

Assessing of Youth Participation and Good Governance in Somalia

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Abstract: This study explores the dynamics of youth participation in Somalia and its implications for achieving good governance. Understanding their involvement in political, social, and religious spheres is imperative for fostering a sustainable and inclusive governance framework, especially with a large youth demographic. Through a comprehensive literature review and analysis of relevant data, the research examines the current state of youth engagement, identifying both challenges and opportunities. The study also emphasizes the roles of civil society, government, and international actors in enhancing youth participation. Furthermore, it assesses the impact of youth involvement on the promotion of good governance principles such as leadership, accountability, and transparency. To fulfill the study's objectives, the findings highlight the need for tailored policies that address the unique needs of Somali youth and promote their active participation in decision-making processes. This study offers recommendations for policymakers, civil society, and international organizations to strengthen youth involvement and advance good governance in Somalia.

1. Introduction

Youth participation in governance depends heavily on political, economic, and cultural contexts. In many regions, social norms lead to discrimination against youth, limiting their role in decision-making ^[1]. Political engagement includes both formal and informal participation, and encouraging youth involvement is vital for a vibrant democracy ^[2]. However, global data shows that youth engage in formal political processes at much lower rates than older citizens, weakening democratic representation. The UN defines youth as those aged 15–24. In 1981, Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim highlighted that the definition of youth varies across nations ^[2]. According to UNDP, youth

can lead non-violent revolutions, mobilize change through technology, and play crucial roles in post-conflict recovery. They have shown the ability to unite diverse groups, manage conflict, and promote peace making them essential agents of change for a more just and stable society.

Youth exclusion was clearly visible in the past study, frequently overlapping with other kinds of marginalization related to gender, geography, culture, and community. Malaysia is among the nations with the lowest rates of youth's involvement in politics and civic life. According to a recent poll, just 42% of the youth assessed, and fewer than half of them (40%) are familiar enough with Malaysia's electoral system to be considered politically literate ^[3]. Several initiatives involving the use of social media and information technology has garnered a lot of attention. The use of social partnerships for service delivery, provincial youth parliaments, and digital games about youth and local government are all examples of innovative techniques. In addition to being distinctive in and of themselves, this collection of projects has contributed to the UNDP's organizational learning process regarding the development and execution of youth-centered initiatives. Youth engagement may stem from the enduring sense of helplessness experienced by the community, particularly the youth, over their ability to participate in governmental decision-making processes ^[2].

Between July 22 and September 8, 2023, ACLED recorded about 375 political violence incidents and over 1,500 deaths in Somalia. After the government launched the second phase of its counter-insurgency against Al-Shabaab on August 6, violence in Hirshabelle and Galmudug rose by over 70%, with security forces inflicting heavy losses on Al-Shabaab fighters (Communications ACLED, 2024). Somalia's clan-based social structure such as Darod, Dir, Hawiye, Isaq, Digil, and Rahanweyn ^[4] which undermines democracy and fair resource distribution, as male elders dominate clan decisions, marginalizing women, youth, and others ^[5]. Despite youth potential, many join criminal or violent groups. Governance reforms aiming to align with global norms often disrupt traditional systems, fueling conflict. Since independence in 1960, Somalia has faced coups, human rights abuses, and prolonged conflict, with central authority collapse leading to self-governance. Despite fifteen peace processes, security challenges persist, and international efforts are seen as inadequate even among policymakers ^[6]. Building trust between government and society is vital for peace, stability, and international support.

