



Strengthening Engagement from the Ground Up: Addressing Challenges in Citizen Engagement in Somalia



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Challenges in Implementing Citizen Engagement Programs in Somalia

- ✦ Political instability and insecurity
- ✦ Weak institutional and governance systems
- ✦ Limited public understanding of the role of the government in serving communities.
- ✦ High illiteracy level

What actionable steps can be taken?

- ✦ Strengthening the legal framework
- ✦ Promoting youth and women's and marginalized groups' participation in decision-making processes
- ✦ Establishing channels for citizens to provide feedback on the services they receive.
- ✦ Creating a platform for interactions between the government and citizens
- ✦ Mainstreaming citizen engagement in government processes



Executive Summary

Somalia has a complex political and social environment that has been shaped by decades of conflict and instability. Despite ongoing efforts to rebuild the country, political instability and weak governance institutions have hampered efforts in building a democratic and stable society.

Citizen engagement is vital for ensuring that the voices and needs of citizens are represented in governance processes and provides opportunities for citizens to hold their leaders accountable. However, citizen engagement in Somalia faces numerous challenges that contribute to a sense of disempowerment among many citizens, particularly those from marginalized communities.

In this policy brief, we explore the barriers to engaging citizens to inform efforts to bridge the gap between policy-makers and local Somali citizens, drawing insights from our research experience and experts. There is a notable lack of community awareness regarding the importance of citizen engagement and participation and the understanding of the role of government in Somalia, resulting in low levels of engagement between citizens and the local government.

Addressing these challenges is crucial for promoting effective citizen engagement and building a more inclusive society. It underscores the importance of citizen engagement in promoting democratic and stable societies. The brief provides recommendations for strengthening citizen engagement in Somalia, with a particular focus on grassroots approaches that prioritize the needs and perspectives of local communities. By prioritizing citizen participation, promoting transparency and accountability, and building stronger institutional frameworks, Somalia can lay the groundwork for a more inclusive and democratic society that reflects the needs and aspirations of all Somalis.

Introduction

There has been an increasing global demand for citizens to have a greater say in public decision-making, and for governments to be more inclusive and responsive to citizens' needs. The rise of innovations in technology has provided citizens with new and unprecedented opportunities to directly engage policymakers and demonstrated the potential to facilitate "Closing the Feedback Loop" between citizens and governments.[1]

Increased citizen engagement has been shown to strengthen citizen participation in decision-making and restore a sense of ownership, accountability, and trust in the government. By providing feedback, the public feels that their previous participation efforts were worth it.[2] Citizen engagement strengthens democracy by making governance more transparent, accountable, and responsive to people's needs. However, developing countries encounter unique and significant challenges in their endeavours to establish citizen engagement and democratic governance processes.

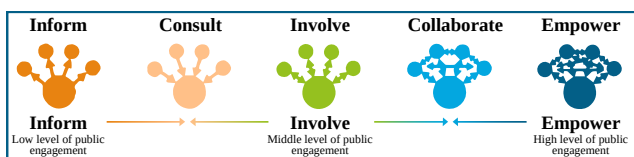


Figure 1: Spectrum of public participation/Citizen Engagement

The Spectrum of Public Participation, developed by the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2), is a framework that outlines the different levels of public participation and citizen engagement in decision-making processes. It provides a guide for policymakers to understand and design effective public participation strategies.

The framework of citizen engagement highlights the importance of providing citizens with information to enable active participation in project design and implementation. It also emphasizes the need for communities to

collaborate with local organizations and government agencies to empower community members to take action and create an impact. Since 1991, Somalia experienced political instability due to the fall of the Said Barre administration. The disintegration of formal government led to the fragmentation of the country into various factions and territories ultimately leading to the emergence of armed groups and clan-based administrations enforcing their authority across the country. Decades of conflict and displacement have also greatly impacted the country's social fabric. This created significant barriers to effective engagement with the public. We explore some of these barriers and put forward pragmatic recommendations explored in the sections below.

Challenges in Implementing Citizen Engagement Programs in Somalia

Citizen engagement programs have become increasingly important in promoting inclusive and responsive governance across the globe. In fragile and conflict-affected settings such as Somalia, implementing citizen engagement programs is challenging. Even though the country has seen modest improvement in stability and new policy priorities were set revolving around deepening peace and good governance and facilitating the economic recovery of the country, there are significant barriers to effective community engagement. These impediments include a lack of access to information, low levels of civic education, language barriers, and a history of conflict and instability. Addressing these challenges is crucial for promoting effective citizen engagement and building a more inclusive and democratic society. Addressing these challenges is crucial for promoting effective citizen engagement and building a more inclusive and democratic society.

