



AGENCY FOR
PEACEBUILDING



MEDIA AND PEACEBUILDING IN SOMALIA

Research report

September 2023

ABOUT THE AGENCY FOR PEACEBUILDING

The Agency for Peacebuilding (AP) is a non-profit organisation whose mission is to promote conditions to enable the resolution of conflict, reduce violence and contribute to a durable peace across Europe, its neighbouring countries, and the world. AP is the first Italian organisation specialising in peacebuilding. This allows us to occupy a unique role in the European landscape: on the one hand, we interpret and synthesise relevant topics for the benefit of Italian agencies and institutions working on peace and security; on the other, we highlight experiences, capacities, and resources specific to the Italian system, which can contribute to the resolution of violent conflict.

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The research report has been produced under the aegis of the "[Somalia Media Hub for Peacebuilding and Human Rights](#)" project, which HANAHR and AP are implementing with the generous support of the Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (IFA), under its Zivik funding programme. The views expressed in this report are those of its authors and of the research participants and do not necessarily reflect those of AP's partners and donors.

This report was made possible thanks to the financial support of IFA.

Suggested citation: Hodan Ahmed et al. (2023). Media, Conflict and Peacebuilding in Somalia. Agency for Peacebuilding (2023).

Cover photo description: A Somali journalist (Credit: United Nations Development Programme).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Somalia is in the midst of a social and political transition of momentous importance: following decades of war, the country has successfully launched a federalisation process that has the ambition of reducing violent conflict and putting Somalis on the path towards economic development. In this process there is an important role to be played by the media, which can promote the participation and inclusion of different people and communities, and thus contribute to changing the narrative around the country's state-building processes. Yet, very little efforts have so far been made to focus on the specific role and capacities of Somali media. And because of this, very little is still known about the media sector.

This is the gap that the present research report wants to fill. To do so, journalists, civil society representatives and young people were engaged in Garowe (Puntland), Hargeisa (Somaliland) and Mogadishu (Banadir). They were invited to share how they perceive the media in relation to their country's ongoing transition. The emerging picture is extremely interesting and timely. Before looking at the landscape, however, it is important to briefly examine Somalia's current peace and conflict outlook.

Somalia's peace and conflict outlook

Somalia has experienced violent conflict since 1991, after the collapse of Siad Barre's regime, and war has persisted for almost three decades. In the face of this, a constant has been social change. Change in the country has resulted from violence, but many attempts have also been made to resolve conflict in non-violent ways. For instance, local, regional and national peace conferences have been regularly held since the early 1990's. Another constant has been the importance of clan affiliation. Indeed, constant competition and confrontation between clans and sub-clans has been one of key drivers of violent conflict. Yet, dialogue between clans and sub-clans has been just as constant as confrontation.

In the last 10 years, conflict dynamics in the country have shifted following the creation of the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) in 2012. There are now several Federal Member States (FMS), as part of a defederalisation process that is very much ongoing.¹ The successful creation of FMS, and the consolidation of the FGS, have thus re-kindled hopes for a peaceful Somalia, and improved security in many areas of the country.

¹ Presently there are six states: Jubaland, South-West, Banadir (which includes the capital, Mogadishu), Hirshabelle, Galmudug and Puntland. Somaliland has so far not opted into the federal architecture.

Recent gains have been inconsistent, however, and violent conflict remains a daily fact of life. Presently, most violent conflict in the country occurs at local level and involves sub-clans. Conflicts have been driven by disputes over land and resources, but the FGS is also becoming a source of competition and confrontation. In spite of this, for now federalism represents an opportunity to establish dialogue and produce durable solutions to Somalia's many challenges. The improvement of the security situation is also strengthening the role of elders. Elders in Somalia are fundamental to resolve conflict, but they are also, by definition, a homogenous group. In connection to this, women remain marginalized in spite of the recognition that they play a significant role in peacebuilding efforts. Here, too, however, some signs of improvement have been noted, including the adoption of the country's first National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security.

All these changes can be positively amplified in and through the media, leading to tangible and significant contributions to the country's transition. Yet, the Somalia media sector is itself evolving, facing important opportunities, but also significant challenges.

The Somali media landscape and its current contributions to peacebuilding

Somalia's media landscape is undergoing epochal changes and today the country can boast a vibrant, even if fragmented, media culture. This said, the sector's development remains affected by insecurity and heavily influenced by the unstable political environment and the complex history of the country.

During Barre's regime, all media was state controlled and it was only after 1991 that privately owned outlets emerged. During this time, in fact, new media stations (mainly radio) were created as business ventures, and some as channels for political propaganda. Several outlets were set up also by the Somali diaspora, which has in general been a crucial force for promoting a more independent and professional media sector. In more recent years, there have been also small and incremental efforts to regulate the sector. Nevertheless, to this day reliable information about Somalia's media sector, including its reach, remains difficult to gather.

This said, all Somali journalists interviewed agree that media sector has grown and improved significantly. The media landscape, today, is very diversified in terms of formats. Radio still plays a dominant role. Television is, on the other hand, a largely urban phenomenon. And print media are fading in most areas. The last decade has also seen the emergence of the Internet, whose use has been driven by the importance of mobile phones. This has also meant a boom in the use of social media, in

particular among young people. This said, Somalis with access to the Internet remain very few and are mostly based in urban areas.

The relative importance of media outlets changes depending on location. Across FMS in South-Central Somalia, for instance, radio stations and television channels have a consolidated presence. All media organisations are private and while the FGS has a Ministry of Communications and Technology, state regulation is essentially absent. Here, Islamist militias have as much influence on the media as formal legislation. In Puntland, radio is the dominant media, but there are also various television channels. In Somaliland newspapers remain popular, alongside radio, and authorities there exercise stronger control on broadcasts. Lastly, it is important to note that information sharing still happens through word-of-mouth and non-media channels, like mosques.

The evolution of the media sector is affected by important challenges. To begin with, Somali journalists continue to face many dangers, ranging from intimidation and harassment, to arrest, to sexual assault against female reporters and also murder. Financial resources in the sector are scant, forcing many journalists to abandon the profession. Lastly, media professionals have very limited professional capacities because of a lack of training and capacity building opportunities available to them. In the face of this, journalists have organised and formed several professional associations, which are very active, but whose work is also hindered by the above-mentioned challenges.

All of this translates into very limited contributions to peacebuilding. Somali media allow very little to no space for voices focused on peace, dialogue or reconciliation. As such, the overall narrative framework, in relation to Somalia's transition, remains focused on violence and insecurity. Undoubtedly, the challenges that limit Somali media's contributions to peacebuilding are in part the same as those affecting the sector more generally, like journalists' insecurity. This said, what is also true is that the media space in Somalia is a contested space, and that media can all too often be marginalising and exclusionary.

This is certainly the case of Somali women, whose participation and representativeness are largely determined by patriarchal customary and social norms. Indeed, the level of women media exposure is very low and the great majority of women do not have weekly access to newspapers, radio or television. Women journalists are significantly underrepresented in Somali media houses and also in journalists' associations and unions. They are also more likely to be victims of harassment. Young people fare a bit better, as they are generally seen to be well represented in the media sector. They also tend to be the ones benefitting the most from the boom in Internet use.

There have been improvement in recent years, mostly on account of a recent increase in formal support for media development. Thanks to donor support, for example, outlets have emerged, which are all-women or women-led. This might be a harbinger of more support to come, but it remains, so far, limited in scope and duration, often uncoordinated and *ad hoc*.