The aim of this research is to contribute to the discourse on effective governance strategies in post-conflict settings and to provide recommendations for policymakers, civil society, and international organizations seeking to strengthen youth involvement in advancing good governance in Somalia. It is crucial for the comprehensive advancement of international relations between governments to ensure that their youth are consistently prepared and guided toward fostering the right values, ultimately shaping them into future leaders.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Concept of Good Governance

The term governance refers to all forms of government, including organizations, procedures, and customs used to manage shared interests. Good governance adds a normative dimension, focusing on

how public institutions manage resources, conduct affairs, and ensure human rights are upheld ^[7]. Though no single definition exists, good governance generally includes full respect for human rights, rule of law, effective participation, political pluralism, transparency, accountability, efficient public sectors, legitimacy, access to information and education, political empowerment, equity, sustainability, and values like accountability and tolerance ^[8]. The World Bank popularized the term in the 1990s, defining it as authority applied to manage social and economic resources for development ^[9]. Good governance aims to minimize corruption, consider minority views, amplify marginalized voices, and address current and future community needs ^[9]. to the present and future needs of the community are all goals of good governance ^[9].

According to UNESCAP, good governance rests on eight principles: leadership, rule of law, transparency, responsiveness, consensus, equity and inclusiveness, effectiveness and efficiency, and accountability. It requires institutions to follow fair, enforceable laws, especially as environmental and social rules gain importance, often needing external experts to ensure ethical conduct ^[10]. Transparency involves openly sharing information with stakeholders, fostering unity, trust, and clarity of roles within and outside organizations ^[11]. Responsiveness means institutions serve all parties fairly and timely, ensuring gender participation and addressing discriminatory practices against ethnic or minority groups. Consensus-oriented governance seeks arrangements that best serve society, balancing diverse and often conflicting social interests ^[12]. Equity and inclusiveness hinges on making sure that everyone in a community, especially the most vulnerable persons and groups, feels included and empowered to preserve or enhance their well-being. The development of effectiveness and efficiency comes from using resources sustainably to satisfy societal demands. Sustainability is the preservation of natural resources for future generations as well as the fulfilment of social investments ^[12].

After decades of research on preventing harmful behaviours in youth, the most effective approach is supporting positive development by leveraging natural resources in their environments such as families, schools, and communities that promote their strengths and growth. While adults take on real responsibilities in their mid-to-late twenties, youths often engage in risky behaviours like substance misuse or unsafe sex. Encouraging youth participation in government provides responsibilities that foster their development. This paper focuses on two key concepts: leadership and accountability ^[12].

2.1.1 Accountability

Accountability is a type of liability that defines who is responsible, for what, and to whom. The term generally refers to the obligation of individuals to explain and justify their actions and decisions to those affected. Those in positions of trust must report on their duties and be answerable to those who entrusted them. Public and private decision-makers, including community and government bodies, must uphold accountability. It plays a key role in promoting good governance and building public trust in government performance ^[13].

Representative democracies elect officials to act in the public's best interests regularly ^[14]. Political accountability means these officials are answerable to the public, ensuring they act despite conflicting interests ^[15]. Some African leaders excel in governance; Rwanda rebuilt strong institutions post-

conflict, Seychelles tackled its 2008 debt through reforms, and Botswana created effective frameworks for managing resource income. Senegal and Gambia improved fiscal governance, while Ghana, Zimbabwe, Botswana, and Mauritius adopted anti-money laundering measures [7].

According to econometric studies show that greater press freedom correlates with lower corruption levels [15]. An impartial press is a powerful tool to expose misconduct, influence norms, change voting behaviors, and help punish corrupt regimes [16]. USAID measures government accountability through fair political justice, human rights protection, civic engagement, public trust in law enforcement and judiciary, and security sector reforms. Its Government Accountability program protects whistleblowers and uses unofficial audits to hold governments accountable. Accountability must be systematic and widespread at all organizational levels [17].

2.1.2 Leadership

Effective leadership and sound governance are essential in today's dynamic and complicated society. History has consistently demonstrated that leadership has a major role in determining whether a group succeeds or fails. Both the organization's productivity and human performance are greatly impacted by it. It is frequently stated that strong governance and effective leadership are essential for a group or organization to succeed. When those in charge are unable to mobilize the group's support for objectives and programs, misgovernance or poor governance is claimed to win out. This typically results in insufficient progress and misalignment of objectives. So as to adjust addressing complex issues, leadership and sound governance are crucial in every way of several governing layers [18].

