water and waterways must be shared among all in a peaceful and sustainable way.**

### *Sexual violence*

Sexual violence, including rape, sexual harassment, and forced marriage, is on the rise in Somalia.<sup>x</sup> Although women and girls are predominantly survivors/victims of sexual violence, boys and men are also being targeted. While most of the acts of sexual violence remain unattributed, al-Shabaab, clan militias and various Somali security forces are among the frequent perpetrators. The Covid-19 pandemic triggered movement restrictions that decreased access to services, including healthcare, psychosocial services, safety shelters, and justice services.<sup>xi</sup> The reoccurring droughts and lack of food increased the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs), with currently over 2.2 million IDPs.<sup>xii</sup> The low security and lack of access to formal justice systems in IDP camps further heighten the risk of sexual violence for women and girls.<sup>xiii</sup>

The survivors/victims of sexual violence suffer from physical injuries, unwanted pregnancies, and trauma. They are also often unable to seek justice, especially in the regions with al-Shabaab

presence. Women tend not to reach out to the police as it is viewed by many as not socially acceptable and might damage their reputation. If a woman speaks to her male relative, i.e., brother or father, about being raped, the issue can be taken up to the clan that has a mechanism for settlement.

However, that often results in a financial settlement for the father of the survivor/victim. If a woman gets pregnant because of rape, the settlement might require the woman to marry the rapist. While the families might be satisfied with the settlement outcome, sexual violence, criminal in nature, demands to be tried in the courts of law based on basic human rights standards and result in jail time punishment for the perpetrator; however, Somali culture is mindful of relationships and communal harmony while resolving conflicts. Thus, the restorative and not punitive approach to crime is widely used.

**In Somalia, it is mandated by law that 30% of parliamentary members are women. However, the implementation of this quota is hindered by the clan-based system, which plays a significant role in the selection of parliament members. Female candidates have expressed concerns about being rejected by clan elders. Increasing women's representation is crucial for the advancement of laws protecting them against sexual violence as well as local and federal peacebuilding efforts.**

Although there are networks of women supporting survivors/victims of sexual violence, their powers are very limited due to the lack of resources and the stigma associated with sexual violence. On a legal front, there have been developments in recent years to tackle sexual violence, such as Article 24 of the Provisional Constitution prohibiting sexual abuse in the workplace, the Puntland Sexual Offences Act 2016,<sup>xiv</sup> and the Somaliland Sexual Offences Law 2018,<sup>xv</sup> criminalising many forms of sexual crimes, including gang rape, sexual exploitation, abuse, and harassment. However, the

implementation of these laws remains limited, and the federal government is yet to pass the Federal Sexual Offences draft prohibiting sexual harassment.

### *Economic situation*

Although the Somali economy is expected to grow moderately in 2023–2024,<sup>xvi</sup> uncertainty about future economic development remains due to the extensive drought, fragile political situation, supply chain disruptions, and al-Shabaab threat.<sup>xvii</sup>

Fisheries, livestock and crop production combined represent the largest economic sector and the largest employer, especially in rural areas. Agriculture is also the biggest driver of Somali exports.<sup>xviii</sup> Thus, the impact of the unprecedented drought has a devastating impact. Somalia is currently experiencing widespread crop failure, water shortages, and a severe decline in livestock production, resulting in many people leaving their homes to seek food and water elsewhere.

Somalia suffers from inflation caused by the drought and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, resulting in an increase in food and oil prices.<sup>xix</sup> The prices of land and properties are skyrocketing. This disproportionately affects those at the lower end of the economic spectrum and displaced people, further deepening the existing humanitarian crisis. Some forum participants pointed out that people in the regions often feel abandoned as many provisions and public goods do not reach them. For instance, the justice system is barely present in many countryside areas. Similarly, the areas under al-Shabaab's control are not accessible to humanitarian workers.<sup>xx</sup>

The challenging economic situation increases poverty, resulting in high dropout rates among girls from schools and forcing them into forced or early marriages. Impoverished women, especially single mothers and widows, are driven into hard labour, unwanted marriages, and a few to prostitution to be able to provide for their children. Women working in the sex industry are

often exposed to violence, prosecution, and sexually transmitted diseases, yet their access to healthcare is very limited.<sup>xxi</sup>

Despite the economic hardships, women have been the backbone of Somali society, assuming dominant roles as breadwinners for many families. Women play a leading role in the rapid growth of small- to medium-sized enterprises. In Somaliland, women own over half of all household enterprises, while in Mogadishu and Bossaso, they own approximately 45% of established formal businesses.<sup>xxii</sup>

**The Covid-19 pandemic, drought, lack of food and an increase in the IPD population, put further pressure on an already stretched healthcare system that has been suffering for decades from armed conflict, limited state capacity, and underfunding. The current Somali healthcare system receives the bulk of its funding from international donors who channel the finances directly to the individual healthcare providers, mostly private sector and humanitarian organisations, rather than to the state budget, creating a patchwork of healthcare provision that is not able to cover the needs of the majority of the population.<sup>xxiii</sup>**

Despite the volatile situation, some of the local businesses are resilient and get on. The stability of the local economic situation varies across regions and communities as it depends on the approach of the local conflict actors to civilians. As long as the local actors are friendly to the community, the community can live in a relatively stable situation allowing local businesses and the local economy to function.