Conclusions and recommendations

All the journalists engaged during the research ultimately view the media sector as a “double-edged sword”, which can be used positively to promote peace or negatively to fan the flames of conflict and violence. Many have expressed their desire to have an independent media free from the political and clan influence in Somalia. Importantly, many see achieving this outcome as possible today as it has ever been. It is in support of this goal that the following recommendations are offered:

- 1. More data is necessary.** Support to media development needs to be guided by reliable information. For this reason, there should be more efforts to gather such data and to the extent possible these efforts should be driven by Somali actors.
- 2. Invest in capacity-building of journalists and media sector professionals.** Efforts should be made to strengthen the capacities of journalists and media sector professionals to report transparently and in a balanced matter on topics related to the political transition, peace and security.
- 3. Support mentorship and exchange programmes for journalists.** Capacity-building efforts should also support networking across locations and media types.
- 4. Foster connections between media, civil society and elders.** The legitimacy of, and trust in, journalists can be increased by fostering connections between journalists and civil society representatives and between journalists and elders.
- 5. Create incentives for media to focus on peacebuilding stories.** Lastly, coverage of peacebuilding stories could be greatly increased, with huge impact on the narrative of the country’s transition, and relatively low costs.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project
AP	Agency for Peacebuilding
ATMIS	African Union Transition Mission in Somalia
AU	African Union
CSO	Civil society organisation
EU	European Union
FESOJ	Federation of Somali Journalists
FGM	Female genital mutilation
FGS	Federal Government of Somalia
FMS	Federal Member State
GBV/ SGBV	Gender-based violence/ Sexual and gender-based violence
HANAHR	Horn Afrik News Agency for Human Rights
IGAD	Intergovernmental Agency for Development
IDP	Internally displaced person
IO	International organisation
LPI	Life & Peace Institute
MAP	Media Association of Puntland
NAP	National Action Plan
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NUSOJ	National Union of Somali Journalists
SAF	Somali Armed Forces
TNG	Transitional National Government
SOLJA	Somaliland Journalists Association
UN	United Nations
UNDP	UN Development Programme
UNESCO	UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNHCR	UN High Commissioner for Refugees
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WPS	Women, Peace and Security

INTRODUCTION

Somalia is in the midst of a social and political transition of momentous importance: following decades of war, the country has successfully launched a federalisation process that is currently gaining speed, and which has the ambition of reducing violent conflict and putting Somalis on the path towards economic development. Many obstacles remain, however, starting with the continued high levels of violence, which in part are linked to the ongoing activities of Al Shabaab, the notorious extremist group that emerged in the mid-2000's and continues to control parts of the country to this day. In part, however, violence is linked to tensions, recent and historical, between Somali clans and sub-clans.

In Somalia's transition there is an important role to be played by the media. As it has happened in other countries, from Afghanistan to Burundi, the media can play a crucial role in promoting the participation and inclusion of different people and communities, and thus contributing to changing the narrative around state-building processes like the one unfolding in Somalia. Yet, while the support to peacebuilding efforts in Somalia has increased during the last ten years, very little efforts have been made to focus on the specific role and capacities of Somali media. And because of this, very little is still known about the media sector. This is the gap that the present research report wants to fill.

The research's main objective is to explore the role of Somali media in the country's transition from violence to peace. The media sector is itself undergoing a process of evolution, in part linked to the transition itself, and in part linked to the emergent use of mobile phones and the Internet, especially in cities. Very little information exists, however, that is specific to how Somali media are covering issues relating to peacebuilding, dialogue and reconciliation. For this reason, the research was based on direct data collection from primary sources: a total 79 respondents participated in the research, 60 in focus group discussions and 19 in the one-on-one interviews. Most of these people are journalists or professionals working in various media outlets and civil society representatives. Importantly, they are from Garowe in Puntland, Hargeisa in Somaliland and Mogadishu, the country's federal capital, in Banadir State. As such, the findings of the research serve as a comparative analysis of the situation and outlook of media professionals across the entire country—a type of analysis which is in itself rare.

The research itself is part of a larger project entitled “Somalia Media Hub for Peacebuilding and Human Rights”, which is being implemented by the Horn Afrik News Agency for Human Rights (HANAHR) and the Agency for Peacebuilding (AP). The project, which has the overall objective of strengthening

Somali media's role in supporting the country's transition from war to peace, is funded by the Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (IFA), under its Zivik funding programme. The project is pursuing this goal by engaging a small group of journalists and increasing their knowledge of peacebuilding, and then helping them to create stories that can highlight the positive changes taking place in the country.

This is a timely project, and a timely piece of research, which wants to represent a small but valuable contribution to an aspect of Somalia's transition that is quickly gaining importance and warrants overdue attention.

The report is divided into six sections. Following this introduction, the methodology section explains how the research was designed and conducted. The report then provides an overview of Somalia's peace and conflict outlook. The following sections focus on the media sector: first, through a description of the landscape, then by looking at current contributions that media are making towards peacebuilding, and lastly by looking at issues of inclusion in the media. The report ends with some conclusions and recommendations.



Photo description: Somali journalists attending a training workshop on media and peacebuilding (Credit: Horn Afrik News Agency for Human Rights).

METHODOLOGY

The research's main objective has been to explore the role of the media in Somalia's transition from violence to peace. Experiences from other countries show that the media can be a powerful force to raise awareness about peace and security, to draw public attention to those issues, and to ultimately shape narratives that can support peacebuilding and human rights. However, in Somalia such assessments remain relatively rare. This research wants to fill this gap.

Given this scope and ambition, the research was driven by four key questions:

1. What does Somalia's media landscape currently look like and in particular: (i) what are the actors; (ii) how regulated are media; (iii) what are the patterns in terms of media demand and consumption; and (iv) how do media cover peace and security processes?
2. How does Somalia media represent the experiences of Somali women, as well as young people and minorities, and what factors favour or limit inclusive and diverse representation?
3. What is the contribution of Somalia's media sector to peacebuilding, if any, and what factors favour or limit this contribution?
4. How can the Somali media sector be harnessed to better support the country's transition from war to peace?

The research was participatory and engaged representatives of the media sector, from civil society, and young women and men in Garowe (Puntland), Hargeisa (Somaliland) and Mogadishu (Banadir State). In terms of media types, the scope of the research included radio, TV and web-based outlets. Print outlets were only considered where data suggested that these played an important role in specific locations. Overall, a total 79 respondents participated in the research, 60 in the focus group discussions and 19 in the one-on-one interviews. Additional information about the methodology can be found in the appendix at the end of this report.

While the research did not encounter any significant limitations, in terms of data collection, the Somali context remains difficult and information that could have been useful to elaborate further and more detailed findings could not always be collected. The research could not find, for example, any reliable statistical data about listenership rates. Nor could content analysis be conducted on programmes aired through Somalia media outlets. This is something that will need to be done in the future to better understand the growth of the media sector and its role in the ongoing transition.

SOMALIA'S CONFLICT AND PEACE OUTLOOK

Somalia has experienced violent conflict since 1991, after the collapse of Siad Barre's regime, and war has persisted for almost three decades. By the early 2010's, the country was divided in three largely separate and autonomous areas: Somaliland in the Northwest, Puntland in the Northeast, and so-called South-Central Somalia in the South. The latter was less a state than a battlefield, as the emergence of localised power centres, and of the extremist group Al-Shabaab, fuelled violent conflicts over power, wealth and territorial control. In 2012, the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) was formally created to re-establish civilian control over South-Central Somalia and, eventually, form a fully federalised nation. This process has led to the creation of several Federal Member States (FMS), in a process that is very much ongoing.² The successful creation of FMS, and the subsequent consolidation of the FGS, have thus re-kindled hopes for a peaceful Somalia, and improved security in many areas of the country over the last decade.

Recent gains have been inconsistent, however: as Al-Shabaab remains active, and as tensions between clans across the country have ebbed and flowed, violent conflict in Somalia remains a daily fact of life. Just in 2022, according to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), Al-Shabaab "was involved in more than 2.400 political violence events, including over 1.700 battle events and approximately 300 incidents of violence targeting civilians"³. The decades-long conflict has also left the country poor, underdeveloped and with little to no basic services. Just one example: educational attainment is low, with only 21% of Somali children attending primary school, while literacy rates are 71% for men aged 15 years or more, and 51% for women in the same age group⁴.

The constant in Somalia's situation over the last thirty years has been social change. Change in the country has resulted from violence, but many attempts have also been made to resolve conflict in non-violent ways. Local, regional and national peace conferences have been regularly held since the early 1990's, some leading to successful outcomes and the establishment of relatively peaceful areas, starting from Puntland and Somaliland. Another change is linked to displacement: the effects of violence on the one side and of urbanisation on the other have resulted in large numbers of Somalis moving, in particular towards cities and also outside the country's borders. The United Nations High Commissioner

² Presently there are six states: Jubaland, South-West, Banadir (which includes the capital, Mogadishu), Hirshabelle, Galmudug and Puntland. Somaliland has so far not opted into the federal architecture.