According to [19], leadership is the process of establishing or making clear the objectives of a group and inspiring its members to work towards achieving them. It involves persuading others to pursue similar objectives. Establishing an atmosphere that is inclusive, considerate, and attentive to the demands of the populace as well as competent in overcoming the numerous obstacles it faces is a prerequisite for good government. In order to create excellent administration and sustain growth and progress in any nation, leadership is essential. The ideal leader is someone who can regularly perform well under certain circumstances and be seen as upholding societal standards. Sometimes, though, people could be ready to defy such leadership and stop complying with immoral aspirations or commands [20].

In choosing its governance measures, the Index of African Governance aims for clarity and accessibility. Liberia, which was the most improved nation in sub-Saharan Africa between 2005 and 2006, rose from 44th to 38th place, partly as a result of President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf's leadership and her attempts to rebuild the country after a conflict. She is Liberia's 24th president and Africa's first female head of state. With horrendous records for press freedom and human rights, nations like Eritrea dropped dramatically from 39th to 41st place. Both of these instances, along with a plethora of other instances that the Index uncovered, involved political leadership qualities that influenced outcomes and ultimate national accomplishments [21].

The ten least developed nations in sub-Saharan Africa are those that are always at conflict with one another. Nigeria, Guinea, Liberia, Eritrea, Cote d'Ivoire, Central African Republic, Angola, Sudan, Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Somalia are listed from top (ranked 39th) to

bottom (ranked 48th). These low-ranking nations all deny their citizens protection and security and provide very few additional high-quality political commodities. Each has low GDP per capita, questionable human rights records, massive corruption, unfree elections, poorly maintained roads (the Democratic Republic of the Congo has thousands of kilometers fewer paved roads than at independence), and deplorable health outcomes and nearly nonexistent educational opportunities. Stated otherwise, all of these nations are or have been under poor governance ^[22].

3. Case Study Somalia

3.1 The Challenges of Enhancing Effective Good Governance in Somalia

The fall of Somalia's government in 1991 and the rise of interim administrations have made achieving good governance difficult. Accountability is described as a system of enforcing established standards to hold those in positions of authority accountable. In conflict-affected countries like Somalia, where power is fragmented and informal, enforcing accountability is challenging ^[23]. Accountability involves holding leaders responsible for their actions, decisions, and policies, and includes the duty to report, explain, and answer for outcomes ^[24]. This highlights the crucial role of leadership and accountability in establishing good governance.

Somalia still struggles to fully involve its people in inclusive, non-violent, and democratic political processes. Unresolved issues under Al-Shabaab rule continue to trigger resource disputes and intercommunal conflicts even though the state has regained control over some areas. Efforts to improve governance are hindered by disagreements over power and resource sharing between federal, state, and local levels. Despite progress in peace and rebuilding, political instability, nepotism, corruption, social divisions, religious tensions, and limited public support continue to obstruct effective governance ^[25].

3.1.1 Political Issues

Somalia faces major challenges in establishing a stable government as it continues to recover from civil war, the collapse of central authority, and the fight against terrorism. Political unrest, corruption, wealth theft, clan rivalries, and debates over federalism have fueled ongoing instability. Over the past two decades, weak leadership, lack of rule of law, and growing security threats have hindered national development ^[26]. Politicians often prioritize personal gain over public welfare, worsening corruption and poverty. Al-Shabaab further undermines democracy by targeting clan delegates, election centers, and officials. Clan rivalries and political tensions threaten free and fair elections ^[27].