### *Crime and conflict nexus*

The connection between crime and conflict is evident in the Horn of Africa, as in other parts of the world. While organised criminal groups take advantage of the instability caused by conflict, armed groups in conflict often depend on organised crime for income.<sup>xxiv</sup> For instance, al-Shabaab gains large income from illegal taxation and extortion of protection money, including



setting up checkpoints on roads and in ports. The armed group works with smugglers and money launderers to maintain and protect its diverse income.<sup>xxv</sup>

One of the consequences of the prolonged conflict in the Horn of Africa is a proliferation of weapons, further fuelling violence and criminal activities. For instance, livestock raids by armed thieves encourage livestock owners to acquire weapons for their protection. That, in turn, increases the level of violence and intensifies inter-communal conflicts.<sup>xxvi</sup> In the urban settings of Mogadishu, youth gangs armed with knives and guns engage in extortion and robbery. The increase in these youth gang crimes can be attributed to several factors, including unemployment and lack of education and opportunities.

**Many people attempt to leave Somalia, but legal routes from Africa to Europe almost do not exist, forcing those who intend to leave to seek the services of people smugglers. Many migrants die at sea, and some are held for ransom by those posing as smugglers. In the case of the latter, the family relatives are forced to raise large sums of money to pay for the release of those kidnapped. However, even if the requested sum of money is paid, people often do not return, and the families are left with no information about their location.**

Generations of Somalis that grew up in armed conflict were exposed to violence, had their education interrupted, and got limited or no access to healthcare.

High levels of violent crime produce uncertainty about personal security. This has serious consequences, such as limiting access to education and healthcare, particularly for girls. Additionally, poor security can make it difficult to travel, which negatively affects the local economy and cross-community interactions. In Somalia, access to security services is not equal. While certain individuals or organisations, including foreign NGOs, are able to pay for their own protection, the majority of the population does not have access to private security services.

## Good Practices in the Context of Changing Conflict Dynamics and Insecurity

Somali society is divided along clan lines and lacks trust, both within communities and towards the state and its institutions. The prolonged armed conflict that began after the central government's collapse in 1991 has had a detrimental impact on traditional social and religious norms. The conflict has disrupted social structures that once regulated relationships between individuals. Our forum discussions highlighted the importance of understanding that the conflict in Somalia has a strong social component that needs to be addressed.

Current conflict resolution attempts tend to focus on immediate issues, such as the resurgence of al-Shabaab, rather than a long-term strategy that considers future needs, including social healing for individuals.

The forum participants shared with us examples of the good practices they consider fitting the needs of communities in the Horn of Africa.

- *Early warning system:* Conflict mapping in nearly real-time provides useful information about the location of conflict hotspots, point to dangerous locations, and identify the need for healthcare in times of violence resurgence.
- *Social healing programme:* This programme was aimed at restoring trust and building a common interest within and across communities. People worked in groups and went through several sessions focused on behaviour change, the role of violence, forgiveness, and compromise. The programme utilised storytelling and arts to help people open up about their experiences. Each session was held in a house of a group member, so the participants got to know each other better and formed trust. More than 8,300 people participated in this programme.
- *Youth programme:* The goal of the programme was to foster communication

among young people from different clans, especially those who were involved in disputes with each other. The programme ensured that both genders were equally represented and included clan elders to enhance the relevance of the dialogue among the youth. Even though the programme has ended, the participants continue to meet. Importantly, when a clan conflict arises, people reach out to the programme participants to seek a resolution before violence erupts.

- *Bottom-up governance.* The programme builds trust and relationships between community groups and state actors through platforms such as forums, radio talk shows, and televised live shows. It connects representatives from town task forces, clan elders, religious leaders, women's groups, youth, and intellectuals with mayors, police officers, governors, and key ministers. Those involved can clarify and better understand their roles and responsibilities while discussing pressing issues related to public services delivery, security, governance, and development. The programme is community-driven, ensuring equitable representation of all groups, with a particular focus on marginalised or vulnerable populations.

## Recommendations and Opportunities for Cross-Stakeholder Collaboration

The forum participants made several recommendations on how to mitigate the negative impact of armed conflict on communities and identified opportunities for cross-stakeholder collaboration.

- *People-centred approach to security.* Following the collapse of the government in 1991, people began to turn to clans for their protection. While there are other social groups, such as women's and youth groups,

they are not as well organised or powerful as clans. Clans hold significant power, while the state has limited influence and trust in its institutions is low. This makes it crucial to prioritise local efforts in promoting peace and security. Thus, a people-centred approach to security could be more effective than relying on the state-based approach.