³ "[Heightened Political Violence in Somalia](#)", ACLED (March 2023).

⁴ "[National Education Profile: Somalia](#)", FHI 360 (2018).

for Refugees (UNHCR) presently estimates that there are 3,8 million people displaced in the country⁵. More than 714.000 are also living as refugees in neighbouring countries⁶. Displacement, which is now being driven also by climate change, has exacerbated violent conflicts, as resettlement regularly leads to disputes over land, property and scarce resources.

As Somalis have regularly moved, national and local political dynamics have also been in constant flux, but always determined by clan affiliation. “Clans, in Somalia, are culturally a consensual identity inherited from patriarchal ancestors and clannism”, says one commentator, adding that, “as a political ideology, [clan affiliation] determines everything else in the country: power, resource distribution, expansion of territory and even recruitment to positions of influence”⁷. **Constant competition and confrontation between clans and sub-clans has been one of key drivers of violent conflict in the country.** Yet, dialogue between clans and sub-clans has been just as constant as confrontation, and it has been the key to all peacebuilding successes recorded at local and national level.

Importantly, **the last 10 years have largely seen positive progress in Somalia’s transition away from war and towards peace.** The regions of Puntland and Somaliland, having declared their autonomy in 1991 and 1998 respectively, have been largely stable and in relative peace. The territory that used to be called South-Central Somalia—and which now includes the FMS of Jubaland, South-West, Hirshabelle, Banadir and Galmudug—has also seen more stability since the creation of the FGS, which has coincided with the expansion of military activities against Al-Shabaab by the Somali Armed Forces (SAF) and African troops under the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), the long-time peacekeeping force in the country.

Violent conflict has not disappeared, however. Rather, conflict dynamics have changed, and continue to do so.

New dynamics of conflict

As the FGS has consolidated its power, and as Al-Shabaab has continued to lose both ground and legitimacy, **most violent conflict in the country has occurred at local level and involved sub-clans.** Conflicts have been primarily driven by disputes over land and resources, according to the literature. As one report has it, “most conflicts occur between clans or between sub-clans over the ownership of land,

⁵ “[Over 1 million people internally displaced in Somalia in record time](#)”, UNHCR (May 2023).

⁶ “[Somalia Refugee Crisis Explained](#)”, UNHCR (July 2023).

⁷ Stephen Musau, “Clans’ and clannism’s control over weak political institutions”, in *Somalia: Clan and state politics*, Scuola Superiore Sant’Anna (December 2013), p. 13.

such as farmland, and competition over scarce pasture and water during drought”⁸. This type of conflict is trending up, according to analysts, also because of the devastating drought affecting the country⁹.

The FGS has also become a source of competition and confrontation. This should not be unexpected. The FGS has a long history—its first iteration, the Transitional National Government (TNG), was created back in 2000, following the Somalia National Peace Conference that was held in Arta, Djibouti—but for much of its history it looked like an empty proposition, lacking resources, legitimacy and, at the height of Al-Shabaab’s power, control over most of the territory of South-Central Somalia. The situation has changed since 2012, and the FGS now has military strength and a consolidated state apparatus. Importantly, it enjoys the support of the international community, including the African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Agency for Development (IGAD), East Africa’s regional organisation, the United Nations (UN) and all international donor countries, including the European Union (EU), which are the primary source of its budget¹⁰. The success of the federalisation process has thus created a resource so appealing and promising that it has become, like other resources in the country, an area of competition, confrontation and also conflict.

This dynamic has been at play in one of this year’s main incidents of violence. In early 2023, fighting erupted in Las Anod, in the Sool region, between local militias and troops from Somaliland. Sool, which is on the border between Puntland and Somaliland, has traditionally been affiliated with the latter. In February, however, the elders from Las Anod formally rescinded this affiliation and declared their intent to form their own state, under the FGS. This led to the intervention by Somaliland’s troops, and the fighting, which has caused hundreds of casualties and forced some 185.000 people to flee¹¹. What happened in Las Anod was primarily driven by people expressing their grievances about prolonged injustices and oppression in the area, with killings and assassinations of prominent figures that triggered no investigations from the Somaliland administration. That anger led to people’s uprising and the decision to form their own state.

Statehood is a new frontier of competition. **The actors behind this competition—and much of the violence—remain, however, the same as before.** These are the clans, and the sub-clans, and their militias. In this sense, conflict remains political in nature and thus dependent on efforts by Somalia’s politicians to retain and grow their support from communities. Politics in the country remain characterised by manipulation, patronage and corruption, at all levels. These continue to feed cycles of exclusion and

⁸ “Sustaining Gains in Somalia’s Offensive against Al-Shabaab”, International Crisis Group (March 2023), p. 1.

⁹ See, for example: “[Climate-related security risks and peacebuilding in Somalia](#)”, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (2019).

¹⁰ See, for example: “[Reviewing the Federal Government of Somalia’s 2022 near billion-dollar budget: development priorities and donor dependence](#)”, Somali Public Agenda (July 2022).

¹¹ “[What’s driving conflict in the disputed Somali city of Las Anod?](#)”, Al Jazeera (February 2023).

marginalisation, which have negatively affected the voices of women, young people and minorities in particular.

There also remains the long history of violence, which is driven by, and itself drives, grievances between clans and sub-clans. Grievances can also drive conflict between communities and sub-clans, where revenge attacks are common¹². And they are also one of the factors behind Al-Shabaab's continued presence in the country: despite the loss of territory, the terrorist organisation still enjoys support in some communities, which has allowed it to continue launching deadly attacks across the country and in Mogadishu.

Lastly, **violent conflict occurs because of the low level of legitimacy that institutions have in the eyes of Somalis**. The historic record of the Somali state—before, during and after Barre's rule—has made Somalis everywhere very distrustful of authorities and of politicians. As one report notes, “the 4.5 system¹³ is seen negatively among all groups interviewed [and the] same negative opinion applies to federalism as well, although many also emphasised the people's lack of understanding on what federalism actually implies”¹⁴. This means that the FGS, while a powerful broker, should not be seen, by and in itself, as a force for stability and peace.

Prospects for peacebuilding

Somalia's present outlook offers new prospects to successfully build peace. The first is the federalisation process. If it can increase competition and lead to violence conflict, as discussed just above, **federalism can also be an opportunity to establish dialogue capable of producing durable solutions to Somalia's many challenges**. Galmudug, one of the newest federal states under the FGS, is an example of this potential. Its creation was borne out of a desire, on the part of local communities and clans, to benefit from the federalisation process and the resources it could unlock. The state-creation process has, however, been fraught with divisions and conflict, starting from the fact that control over its territory, which sits at the border of Puntland, is disputed. “Since the formation of Galmudug State in 2015”, one report states, “the increased competition for power and influence has led to clan disputes. Mistrust among the clans is high and many politicians take advantage of this for their own benefit”¹⁵. Indeed, when the state-formation process was launched, Puntland went even as far as suspending

¹² See, for example: “Conflict Assessment, Galmudug State: An Analysis of Local Perspectives”, Berghof Foundation (2019).

¹³ The 4.5 formula is an informal governance arrangement by which representatives in federal institutions, including the Somali parliament, are assigned according to a quota system: the country's four major clans (Darood, Dir/ Isaaq, Hawiye and Rahanweyn/ Digil-Mirifle) receive equal quotas, and the remaining half-a-quota is divided among recognised minority clans.

¹⁴ “Conflict Assessment, Galmudug State: An Analysis of Local Perspectives”, Berghof Foundation (2019), p. 2.

¹⁵ Conflict Assessment, Galmudug State: An Analysis of Local Perspectives”, Berghof Foundation (2019), p. 1.

cooperation with the FGS¹⁶. Local politicians and militias saw in this process a one-time chance to obtain political and material benefits, and escalated the conflict. This notwithstanding, the state-formation process continued over the years: barriers and challenges came up regularly. At one point, parallel administrations were established, each representing one of the two parties claiming to represent Galmudug state. By 2019, dialogue achieved a measure of success, allowing for all parties to agree to a power-sharing agreement, without any further escalation or violence.