The challenges are explored deeper in the following section:

01 Political instability and insecurity

Somalia has experienced conflict for almost three decades and the ongoing conflict and instability have made it highly challenging for the government and different actors to implement citizen engagement, as it may not be safe for individuals to participate in such programs. The presence of armed groups in certain parts of the country has created an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty among Somali citizens that constantly discourages their participation.

02 Weak institutional and governance systems

Decades of conflict and war in Somalia have left a devastating impact on the country's critical infrastructure, resulting in weak institutions and governance structures. As a result, it has been challenging to support effective citizen engagement and participation in the decision-making process. The deeply fragmented governance structures in Somalia, often aligned with clan affiliation, have reinforced the marginalization of certain communities and clans, leaving them with limited representation in existing political structures. This has led to the removal of these communities from the decision-making process, hindering their ability to have a voice in the country's governance. In addition, structural barriers within the government, including lack of mechanisms for community engagement procedures and processes, have slowed down the pace at which the public can pursue certain issues hence discouraging the public from engaging further, resulting in a lack of involvement in decision-making processes.

03 Limited public understanding of the role of the government in serving communities

As a result of the prolonged conflict and breakdown of government structures, many citizens lack a clear understanding of the government's responsibilities and functions in addressing community needs, hence do not see the value in participating in engagement programs. This lack of engagement can lead to a lack of trust in the government as citizens may view it as being disconnected from their needs and concerns.

04 Cultural and social barriers affecting inclusive participation

Cultural and social factors play a significant role in determining how communities interact in the governance process as cultural values and beliefs can influence how people participate in and perceive citizen engagement and participation programs. With Somalia having a highly patriarchal society, gender roles are more rigidly defined, limiting the participation of women in public and political life. Additionally, the marginalization of communities and minority clans in Somalia hinders engagement and makes it difficult to incorporate and challenge decisions by those in power.

05 Poverty and inequality

Poverty can hinder citizens' ability to participate in decision-making processes. In essence, citizens' income level directly influences their participation or non-participation in public decision-making. Those in lower economic categories tend to prioritize the provision of basic commodities for their families over engaging in meetings. On the other hand, the wealthy have better social and political understanding and are more likely to participate in government affairs due to their vested interests.

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Limited access to information and communication

Effective citizen participation requires access to relevant information that enriches involvement and engagement in planning, policy-making, accountability, and influencing decision-making. Information empowers citizens and instils confidence in government decisions. However, in a vast country like Somalia, some rural areas are geographically remote, making it challenging for communities to access essential information on policies, plans, budgets, programs, and services. Moreover, some information is complex and difficult to understand, posing a barrier to effective public participation.

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Expectation of pay for participation by citizens

NGOs/INGOs have played an important role in Somalia's development and humanitarian sector, providing much-needed aid and support to vulnerable populations. However, there has been a growing concern that the presence of NGOs in Somalia has created a culture of dependency, where citizens expect to be paid for their participation in development activities and decision-making processes. This has reduced citizens' sense of ownership and investment in the decision-making process leading to a situation where citizens are only willing to engage in civic activities if they are paid, rather than because they are genuinely interested in contributing to the development of their communities.

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Lack of interest/apathy by citizens

Lack of interest by citizens is a complex challenge that impacts citizen participation in governance programs. The absence of adequate awareness and sensitization programs in Somalia has led to a lack of understanding by citizens on the importance of their participation in decision-making processes or the potential impact of their involvement.

Furthermore, the lack of a common understanding of what constitutes citizen engagement and the methods, processes, and information needed to ensure effective engagement creates another barrier. Additionally, the lack of feedback from previous consultations or engagements by citizens has resulted in engagement fatigue where the public feels that nothing ever comes out of their participation.

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High Illiteracy level

Illiteracy is a significant barrier to citizen engagement in Somalia. Nearly two-thirds (65.5%) of the Somali population have no formal education[3]. Many Somalis, especially those living in rural areas, lack basic literacy skills, many are unable to read or write limiting their ability to access information to participate in decision-making processes and engage in civic activities.

10

Inadequate representation

The 4.5 clan system implemented in Somalia has been noted to perpetuate inequality and exclusion, especially among minority and marginalized clans. The majority clans in Somalia control the political and economic interests of the country to the detriment of minority clans not having adequate representation in these spheres. Powerful individuals especially from majority clans prioritize the interests of their own clans over the broader interests of the country, leading to policies and decisions that further entrench inequality and exacerbate divisions between clans and among women, youth, persons with disabilities and other marginalized groups exacerbating social and economic disparities. Additionally, the political system is controlled by a few elites who dominate leadership and make decisions on behalf of the rest of the citizens hence limiting access and opportunities for broader representation of diverse voices and interests within the political and governance system.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO ENHANCE CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

Effective citizen engagement is essential for improving service delivery in Somalia. By involving the public in the planning and decision-making process, gathering feedback, and leveraging technology, the government, private sector, and other service providers can ensure that citizen engagement is at the core of policy and service design and that services are designed and delivered in a way that meets the needs of the people. However, for engagement to be meaningful and productive, the state has to recognize the value of engagement and be willing to take advantage of it. The following are recommendations on how citizen engagement can be scaled up to improve effective service delivery in Somalia.