**People-centred security:** The approach to security that takes into account the daily experiences and perceptions of individuals and communities.

- *Political system.* In the current political system of Somalia based on clan-power-sharing, clan elders have influence over the appointment of some positions in government and the parliamentary electoral process. The clan-based power-sharing system, in some instances, promotes people with strong clan backing yet insufficient education and experience to the position of power. Furthermore, the federal power-sharing structure is conducive to competition among the states and jeopardises the unity of Somalia. For effective state-building, it is crucial to establish robust state institutions while maintaining meaningful dialogue between clans. Establishing strong local governance that is accepted by the people is key to effectively managing local conflicts, preventing violent incidents, and building trust.
- *Role of the international community:* To ensure better inclusivity, it would be beneficial for the international NGOs to provide more programmes in local languages and to the peripheries of Somalia. Due to the current security challenges, international NGOs have a limited presence in the peripheries of Somalia. Therefore, they should focus on supporting the programmes and initiatives run by Somali NGOs and communities. To ensure sustainability, it would also be paramount to consider Somali-owned and Somali-led solutions to overcome decades-long problems and challenges. Although there are many

international NGOs present in Somalia, communities tend to be sceptical about the benefits they bring. The international community should avoid creating high expectations that cannot be met, as it can lead to harm and mistrust in the future.

- *Empowering young people:* Social media has enabled young people to connect with each other and the world. This could potentially help overcome some of the negative effects of the clan structure. It is important to provide young people with access to education, including peace education, from a very young age, as well as with means for gaining economic independence and opportunities to communicate across the clan and generational divide.
- *Role of academia:* There is a gap in our understanding of the intra- and inter-clan dynamics and their impact on the economy, the political system, and the daily life of the communities. Improving our knowledge of the clan system is imperative for successful peacebuilding. Many young people in Somalia desire to pursue higher education, hoping it can improve their lives. However, accessibility to such education is limited, particularly in some Somali regions. Establishing partnerships between universities in the Horn of Africa and foreign universities could boost the capacity and reach of universities in Somalia and facilitate stronger connections between academics and students based in the Horn of Africa with the global community, leading to greater opportunities for knowledge sharing.



We would like to express our deep gratitude to the forum participants for sharing with us their experiences and knowledge. Without their generosity, the cross-stakeholder forum would not have been possible.

## About the Conflict Platform’s Network for Change



The Network for Change is the second phase of the project (Conflict Platform, <http://www.conflictplatform.ox.ac.uk/>) based at the University of Oxford, which started on 1 January 2017, funded by the UK Research Council’s Partnership for Conflict, Crime and Security Research. The Conflict Platform seeks to enhance understanding of changing conflict dynamics along five dimensions: the actor involved in conflict, the methods used, the resources that fuel conflict, the environments where conflict takes place, and the impact it has on individuals, communities and societies. The team has developed a novel conceptualisation of armed conflicts and a tool (see [UN article](#)) to analyse changes across the five dimensions of conflict<sup>xxvii</sup>. For the project’s second phase, we selected **the Horn of Africa and Myanmar** as some of the world’s most protracted conflicts. In this phase, our goal is to deepen the Conflict Platform’s positive impact that benefits communities affected by armed conflict. These activities include innovative cross-stakeholder fora through which local community leaders with lived experiences of conflict, practitioners, policymakers, and academics with expertise in conflict and related fields (e.g. policy, security, development) will engage with each other and the findings of our research. Creatively employing modern technologies, we will integrate written resources with innovative resources in the form of photoessays, storytelling, and web-based interactive visualisations to provide forum participants with a wide array of input formats for discussions during the fora and further knowledge exchange among the participants.

### Project Partners:

- [Global Security Programme](#) (University of Oxford)
- [Danish Refugee Council](#)
- [International Alert](#)
- [UN System Staff College](#)



The Conflict Platform’s Network for Change was generously funded by the Art & Humanities Research Council.

Global Security Programme: <https://globalsecurity.web.ox.ac.uk>

The Global Security Programme (GSP), based at Pembroke College, conducts cutting-edge research on global security in the contemporary world. Taking a genuinely interdisciplinary approach to global security research, GSP focuses on security dynamics in the context of armed conflict, cross-border violence, and the global illicit economy; transitions from war to peace, and responses to insecurity. We emphasise the connections between localised insecurities and global shifts in power and order. While grounded in Political Science and International Relations, our work also draws on insights from other social science disciplines and is in dialogue with the humanities, the arts and STEM. Our research combines various methods ranging from ethnographic approaches and visualisation techniques to quantitative methods such as GIS analysis. We place emphasis on both developing rigorous theorisations of security as well as carrying out applied research. To enhance the positive impact of our work, we have long-standing partnerships with various UN bodies as well as universities in conflict zones, and advise governments and international organisations.

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