The positive development in Galmudug points to another important factor for successful peacebuilding: **the role and participation of elders**, which lent the ongoing dialogue effort strong legitimacy. Indeed, the Galmudug experience is a reminder of how important elders are in terms of promoting peace and security across Somalia. The literature is consensual on this front, with several reports linking the relative peace achieved by Puntland and Somaliland as the direct result of a process that saw elders from different clans participate actively and lead reconciliation efforts¹⁷. Overall, elders play a major role in conflict resolution and prevention efforts, and the country's progress, in terms of stability, could provide more opportunities for them. As a group, however, elders are by definition homogeneous: they are male and old. While a reliance on elders might in other words be necessary, it might also hinder inclusion.

The significant role of Somali women in peacebuilding efforts still lacks formal recognition. Despite women's pivotal role and contributions to peacebuilding efforts, they are often excluded and marginalised from the formal decision-making processes. Women's participation in such efforts is complicated by the violence that affects women disproportionately. And it is complicated by patriarchal norms, including communities' reliance on customary law (*xeer*). Yet, historically women have also played a role. In the words of a Somali woman activist:

*"In Somali society, it is men, specifically the elders, who traditionally have the means to make peace through dialogue and mediation. But although women are typically excluded from decision-making forums where peace accords are negotiated, their position within the clan system gives them the ability to bridge clan divisions and to act as a first channel for dialogue between parties in conflict"*¹⁸.

As progress in terms of security continues, more space could be created for women to formally take part in peacebuilding processes, and in society more generally. This can be seen already in the media sector, as will be discussed later. It can also be seen at the institutional level, with the recent approval of

¹⁶ "Galmudug Reconciliation: Processes, Challenges, and Opportunities Ahead", Interpeace (February 2021), p. 16.

¹⁷ See, for example: "Conflict in Somalia: Drivers and Dynamics", World Bank (January 2005).

¹⁸ "Whose peace is it anyway? Connecting Somali and international peacemaking", *Accord* (Issue 21), Conciliation Resources (2010), p. 62.

Somalia's first National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace and Security (WPS). The NAP articulates the goals of the FGS in terms of implementing United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, which "urges all actors to increase the participation of women and incorporate gender perspectives in all United Nations peace and security efforts"¹⁹. In and of itself, the NAP does not automatically guarantee that the situation of women will be improved, but as experiences from other countries show, the existence of such a policy should create opportunities for more meaningful engagement.



Photo description: UN Secretary-General's Special Representative in Somalia, James Swan, talking at an event celebrating the anniversary of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (Credit: UN Assistance Mission in Somalia, 2022).

¹⁹ United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, UN Security Council (2000).

A FAST-CHANGING MEDIA LANDSCAPE

Somalia's media landscape is primarily characterised by insecurity: with more than fifty media workers killed since 2010, Somalia ranked in 169th place when it comes to security for journalists²⁰. Yet, this landscape is also undergoing epochal changes and today the country can boast a vibrant, even if fragmented, media culture²¹, and many journalists remain committed to media freedom²². This section provides an overview of the evolution of the country's media sector, starting with an historical analysis and then moving to assessing what the landscape looks like today.

Somalia's media sector in historical context

The turbulent and unstable political environment and the complex history of Somalia strongly influenced the development of the media sector²³. Due to strong Somali oral culture, radio broadcasting, first introduced in 1945 by the British colonial administration in Hargeisa, has been for decades the most important mass media for sharing and receiving information²⁴. Between 1960 and 1969, there were two radio stations in the country, Radio Mogadishu and Radio Hargeisa, and two newspapers. From 1969 to 1991, during the Barre regime, the country's media were under total state control. The Ministry of Information and National Guidance published the only daily newspaper, "October Star", in Somali, English, Arabic and Italian, while the Broadcasting Department managed the radios. In 1991, the fall of Barre's government ended the state's monopoly over the media and, from then on, the media sector started to develop and diversify with a considerable increase of private media, especially radio stations.

Most political actors, in fact, deemed of the utmost importance to own or, at least, control media outlets. Two types of radio stations therefore emerged: those established by warlords for political control and those established for business²⁵. The civil war and political instability that followed the change of regime hindered the activity of the new radio stations and newspapers, however. And media became

²⁰ The World Press Freedom Index 2023 evaluates the environment for journalism in 180 countries and is published by Reporters Without Borders. They have a [page dedicated to Somalia](#) (Accessed on 29 August 2023).

²¹ "Evaluation of media support in Somalia (2014-2017), Finnish Foundation for Media and Development (2017), p. 9.

²² "State of the Media", National Union of Somali Journalists (2021), p. 6.

²³ "Somalia: Media Law and Policy Review", United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (December 2012), p. 18.

²⁴ "Evaluation of media support in Somalia (2014-2017), Finnish Foundation for Media and Development (2017), p. 13.

²⁵ "The media in Somalia: A force for moderation?", BBC World Service Trust (November 2011), p. 4.

mainly a useful instrument of propaganda by warlords and clan leaders, who promoted their own interests and agendas, if not hatred.

A first wave of diversification can, however, already be seen during this time. The dominance of warlords over Somali radio started to be challenged thanks to investments from Somali diasporas living outside of the country. **The influence of the Somali diaspora was crucial in creating the conditions for a more independent, plural and genuinely professional media sector**²⁶. For example, it was the diaspora that was most responsible for the opening of privately owned stations, such as Radio Horn Afrik in 1999²⁷. Inside the country, however, these developments did not affect the situation facing the people working in the media, which was, and has remained, dire: journalists face harassment and intimidation from powerful elites and groups, and their situation has worsened with the rise of Al-Shabaab. The terrorist group has, in fact, launched a merciless assault on independent media, while also launching, as warlords in the past, a radio to broadcast their propaganda²⁸.

After the establishment of the FGS, and especially in more recent years, there have been small and incremental efforts to coordinate international media support. In 2015 a new media law was passed by the FGS and a Somali Federal Media Strategy was adopted as a framework to strengthen and guide the development of Somali media and the implementation of the media law²⁹. Progress has, however, been slowed by the Covid-19 pandemic, which exacerbated financial struggles and led to the contraction of many media outlets, as well as media coverage more generally. Moreover the FGS, under the pretext of pandemic control measures, has imposed tight restrictions on media access to information, hindering the media's ability to provide critical information and to counter misinformation about vaccines, and other important issues, targeting media outlets for closure and jailing journalists for spreading fake news and misinformation³⁰.

The media sector in Somalia today

Reliable information about Somalia's media sector, including its reach, is difficult to gather. There is, for example, no single repository of media statistics, nor do relevant authorities have updated information. For this reason, the research has primarily chosen to understand the sector by interviewing those working in it. And according to them, **the media sector today has grown and improved significantly**. It is also perceived not only as a powerful tool for disseminating information and shaping public opinion, but also

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ For reference, see: "[Somalia: Brave new airwaves](#)", CBC News (February 2004).

²⁸ "The media in Somalia: A force for moderation?", BBC World Service Trust (November 2011), p. 4.

²⁹ "Evaluation of media support in Somalia (2014-2017)", Finnish Foundation for Media and Development (2017), p. 13.

³⁰ "Journalists Safety and Media Freedom in Somalia", Somali Mechanism for Safety of Journalists (2021), p. 12.

as an important component of Somalia's transition to sustainable peace. As highlighted by an interviewee, a male CSO representative in Mogadishu, *"The media sector is so powerful that it can either destroy or build nations. And it is absolutely up to the journalists to decide which path they want to take"*³¹.

Nowadays, Somalia's media landscape appears to be very diversified, in terms of formats³².

Unsurprisingly, **radio** still plays a dominant role. Like in other parts of Africa, radio is a crucial source of information for a vast proportion of the population and this is particularly true for a country with such a strong oral tradition as Somalia³³. Most local stations have a limited geographic broadcast reach, estimated at approximately 30 kilometres, and thus many people have only access to international channels broadcasting on shortwave, such as the BBC Somali Service and Voice of America³⁴.