Weak governance drives Somalia's political instability, worsened by inconsistent law enforcement ^[28]. In April 2022, a power struggle erupted when PM Mohamed Hussein Roble expelled AU envoy Francisco Madeira, opposed by President Farmaajo, who claimed sole authority for such actions, a power he used in 2019 against the UN envoy ^[29]. This deepened federal disunity and weakened government cohesion. Al-Shabaab continues attacks on officials and civilians, exploiting drought conditions ^{[30][31]}. Somali nationalism coexists with elite fragmentation and poor governance, allowing elites to manipulate foreign actors while neglecting citizens ^[32]. Ineffective security

strategies have escalated violence, including crackdowns on opposition ^[27]. The 2007 Mogadishu crisis displaced 300,000 due to poor decisions by Somali and foreign actors amid Ethiopian/TFG clashes with insurgents ^[33]. UN data shows persistent insecurity, with monthly incidents averaging 265 in 2021 and slightly decreasing in 2022 ^[2]. Power struggles continue among armed groups including Macawiisleey, Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a, South-West Special Police, militias loyal to Mukhtar Robow and Ahmed Madobe, and Puntland's PMPF and PSF ^[28].

Al-Shabaab, an Islamist insurgent group, was pushed out of Mogadishu in the late 2000s by AU and Western-backed forces but remains Somalia's greatest security threat ^[34]. Its attacks have delayed AU troop withdrawal and disrupted U.S. counterterrorism operations. Seeking to establish an Islamic state under its interpretation of Sharia, it also provides services like dispute resolution in areas abandoned by the state ^[35]. Al-Shabaab forcibly recruits minors and targets civilians, with clashes involving clan militias, government troops, and AMISOM causing widespread displacement. The group rapidly regains lost territory, necessitating stronger government control ^[36]. Outdated laws continue to suppress press freedom, with military courts prosecuting Al-Shabaab cases despite international criticism ^[24].

Since 2007, the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), formerly AMISOM, has deployed over 22,000 troops from Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Uganda to support Somalia's government in fighting Al-Shabaab. At the time of deployment, the al-Qaeda-linked group controlled most of south-central Somalia. AU troops, with Somali forces, pushed the militants into rural areas, where Al-Shabaab still holds significant control ^[37]. Despite years of joint operations killing hundreds, debate continues over ATMIS's effectiveness as it begins to withdraw. Recently, Al-Shabaab has stepped up attacks on Somali and AU forces. In one major assault, militants overran the AU base in Bulamarer, 130 km southwest of Mogadishu killing over 50 Ugandan soldiers ^[38].

3.1.2. Societal Issues

Firstly, Somalia faces grave societal challenges including human rights abuses, displacement, and economic hardship. Violations such as sexual violence, child abuse, and civilian attacks frequently breach international humanitarian law ^[13]. Conflict and recurrent droughts obstruct humanitarian aid. As of November 2022, the UN reported 613 civilian deaths and 948 injuries, mainly caused by Al-Shabaab amid increased operations by government and clan militias following President Hassan Sheikh's election ^[2]. Over 1.8 million people are displaced, with 188,186 forcibly evicted between January and August, mostly affecting vulnerable populations. Overcrowded IDP camps have led to increased gender-based violence ^[39]. Decades of conflict have intensified sexual violence, often perpetrated by security forces, disproportionately impacting minorities and displaced women ^[40]. Women suffer from underrepresentation, low wages, and discrimination, while rural girls face obstacles to education due to early marriage, conflict, and FGM/C ^[41]. Although rape is criminalized, Somalia lacks a federal domestic violence law. The 2018 Sexual Offences Bill remains stalled, and existing laws in Puntland and Somaliland are unenforced ^[41]. COVID-19 further limited survivor supports due to funding cuts and delays. The UN urges swift adoption of a national plan to address sexual violence, particularly in conflict zones ^[42].