01 Strengthening the legal framework to protect and promote citizen engagement

There is a need for the government and its partners to develop and implement policies and programs that are responsive to the needs and priorities of citizens. This includes policies that address key challenges facing Somali communities, such as access to education, health care, and economic opportunities, strengthening peace and security and governance systems. Additionally, the Federal Government of Somalia can develop a legal framework that outlines the rights and responsibilities of citizens to provide a legal basis for citizen engagement programs. Furthermore, the provision of training to government staff to enhance their capacity to engage citizens in decision-making processes, the creation of incentives for citizens to engage in decision-making processes by providing recognition, awards, or other benefits and engaging civil society organizations that have a strong track record of promoting citizen engagement to provide technical assistance and support to citizen engagement programs can enhance the participation of citizens to the development of their communities.

02 Promoting youth and women's and marginalized groups' participation in decision-making processes

The youth and women are often underrepresented in decision-making processes. Their participation can be enhanced by creating programs that target them and encourage their involvement in

decision-making processes. Furthermore, providing capacity-building activities, such as leadership and advocacy training, can help to build their skills and confidence and providing opportunities for women and youth to be included in committees and other decision-making bodies ensures that their voices are heard, and their perspectives are taken into account.

03 Supporting civil society organizations to enhance citizen engagement

Civil society organizations and traditional leaders play a crucial role in facilitating citizen engagement. The government need to put mechanisms in place to support these groups by providing resources, funding, and technical assistance to enhance their capacity to engage with the public and the government. Working with civil society organizations can help facilitate citizen engagement and ensure that the voices of the people are heard. These organizations can help collect feedback from the public, facilitate discussions, and ensure that citizens' views are taken into consideration in decision-making.

04 Establishing channels for citizens to provide feedback on the services they receive

Establishing channels for citizens to provide feedback on the services they receive is an important aspect of citizen engagement and can help improve service delivery and strengthen the relationship between citizens and the government ensuring citizens feel connected to their local governments. Stakeholders can achieve this by

establishing a system to receive analyze and provide feedback provide feedback to citizens on the actions taken in response to their feedback. This will demonstrate to citizens that their feedback is being taken seriously and acted upon, which will help build trust and confidence in the government. Additionally, training government officials on how to receive and respond to citizen feedback is required to ensure they handle feedback in a professional manner and address citizens' concerns and complaints in a timely and effective manner.

05 Create a platform for interactions between the government and citizens at the local level to discuss service delivery

The government can utilize various platforms that cater to diverse communication preferences and ensure broader participation to facilitate interactions between the government and citizens at the local level to discuss service delivery. These include organizing regular community/town hall meetings, utilizing local radio stations to host programs focused on service delivery and dedicated online platforms or portals that allow citizens to access information, provide feedback, and engage in discussions about service delivery.

06 Harnessing technology to promote citizen engagement

Technology can be a powerful tool for facilitating citizen engagement and improving service delivery. The government can leverage online platforms like websites and social media to communicate with citizens and provide information about government policies, programs, and services. Additionally, with the rapid growth of internet use in Somalia, the government can create e-government portals that allow citizens to access a wide range of government services online.

07 Mainstreaming citizen engagement in government processes

The Federal Government of Somalia, in collaboration with the private sector and other stakeholders, can work towards mainstreaming citizen participation by integrating it into government processes, policies, and decision-making frameworks. This collaborative effort can

lead to increased transparency, accountability, and effective utilization of public resources, ultimately enhancing the delivery of public services and addressing the needs and aspirations of Somali citizens.

Conclusion

Enhanced engagement with citizens results in designing and implementing effective policies responsive to citizens' needs and improved accountability, responsiveness, and openness in the public sector. Increasing citizen participation can enhance service delivery in Somalia. Somalia's complex political and social environment presents a significant challenge for citizen engagement programs. The country's history of conflict and instability, weak governance institutions, and cultural barriers to participation have created a sense of disempowerment among citizens, particularly those from marginalized communities. By amplifying citizens' voices and promoting grassroots approaches, citizen engagement, offers hope for building a more inclusive society. Citizen engagement can promote good governance by providing feedback to policymakers, making governance and service delivery more transparent and accountable, and building stronger institutional frameworks. To overcome the challenges to effective citizen engagement in Somalia, stakeholders must prioritize citizen participation, promote transparency and accountability, strengthen legal and institutional frameworks, establish feedback mechanisms systems and leverage technology to ensure that the needs and aspirations of all Somalis are adequately represented.



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