Television is, on the other hand, a largely urban phenomenon. There are two state-owned TV channels and several private ones, some of them set up by the diaspora abroad and broadcasting via satellite, which allows them to reach a wider geographic area. While there is evidence that television is becoming more popular, low income levels, poor access to electricity, and the nomadic lifestyle of a large number of Somalis mean that radio is likely to remain the most widely used media for some time yet³⁵.

In a break with the past, **print media** are instead fading in Puntland and across the states that used to make up South-Central Somalia: according to sources, only two newspapers are still published in Mogadishu, with others having closed because of the destruction of infrastructure and the lack of security. Only Somaliland has succeeded in maintaining a relatively vibrant press, but low literacy levels and poor distribution to rural areas mean that audience reach is much lower than radio³⁶.

The last decade has seen the emergence of **Internet use**. Somalis currently enjoy some of the cheapest costs for accessing Internet services and the web-based communication sector is one of the strongest industries. To some, this is an indication of larger trends of economic growth and development, which may seem counterintuitive to the prevailing discourse of Somalia as a lawless and hopeless territory³⁷. Yet, multiple analyses point to this recent boom in Internet use among Somalis, although they also

³¹ AP, interview with male CSO representative, Mogadishu (May 2023).

³² See, for general reference: "[Somalia](#)", Reporters Without Borders (2023).

³³ "The media in Somalia: A force for moderation?", BBC World Service Trust (November 2011), p. 4.

³⁴ "Conflict in Somalia: Drivers and Dynamics", World Bank (January 2005), pp. 6-7.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Nicole Stremmlau, "Towards a diagnostic approach to media in fragile states: Examples from the Somali territories", *Media, Law and Conflict* (2013), p. 285.

recognize that the absolute numbers of those with access remains very limited, and that Internet users are mainly young and urban-based³⁸.

The importance of the Internet has been driven by mobile phones, which have grown in popularity and are widely used for personal communications, and for banking. According to the World Bank, for instance, mobile cellular subscriptions went from 18 per 100 people in 2021 to 52 in 2020³⁹. This has also meant a boom in the use of **social media**—young media consumers interviewed for the research confirmed using Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat and WhatsApp. Indeed, what appears clear is that social media are mostly used by youth⁴⁰, so much so that many of those interviewed for the research believe that social media will soon overtake the traditional ones. “Social media is taking over the traditional media”, stated by a young woman in Mogadishu, adding that “very soon TV and radio broadcasting will disappear, the same way printing media is disappearing”⁴¹. Social media is not generally trusted, however, as people are concerned that it can become a platform for spreading unverified facts, rumours or fake news. This came through in talking to young people, and it is a trend that has also triggered concerted action by at least one of the country’s associations of journalists⁴².

As befits the political divisions in the country, **the relative importance of media outlets changes depending on location**. Across federal states in South-Central Somalia, for instance, radio stations and TV channels have a consolidated presence even if they operate under constant threats. All media organisations are private and while the FGS has a Ministry of Communications and Technology, state regulation is essentially absent. Here, Islamist militias have at least as much influence on the media as formal legislation: they can issue directives to organisations about what can be broadcast, close radio stations, and threaten or attack journalists who are accused of violating Islamic codes.

In Puntland, radio is the dominant media, but there are also various TV channels. Although the regional radio stations are deemed to be independent, the authorities maintain a strong control over them. In 2010, for example, Puntland’s Ministry of Information issued a set of new strict directives on content that could be broadcast. As in the other FMS, in Puntland also there is a plurality of broadcast organisations, both government and privately owned. The information gathered for this research suggests that the importance of press outlets is fast diminishing, although there still is a specific association of print journalists.

³⁸ “Conflict in Somalia: Drivers and Dynamics”, World Bank (January 2005), pp. 6-7.

³⁹ “[Mobile cellular subscriptions \(per 100 people\) – Somalia](#)”, World Bank (Accessed on 29 August 2023).

⁴⁰ “Somalia Youth Assessment”, United States agency for International Development (January 2020), p. 18.

⁴¹ AP, Interview with young female consumer, Mogadishu (May 2023).

⁴² “[Somali Journalists Launch ‘Disinformation Lab’ to Combat Spread of Fake News](#)”, Voice of America (June 2021).

The situation is different in Somaliland, where newspapers have played an important role since the declaration of independence following Barre's fall. They not only flourished, but also played a role in building the path to democracy and maintaining a strong sense of nationalism. However, authorities are particularly sensitive to anything which might be perceived to jeopardise efforts towards achieving international recognition as an independent state. Numerous newspapers exist, some independently owned, while radio and television broadcasts are almost completely state-controlled. The government retains tight control over the licensing of new broadcast media outlets with the result that there are many TV and Internet-based outlets, but only one state-controlled radio.

Lastly, it is important to note how, across all locations, **information sharing still happens through word-of-mouth and non-media channels**. For example, the mosque is still a greatly used source for information dissemination, together with a variety of face-to-face methods like clan elders and family members, tea shops, khat-chewing clubs, and marketplaces⁴³. The reliance on such sources of information highlights the importance that Somalis place on trusted sources. In this respect, while news in Somalia is much more accessible than ever before, how Somalis get their information is still strongly influenced by identity markers such as clan affiliation, gender, urbanisation, income and level of education. For example, male urban residents with higher-income and higher education are more likely to use television and social media to get their information, but media in general (social and traditional) is still much scarcer and more distrusted in rural areas.

Present-day practices and challenges

Media sector representatives interviewed for the research confirm that media content is dominated by political news, sports and entertainment programming. News related to the country's peacebuilding processes are normally shared through programmes or outlets that are supported by the UN, by international NGOs and, in some cases, by local CSOs in the form of short awareness programmes, dramas and poetry.

What media does, including what it covers, remains linked to the political context, which is defined by competition and corruption, as discussed before. As such many media outlets are directly owned by politicians who use them to exercise political pressure and mobilise their constituents for political gains. And while there are state subsidies, their distribution is opaque and through to favour media outlets that support the government⁴⁴. Media legislation in place should theoretically enable transparency and

⁴³ "Somali Perceptions Survey: Key Findings on Somaliland", USAID (2016), p. 1.

⁴⁴ "Somalia", Reporters Without Borders (2023).

ensure media freedom, but in practice government representatives keep exercising censorship and repression⁴⁵. In the absence of new laws, the country's Penal Code of 1964 remains valid, and it contains a number of vague offences that restrain media freedom. The Code's provision relating to "abusive exercise of a profession" is, for example, routinely used to prosecute journalists.

Overall, **Somali journalists continue to face many dangers**, ranging from intimidation and harassment, to arrest, to sexual assault against female reporters and also murder⁴⁶. Attacks, whether by authorities or Al-Shabaab, represent a clear attempt to destabilise and intimidate the whole media sector and the result is the increasing reluctance to critically cover political events or report stories that put authorities in bad light. There are nonetheless some encouraging signs in recent years, including the appointment of a special prosecutor to investigate the killings of media professionals⁴⁷. In the meanwhile journalists continue to courageously risk their lives to bring the truth to the general public.

Table 1. Major associations of journalists in Somalia

Name	Description
Federation of Somali Journalists (FESOJ)	FESOJ is a national union of professional journalists in Somalia based in Mogadishu. It was created in 2002 and it currently has 950 members.
Media Association of Puntland (MAP)	MAP was founded in 2009 to promote press freedom in Puntland. It is an independent, non-profit organization based in Garowe.
National Union of Somali Journalists (NUSOJ)	NUSOJ is a national labour union representing over 600 Somali journalists. It was created in 2002 and is based in Mogadishu.
Somaliland Journalists Association (SOLJA)	SOLJA is a national independent, non-governmental, non-political and non-profit organisation based in Hargeisa. It represents more than 38 media outlets and 800 professionals.

An important source of protection and self-organisation is represented by journalists' associations and unions. In Somalia there are several such entities, the most often cited being the Media Association of Puntland (MAP), based in Garowe, the National Union of Somali Journalists (NUSOJ) and the Federation of Somali Journalists (FESOJ), based in Mogadishu, and the Somaliland Journalists Association (SOLJA), based in Hargeisa. These institutions function independently from one another and advocate for regulatory laws and protection of rights of journalists under intimidation, threat and arrest. They are also independent from the government, except for SOLJA in Somaliland, which gets standard allocated funds from the Somaliland government. However, limited coordination and

⁴⁵ "Conflict in Somalia: Drivers and Dynamics", World Bank (January 2005), p. 7.