Second, insecurity in Somalia has devastated food production and distribution, compounded by climate disasters and conflict ^[2]. Four consecutive failed rainy seasons and the Ukraine war which disrupted 90% of wheat imports have led to severe food shortages. Half the population (7.8 million) requires humanitarian aid, with drought killing over 3 million livestock and inflation worsening food access for IDPs, farmers, and conflict-affected communities. Currently, 6.7 million people face extreme food insecurity, 300,000 are at risk of famine, and over 500,000 children suffer from severe malnutrition about 173,000 more than in 2011. Nearly one million displaced people seek food and water ^[28]. Hunger and poverty are worsened by crop failures, water shortages, locust infestations, and ongoing conflict ^[30]. Humanitarian access is severely restricted, especially in Al-Shabaab-controlled areas, where intensified violence in late 2022 led to attacks on aid convoys, destruction of food supplies, and sabotage of water sources ^[43]. NGOs face legal risks and violence, as Al-Shabaab taxes or seizes aid risking a repeat of the deadly 2011 famine ^[44].

Religion in Somalia is predominantly Sunni Islam, with conversion from Islam socially taboo and punishable by abuse or violence ^[38]. A small, hidden Christian minority and traditional African believers' worship in secret due to threats. Al-Shabaab targets aid workers and alleged converts, enforcing punishments like stoning and whipping ^[42, 51]. Most Somalis follow Sufi Islam, especially in the south, while the north is more nomadic. Islam traditionally blended with clan law (seer), but colonial and communist rule disrupted this balance ^[38]. In Al-Shabaab-controlled areas, suspected converts, Shi'a Muslims, and East African immigrants face severe persecution under Shariah law ^[45]. Despite constitutional guarantees of press freedom, journalists face threats from both state and extremist groups; 69 have been killed since 1992, including Abdiwali Ali Hassan in 2020 ^[46]. Al-Shabaab enforces strict Islamic law, punishes "un-Islamic" behaviour, and views Sufis and Christians as apostates. Other militant groups like Hizbul Islam also operate in some regions. Although the Transitional Federal Charter and 1960 Constitution affirm religious equality (Article 15), national laws are based on Islamic law (Article 8). While conversion is not explicitly banned, Shariah law prohibits it, leaving Christians unprotected and vulnerable to persecution or death, particularly from extremists ^[45].

4. Findings and Analysis

4.1 Youth Participation and Good Governance in Somalia

Peace and security in Somalia remain fragile despite progress in counterterrorism, humanitarian aid, and state-building. Puntland and Somaliland are relatively stable, and Mogadishu's federal government, though not fully democratic, has improved security and the economy since al-Shabaab's peak a decade ago. Al-Shabaab, with 2,000–3,000 fighters, controls large areas and operates nationwide, including Mogadishu, regularly attacking and collecting taxes. Unlike clan-divided groups, Al-Shabaab transcends clan politics and often outperforms the government by maintaining roads and delivering justice, which, though sometimes harsh, is seen as more reliable and less corrupt, especially in property disputes ^[47]. In 2017, Somalia's Ministry of Youth and Sports finalized the National Youth Policy under the Nabad iyo Nolol government ^[2]. Youth participation bridges

generational divides, combining elder experience with youthful perspectives to strengthen community unity.

4.1.1. Political Issues

Somalia's future hinges on empowering its youth, whose inclusion is essential for development and achieving the SDGs. Despite their significant contributions, youth face barriers to political participation and freedoms, risking the loss of their ideas and energy and ignoring the needs of the majority ^[2].

First in term of governance, youth inclusion is improving; 43 of 95 parliamentary seats (45%) in Southwest state went to youth aged 25–36, a historic move toward a more representative federal system ^[48]. With youth as the population majority, their engagement is crucial for democracy and progress. Valuing youth perspectives fosters innovation and avoids marginalization ^[48]. Ahead of the 2021 Federal Election, efforts promoted youth participation aiming for universal suffrage, with federalization increasing youth involvement especially in Jubbaland and South-West States. However, traditional male-dominated leadership often excludes youth, pushing some toward extremist groups like Al-Shabaab ^[2].

Secondly, in terms of security, on August 1, 2012, a constitutional conference with clan elders adopted a new constitution, paving the way for a federal parliament and president. International support from the African Union, EU, and US, along with better-trained Somali forces, forced Al-Shabaab out of Mogadishu and major cities ^[48]. Al-Shabaab exploits youth frustrations by recruiting unemployed and marginalized youth, offering purpose and income through violence, undermining their positive national role and threatening stability. This creates a dual challenge of limiting youth participation while fueling radicalization ^[32]. Western governments and international organizations focus on top-down security approaches, aiming to rebuild the state and strengthen democratic institutions for peace and representation ^[49].

4.1.2. Societal Issues

In an attempt to seize control of society, manipulative elites often use religion to justify their actions. This has contributed to youth involvement in extremist groups like Al-Shabaab in Somalia. Islamist leaders in such organizations have gained support by portraying Western interventions as efforts to impose a government that does not prioritize Somali interests. Its capacity to lend ethical credibility to behaviours and organisations is one of religion's primary and societal purposes. This is evident in how Islamist movements justify harsh rules and punishments for dissenters and those they deem non-compliant with their beliefs ^[50].

After firing into the air to disperse local protestors, Al-Shabaab insurgents in central Somalia damaged a mosque and disrupted the burial of a respected Sufi Muslim sheikh, according to local residents on Monday. In the past, Al-Shabaab, a militant group affiliated with al-Qaeda and operating through a shadow state in the Horn of Africa has attacked Sufi holy sites and religious figures ^[51]. The group claims that such practices violate their strict interpretation of Islamic law. For the first time, Sufi groups in the rural plains of central Somalia are taking up arms and fighting back against Al-

Shabaab, with growing public support. This new front where Islamist fighters are engaged in religious conflict with one another that could alter the long-term dynamics of the conflict. Most Somali Muslims are moderate Sufis who embrace practices such as dancing, singing, and meditation. In contrast, Al-Shabaab follows a strict Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, influenced by Saudi Arabia. In areas under their control, the group has banned activities such as dancing at weddings, playing or watching football, using musical phone ringtones, and watching films [52].

Al-Shabaab forbids proselytising and gives no room for people of other religions, particularly Christians, to practise their religion. In Somalia, it is often too risky to be a Christian in public, and those who are found out face extermination by a shooting squad or decapitation. The Church in Hargeisa has made increasing developments. The 80,000-person city in the northwest is thriving and remaking itself, far from the bloodshed in the country's southern areas. It is safe enough to cycle around the streets with confidence and have a cup of coffee outside. Some have justified this by saying that the city was constructed by a diaspora community, which makes people particularly welcoming [52].

5. Conclusions

Despite years of foreign aid, Somalia continues to face instability, with persistent issues like corruption, insecurity, weak governance, and low social trust. While progress has been seen such as the peaceful transfer of power from President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud to President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, challenges remain. In 2016, Stephen Schwartz became the first U.S. ambassador since 1991, confronting significant hurdles including limited government reach and funding. Public participation is essential for democracy, but youth remain largely excluded despite being heavily impacted by conflict. Many have grown up amid violence and hardship, yet are denied a voice in governance. Youth development programs aim to equip them with skills, awareness, and civic understanding. However, unemployment, poor education access, and insecurity still hinder their involvement. The government and NGOs continue working to empower youth, whose participation is crucial for good governance and national development.

The future of youth participation in Somalia's governance holds promise but faces ongoing challenges. While recent progress is encouraging, meaningful engagement requires sustained efforts. Quotas or affirmative action can increase youth representation, while empowerment and mentorship programs should equip young people with political skills and connect them with experienced leaders. Improved access to quality education is key to fostering civic awareness, critical thinking, and leadership abilities. Governments must adopt youth-focused policies and actively consult young people to address their concerns. Economic opportunities, including job creation and support for youth entrepreneurship, are essential to engagement and stability. In a conflict-affected country, youth involvement in peacebuilding is vital. Youth-led efforts that promote dialogue and tolerance can contribute to lasting peace. Realizing this potential requires continued support from the government, civil society, and international partners.

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