⁴⁶ "State of the Media", NUSOJ (2021), p. 6.

⁴⁷ "Somalia's Attorney General Appoints Special Prosecutor for Crimes Against Journalists in Somalia", FESOJ (September 2020).

cooperation across associations limit a comprehensive advocacy effort and the capacity to protect media professionals.

Media practices are affected by additional factors, including important challenges. To begin with, being a journalist is a highly insecure job, which many are forced to leave to pursue more secure and financially stable employment. In general, **the media sector lacks financial resources:** as mentioned before, private organisations can usually rely only on advertisement revenue and are poorly equipped to manage shocks, as was demonstrated during the Covid-19 pandemic, which forced many outlets to reduce operations or close.

Linked to these, all those interviewed and the literature alike are adamant that media professionals have very limited professional capacities because of a lack of training and capacity building opportunities available to them. According to the journalists interviewed, there are also very few institutions that offer university-level media or journalism degrees, whereas professional or vocational training, usually offered by UN agencies or international NGOs, are mostly short-term and subject to funds availability.

Respondents also expressed their concern over the increasing number of media practitioners with limited knowledge of the field. “In Somaliland today”, said a young woman in Hargeisa, “the only qualification you need to be a journalist is Internet access and a smartphone”⁴⁸. Many educated journalists have left the country in recent years, leaving a void that has largely been filled by self-made journalists, with little professional training and experience⁴⁹. This is one point of agreement between journalists and government officials: “There is a mushrooming of media outlets and journalists in Somalia”, a government representative in Mogadishu shared, “with no or little knowledge and qualifications”⁵⁰. According to everyone, there is a dire need for media professionals to develop a better understanding of the important role of the media and to promote professional journalistic standards⁵¹.

⁴⁸ AP, interview with young female media professional, Hargeisa (May 2023).

⁴⁹ “An analysis of the Somali Media Environment”, BBC World Service Trust (July 2011), p. 9.

⁵⁰ AP, interview with male government representative, Mogadishu (May 2023).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

SOMALI MEDIA'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO PEACE

Somali media are not seen as contributors to peacebuilding, not presently. Most of the journalists and media sector representatives interviewed for this research criticised media outlets for escalating conflicts in the country, which they do by highlighting political disagreements, and allowing airtime to those inciting conflicts and controversy.

Somali media allow very little to no space for voices focused on peace, dialogue or reconciliation.

Journalists are the first to admit this, and the literature confirms it. As with most other aspects of Somalia's media sector, statistics are absent, although some analyses have been made, which are discussed below. What is clear is that issues related to peace, dialogue and reconciliation do not generally make it on the air, and the only exception is given by interventions that are funded with specific peacebuilding goals, which are still uncommon and always funded by external donors.

The available analyses of media content confirm that media coverage of what happens in Somalia tends to focus almost exclusively on keywords such as violence, instability, terrorism. Such analysis has focused on international media outlets, rather than Somali ones, but it remains nevertheless interesting and useful. Specifically, a report by the Life and Peace Institute (LPI) looked at how international media has framed Somalia's transition, drawing a comparison between Western and African media. The conclusion of this analysis is interesting, if unsurprising: "Western media tends to frame Somalia in terms of terrorism, a humanitarian crisis or a civil war, with little focus on peace negotiations and local human-interest stories or pragmatic local realities"⁵². Africa media tend to be more attentive to peacebuilding processes, but their coverage is also dominated by references to terrorism, humanitarian crises, civil war and peacekeeping operations. Notably, "local peacebuilding efforts, represented by the key words 'civil society' and 'grassroots', were only mentioned in 12 out of the 2,500 articles"⁵³.

The overall narrative framework, in relation to Somalia's transition, remains squarely focused on violence and insecurity, and this is much more often than not how people and policy-makers alike see the country. The narrative then justifies support for interventions that are focused on security, including countering violent extremism. In this regard, it does not help that many private media outlets are either owned by or closely associated with warlords and politicians, as discussed in the previous section. As a

⁵² "Somalia: Creating space for fresh approaches to peacebuilding", Life & Peace Institute (2011), p. 52.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 55.

Somali woman shared, “some prominent media outlets are owned or supported by different clan leaders, politicians and warlords, and these outlets only deepen conflicts and contribute to the country’s instability rather than peacebuilding”⁵⁴.

The challenges that limit Somali media’s contributions to peacebuilding are also tied to more general factors affecting the media sector as a whole. These have already been discussed in the previous section. The lack of resources is held responsible for media outlets’ choice of content, which remains focused on politics and entertainment. The lack of capacities refers not just to a lack of standards, but also knowledge. What deeply affects Somali journalists’ ability to cover the transition is also the wide sense of insecurity.

These are objective limitations, thoroughly discussed by many different sources, and taken together they provide the basis for the prevailing consensus, which is that **the media space in Somalia is a contested space**. For example, media outlets in territories that have expressed the desire for greater autonomy are generally seen as publishing messages reflecting this political agenda regardless of whether these may or may not incite support for violent conflict. This means that media can all too often be marginalising and exclusionary, with only the voices aligned with the dominant political agendas allowed to operate, at least in the context of “old” media.

This outlook notwithstanding, Somali journalists and media sector representatives interviewed for this research were also equally quick to point out how **the media’s potential contribution to peacebuilding has never been higher than it is today**. This potential is in large part linked to the evolution and growth of the media sector in Somalia. As the previous section highlights, the sector is rapidly evolving, with more and more Somalis being able to access sources of information on their own than ever before. Recently, there has also been greater formal support for the media, which has resulted in increasing the sector’s contributions to peacebuilding. These cases, however, are generally linked to international interventions, with a limited scope, as they may involve one outlet, or a handful of journalists only. Those interviewed for the research all stated, for instance, that peacebuilding programmes are usually funded by the UN and international NGOs, and are therefore short-termed. They also mentioned how, on special occasions like International Peace Day, programmes focused on peace might be aired (but always paid for by international donors, NGOs or IOs).

Similarly, where people spoke of interactions between media and peacebuilding actors, including CSOs, they said that these were usually rare. They said that such interactions tend to happen only when

⁵⁴ AP, interview with young female media consumer, Mogadishu (May 2023).

there is an existing collaboration between a media outlet and the UN or an international NGO. Such instances include funding the development and production of programmes related to peace and security (usually in the form of dramas, short films, poems or songs). “International NGOs and the UN usually support peacebuilding programmes in Somalia, and that is how they are connected”, confirmed a female media professional in Garowe⁵⁵.

This kind of support, limited as it may be in its current form, might nonetheless be a potential harbinger of more to come, assuming that the ongoing transition moves forward. This can be inferred from what has happened in other post-conflict situations, including for example in Liberia in the late 1990’s, and in Afghanistan following the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001⁵⁶. The influx of financial resources should help journalists overcome key challenges, such as improving standards and reinforcing capacities. **These resources might also influence the composition of the sector, making it more inclusive.** An interesting example, in this regard, is Bilan Media, which has been hailed as Somalia’s first all-female media outlet. Bilan was launched in 2022 thanks to support from the UN Development Programme (UNDP)⁵⁷.

Outside of these initiatives, **media diversity has increased also thanks to the Somali diaspora.** Somalis who have fled the country can remain deeply involved in the country’s politics, in spite of the distance. Studies that have looked at the Somali diaspora have noted that it can be a force supporting peacebuilding, although the role they play can also be ambiguous. For example, a study of Somalinet.com, a website popular among Somalis living outside the country, noted how “members of the discussion forum [rebuked] violent means and [diminished] rather than [heightened] tensions”⁵⁸. Others, however, have drawn attention to the sometimes poor quality of articles or discussions taking place in such fora. Diasporas can also have competing political views that trickle into media.

Lastly, there are opportunities linked to non-traditional sources of information. Poetry, which is widely disseminated also through media, has been used as an effective way to share reliable information and reconciliation messages. In Somalia, poets are trusted figures, and the nature of society, where illiteracy rates remain high and oral culture is very strong, makes poetry a natural means of communication, which can be integrated with traditional and new media⁵⁹. Indeed, some experiments have already started⁶⁰, and could be scaled up by taking advantage of the expansion of social media across the country.

⁵⁵ AP, interview with female media professional, Garowe (May 2023).

⁵⁶ For general reference, see: “[Media and Peacebuilding in Afghanistan](#)”, United States Institute of Peace (March 2010).

⁵⁷ “[All-female newsroom launched in Somalia to widen media’s scope](#)”, The Guardian (April 2022).

⁵⁸ Terje S. Skjerdal, “The Somali Media and their Peacebuilding Potential” (2021), pp. 38-39.

⁵⁹ Nicole Stremmler, “Towards a diagnostic approach to media in fragile states: Examples from the Somali territories”, *Media, Law and Conflict* (2013).

⁶⁰ “[Can poetry bring peace?](#)”, UNDP (September 2021).

MEDIA AND INCLUSION

Women in the media

Somali society is highly patriarchal and specific customary and social norms forbid women to exercise leadership and decision-making on clan issues or within the public sphere. Somali women are continuously subjected to harmful gender norms that affect, among other things, their access to education and do not allow them to get involved in politics⁶¹. In fact, Somali women are rarely found in prominent roles in society and they do not hold, generally, a position equal to men in the workplace.

This lack of inclusions is reflected in the media. According to the 2020 Somali, Somaliland and Puntland Health and Demographic Surveys, **the level of women media exposure is very low and the great majority of women do not have weekly access to newspapers, radio or television**⁶². When it happens that women have access to media, often in cities, television is the most common use of media by women. Urban women then have more access to newspapers, television and radio compared to their rural and nomadic counterparts, and exposure to media is known to increase with both education and wealth. Nomadic women have the least access to any media source, with less than 1% accessing newspapers and television. Less than two women out of 10 used the Internet at least once in their life and the users are generally younger urban women who, again, have greater education and wealth.

In regards to **women working in the media sector**, media outlets, like most other public sectors, continue to be male-dominated in all spheres, from leadership to production and reporting. Women journalists are significantly underrepresented in Somali media houses and also in journalists' associations and unions. As in many other sectors, there are few women in influential and decision-making positions in the organisational structures of media houses⁶³. Female journalists tend to receive lower pay than men, are considered inferior to male counterparts, and are much more likely to be victims of harassment. "Women journalists within media institutions are harassed", said a female journalist in Mogadishu, "especially when they are new, they are underpaid and denied opportunities to grow just because they are women"⁶⁴. According to those interviewed, women in journalism are indeed still perceived by

⁶¹ "Clans, contention and consensus: Federalism and inclusion in Galmudug", Saferworld (June 2020), p. 23.

⁶² "The Somali Health and Demographic Survey 2020", FGS (2020), pp. 52-53; "The Somaliland Health and Demographic Survey 2020", Government of Somaliland (2020), pp. 48-49; "Somali Health and Demographic Survey: Puntland report 2020", Puntland State of Somalia (2020), pp. 44-45.

⁶³ "Baseline study on the working conditions of Somali women journalists", Somali Women Journalists (2016), p. 5.

⁶⁴ AP, interview with female journalist, Mogadishu (May 2023).

society to be indecent and inappropriate and, in many cases, the male colleagues are preferred for covering top stories and conducting interviews with key stakeholders.

Moreover women professionals face greater security risks than their male colleagues, often subjected to threats and even sexual violence, especially by militant Islamists who do not believe women should work in media⁶⁵. The abuse and violence they experience unfortunately feeds into a broader culture of gender inequality and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), which also comes with the stigmatisation of the victims⁶⁶. This significantly impacts the personal and professional development of female journalists: female respondents have cited that access to opportunities and growth for them and women in general is strongly limited by the challenges and obstacles of gender inequality and gender-based harassment within the media institutions. The majority of media outlets do not have gender-sensitive policies and procedures, gender or sexual harassment policies, nor training on gender themes. For this reason, many female journalists have been forced to leave their profession, while other ones choose not to pursue political and security news stories.

This explains why most respondents believe that there are very few programmes addressing women's experiences, challenges and priorities. The majority of female respondents affirm that the production of media programmes tackling gender issues is not in the top priority for the media outlets and in most cases such programmes are influenced either by the individual interest of the media outlet owners or by the interest and availability of funding by the UN and international NGOs. Some programmes exist, for example the ones covering special occasions like International Women's Day, the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence (GBV) or the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). Occasionally, informants suggest that debates on issues of concern to women are aired on radio and TV, but they remain rare. In this respect, social media might be proving a game-changer, in particular for young women, but information about this is so far anecdotal.

Promoting gender equality is not easy, however: not only are female journalists underrepresented, but **male journalists can often have biases and prejudices against women**. The interviews conducted for this research show that some men believe that there are no problems in relation to women's rights and participation, that Somali culture provides enough protection to women, and that efforts to increase equality are driven by foreign ideologies. This is a huge problem, which suggests the dire need to work with both men and women.

⁶⁵ "An analysis of the Somali Media Environment", BBC World Service Trust (July 2011), p. 8.

⁶⁶ "Assessing the scope and parameters of transitional justice in Somalia", Somalia Stability Fund (2021), p. 11.

So far, efforts to promote women's inclusion have mainly resulted in the establishment of media outlets that are exclusively for women, that have an all women team, or are led by women. Examples of these efforts include the previously mentioned Bilan Media, but also MMTV in Garowe and Carro Edeg Media in Hargeisa. While welcome additions to the media landscape, many female journalists do not however feel that this is enough. In this regard, poetry, which has already been highlighted as representing an opportunity for promoting peacebuilding through media, could also help. Somali women are, in fact, well known for composing *Buraanbur*, a form of poetry traditionally composed and recited by women. In many instances participants shared their experiences where women stood up for peace by reciting *Buraanbur* through media, to mitigate tensions between clans and spread messages of peace and co-existence.

Youth, minorities and media

Somalia, like other countries in sub-Saharan Africa, has an extremely young population. Of an estimated 18 million people, more than 60% of Somalis are under the age of 25⁶⁷ and 75% are under the age of 35⁶⁸. Most youth live in poverty and with high food insecurity and there are some youth categories which are particularly vulnerable: unemployed and out-of-school youth, those coming from marginalised and minority clans, internally displaced people (IDPs), girls and boys recruited by criminals or Al-Shabaab, and youth who migrate illegally⁶⁹.

Despite the existence of minority groups, Somali society is a relatively homogenous country linguistically, with the Somali ethnic group constituting around 95% of the population alongside minority Arabic and Bantu communities. Somali society is also homogenous religiously (Sunni Muslim). The main characteristic that determines diversity is therefore lineage, which underpins Somali society by defining clan and sub-clan lines⁷⁰. As in other aspects of life, clan culture plays an important role in the way news and information are handled. Overall, **journalists find it difficult to provide coverage that is objective and respects a diversity of opinions**⁷¹. Violence and injustices against minorities are often not considered in the same way as violence and injustices among "equals", for example men belonging to dominant majority groups⁷².

⁶⁷ ["The Promise of Somalia's Youth"](#), RTI International (January 2020).

⁶⁸ "Somalia Youth Assessment", USAID (January 2020), p. 11.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁷⁰ "Conflict in Somalia: Drivers and Dynamics", World Bank (2005), p. 7.

⁷¹ ["Somalia"](#), Reporters Without Borders (2023).

⁷² "Assessing the scope and parameters of transitional justice in Somalia", Somalia Stability Fund (2021), p. 11.

Life in Somalia is gendered. Most youth have socially constructed gender views about what kind of work women and men can do⁷³. Traditional views of gender roles are still strong: women should be responsible for household and children, and men make financial decisions⁷⁴. Tribalism, nepotism and corruption interfere with the personal and professional development of most youth, favouring those who are connected with strong clan networks⁷⁵. Furthermore, elders control leadership positions leaving not enough “room” for young people not only to engage, but even to be heard⁷⁶. In response to this, the FGS has designed a number of policies and strategies supporting youth, which are well written and recommend some best practices for youth development. They would indeed be beneficial for Somali youth, but they require coordination, oversight and follow-up⁷⁷.

Youth get and share information mostly via social media and mobile phones, even though word-of-mouth communication is still common and television and radio are also considered as reliable sources of information⁷⁸. There are not enough television or radio programmes tackling issues that are relevant for young people and the ones that exist are usually funded and influenced by the UN or international NGOs.

Overall, young people interviewed for this research believe that Somali youth are well represented in the media sector and that media do not discriminate against minority groups. The majority of interviewed young media consumers also believe that Internet-based media have completely changed the media landscape in Somalia, by increasing the access to information that different communities enjoy. Social media has also created greater space for representing different groups and identities. For example, young people and minority groups can now share their stories, experiences, achievements and challenges through social media: “Nowadays, different groups of the society have their own representative in the social media stream who has millions of followers and who shapes that particular group’s narrative”, said a young female media consumer in Hargeisa⁷⁹. This view was reiterated also in Garowe, where another young female media consumer said, “Young people today don’t need anyone to tell their stories: thanks to social media young people are able to formulate their own narrative”⁸⁰. And by a media professional of Mogadishu, who claimed, “The media prioritises young people because we hear a lot of youth programmes and news reports telling stories of minorities”⁸¹.

⁷³ “Somalia Youth Assessment”, USAID (January 2020), p. 21.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁷⁹ AP, interview with young female media consumer, Hargeisa (May 2023).

⁸⁰ AP, interview with young female media consumer, Garowe (May 2023).

⁸¹ AP, interview with young female media professional, Mogadishu (May 2023).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Somali media sector is rapidly changing, and there are opportunities to harness these changes in a way that would support the country's transition from war to peace. However, all the journalists engaged during the research ultimately view the media sector as a “double-edged sword”, which can be used positively to promote peace or negatively to fan the flames of conflict and violence. Many have expressed their desire to have an independent media free from the political and clan influence in Somalia.

If the path towards that outcome is difficult, many also see it as possible today as it has ever been. Journalists and commentators alike indicate a knowledge gap in the media sector that needs to be filled in order to fully contribute to the peace and stability in the country. Female journalists need to be given more training opportunities as these are currently limited. Yet, these opportunities are starting to come.

There is today stronger support for strengthening Somali media, and this can be seen in a host of different initiatives. The landscape is still very precarious and far from being inclusive, as the perspectives and views of women in particular and also minorities remain very limited. This landscape is, however, increasingly diverse, much more so than ever before. This represents a clear opportunity to foster pluralism in the media.

All the interventions so far are the result of international donor support, and in this regard many journalists have expressed the need for sustainable funding by donor governments, by international NGOs and by IOs, including the UN. More funding, and more funding for local outlets and organisations would go a long way in increasing and promoting media programmes focusing on peacebuilding.

In light of all the findings presented in this report, the following recommendations are provided to guide future efforts by those actors engaged in supporting Somalia's transition.

More data is necessary. There is a dearth of reliable data about media and media development in Somalia. This is partially due to the difficulty of conducting data collection activities across the country, given the differences that exist between locations and also the insecurity. Yet, support to media

development needs to be guided by reliable information. For this reason, there should be more efforts to gather such data, which is something that donors could indeed contribute to easily as part of ongoing state-building efforts. This said, the ownership of such efforts should remain squarely with Somalis, and existing media associations could perhaps be given a central role.

Invest in capacity-building of journalists and media sector professionals. As in other countries transitioning away from violent conflict, efforts should be made to strengthen the capacities of journalists and media sector professionals to report transparently and in a balanced matter on topics related to the political transition, peace and security. Capacity-building efforts should not, however, be done only at the individual level. Rather, they should be structural, allowing for the emergence of standards and spaces for the effective sharing of experiences across locations.

Support mentorship and exchange programmes for journalists. In line with the previous recommendations, capacity-building efforts should also support networking across locations and media. The research has identified an appetite for such experiences, within Somalia and also engaging media sector representatives from other African countries—Kenya to begin with, but also others. Such exchanges are expensive, but as the Somali media sector is undergoing a revolution, they might have outsized impact on how the latter will deal with the historic forces that are shaping the country's transition.

Foster connections between media, civil society and elders. What journalists can do in Somalia will depend on the trust that Somalis have in them. The research suggests that trust has less to do with the medium used than with the legitimacy that journalists enjoy. And in this regard, legitimacy can be increased by fostering connections between journalists and civil society representatives, which are often the main providers of basic and essential services in Somalia; and between journalists and elders, which are the actors engaged in solving conflicts and building peace locally and regionally.

Create incentives for media to focus on peacebuilding stories. Lastly, coverage of peacebuilding stories could be greatly increased, with huge impact on the narrative of the country's transition, and relatively low costs. As potentially transformative media outlets are already being supported, and as the media landscape is fast changing, the incentives required to increase such coverage would be relatively limited. Competitions could be organised to collect and feature relevant stories; small fees paid to selected journalists; or small sub-grants awarded to existing and fledgling outlets.

APPENDIX 1: METHODOLOGICAL NOTES

The research used a methodology that was mainly qualitative, while also informed by some quantitative

The research was guided by the following main questions:

1. What does Somalia's media landscape currently look like and in particular: (i) what are the actors; (ii) how regulated are media; (iii) what are the patterns in terms of media demand and consumption; and (iv) how do media cover peace and security processes?
2. How does Somalia media represent the experiences of Somali women, as well as young people and minorities, and what factors favour or limit inclusive and diverse representation?
3. What is the contribution of Somalia's media sector to peacebuilding, if any, and what factors favour or limit this contribution?
4. How can the Somali media sector be harnessed to better support the country's transition from war to peace?

Data was collected through a literature review, focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. The literature review covered more than 50 documents including: academic papers, research reports, analytical briefs and article produced and published by relevant governmental and non-governmental actors, including universities and think tanks. The literature review used only documents that were found online through targeted searchers, and which were open-access.

Table 2. Description of focus group discussions

Participant type	FGDs held	Description
Media sector representatives	6	These included journalists and media representatives from television, radio and web-based outlets. In each area, two events took place each involving 5 participants: one FGD only with women, one only with men. The total number of participants were 30.
Media consumers	6	These included young men and women in each area representing different sectors of the society. Two events took place each involving 5 participants: one FGD only with young women, and one only with young men. The total number of participants were 30.

Focus groups discussions were conducted in a semi-structured format and directed by a moderator using a pre-set questionnaire. The conclusions presented in this report represent views commonly and repeatedly cited during the group discussions, which were participative and engaged representatives from the media sector and civil society, and media consumers. Each FGD comprised of five participants, representing media personnel (from television, radio and web-based outlets, as well as freelancer journalists) and media consumers (university students and civil society) respectively.

Table 3. Description of in-depth interviews

Participant type	IDIs held	Description
Media sector representatives	9	Informants included media sector representatives from television, radio and web-based outlets (5 of whom were women).
CSO representatives	6	Informants included representatives from CSOs as well as human rights activists. In each area, 2 people were interviewed, one man and one woman.
Institutional representatives	3	Informants included representatives from relevant government entities. In each area, one representative was interviewed: 2 men and 1 woman in total.
Peacebuilding experts	1	An expert with an in-depth knowledge of conflict and peace processes in Somalia was interviewed.

In-depth interviews were also conducted in a semi-structured format and one-on-one (in-presence), and the researcher used a pre-set questionnaire. IDIs engaged representatives from the media sector, civil society, government authorities and experts in the field of peacebuilding and conflict.

In total, 79 respondents participated in the research: 60 in the FGDs and 19 in IDIs. The groups were recruited to be homogeneous—that is, men and women groups were conducted separately, with the intention of enhancing the comfort level of the participants and to clarify the views of a particular sub-group. Groups also included participants from different age groups: those with representatives from the media sector included both young (between 18 and 35 years-old) and older (35 years and older) participants. Focus groups with media consumers included only young participants.

In terms of locations, the research focused on the media sector in the entire Somali territory. The 12 focus groups and 19 one-on-one interviews outlined in this report were conducted in three locations: Garowe in Puntland, Hargeisa in Somaliland and Mogadishu in Banadir.



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