

POLICY BRIEF



Sustaining the Post-Agreement Peace – Galkayo, Somalia

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This research is supported by the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep), funded by UK International Development from the UK government. However, the views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies. Any use of this work should acknowledge the authors and the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform.

PeaceRep Somalia research aims to deepen the understanding of the country's fragmented predicament, ten years after the establishment of the Federal government and in light of the continued pervasiveness of conflict and political instability, both domestically and regionally. Our research themes include: sub-national governance through checkpoints; justice and security in Somalia; building on the Galkayo 'local' agreement; emergent conflict and peace dynamics across the Somali regions (Ethiopia, Somalia and Kenya). The programme will continue to analyse and engage stakeholders around peacebuilding processes and in relation to events that unfold in real time.

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Acknowledgements:

We are very grateful for the helpful comments of Tim Epple (PeaceRep, Edinburgh Law School) and Iavor Rangelov (LSE Conflict and Civiness Research Group).

Design: Smith Design Agency

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7488/era/6056>

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Key Findings

- ▶ This policy brief highlights learning from the post-agreement peace in Galkayo, seven years on from the signing of the 2017 Galkayo 'local' agreement. By most accounts, the agreement has been a major success in Somalia's volatile, violent and fragmented context, in spite of recent challenges and an upsurge of revenge killings.
- ▶ The endurance of the agreement reflects the potential of adaptive, trans-scalar mediation efforts, customary governance mechanisms, and sustained commitment. Unlike many national agreements, which often emphasize formal power-sharing frameworks, Galkayo's process relied on flexibility, iterative problem-solving, and localized legitimacy rather than rigid institutional designs. This flexibility, however, exposes a key vulnerability: the process has remained highly dependent on the leadership, networks, and credibility of individuals.
- ▶ The absence of a unified security framework continues to leave the town vulnerable to revenge killings and cycles of violence, with governance fragmented between dual administrations and overlapping authorities. These governance and security gaps reinforce localized insecurities, which can easily spill over into broader political and clan rivalries, especially during election cycles or periods of wider regional instability.
- ▶ The Galkayo case illustrates the importance of seeing peace implementation as a dynamic and relational process requiring continuous mediation and adaptation to evolving political, economic, and security dynamics. By demonstrating how local processes both shape and are shaped by broader political economies and governance arrangements, the brief highlights the need for peace implementation strategies to be explicitly designed to accommodate shifting conditions and reduce over-reliance on individual mediators.
- ▶ The case also highlights the importance of actively engaging the Somali diaspora in peace processes, recognizing that their influence spans economic investment, political mobilization, and the amplification of conflict narratives through digital platforms. A trans-scalar approach not only links local, federal, national and international actors, but must also engage diaspora networks as key stakeholders in both peace implementation and conflict prevention.

Policy Recommendations

- ▶ Invest in and strengthen a more unified and cross-administrative security architecture for Galkayo, building on the relative success of post-agreement security modalities to deepen the current peace context.
- ▶ Obtaining the right balance between flexibility and rigidity in institutional design must be acknowledged and accommodated in the design of and support to peacebuilding processes in fragmented contexts such as Somalia. A trans-scalar platform or modalities that link local actors in Galkayo with FMS, FGS, international actors, and diaspora communities could enhance alignment of peace efforts across levels and ensure adaptive responses to shifting political dynamics, especially around election cycles.
- ▶ Maintaining resources that can support peace networks and continued mediation to sustain and expand the agreement and post-implementation peace, with resources such as logistical support, rapid response investments, and institutional backing. This can serve as a form of institutional memory and on-call peacebuilders/mediators group to respond to future crises, adaptive mediation negotiation needs and opportunities (such as diaspora engagement strategies).
- ▶ Consider a visioning process for Galkayo to build shared understanding and ideas around an appropriate, more unified governance and security framework. The goal is to collaboratively map stakeholder needs, assets, and governance aspirations, which can guide both Somali and international actors in future support.
- ▶ Support longer-term monitoring and research on and in Galkayo, through a credible local partner: Tracking peace and security trends, collect data, and generate evidence to inform adaptive responses and policy revision.

Introduction

This policy brief draws on a forthcoming article which examines the dynamics of 'post-agreement peace' in Galkayo, Somalia, following the signing of the Galkayo 'local' agreement in 2017.¹ It draws on previous research by the same study team, initially focused on the 2017 agreement and then on the conditions concerning its implementation. The brief draws attention to the need for adaptive, trans-scalar mediation work in relation to peacebuilding in multilayered conflicts, where peace must be continuously renegotiated across local, regional, and national arenas. It further situates Galkayo within Somalia's broader political economy of peace and conflict, offering broader insights on the sustainability of peace in fragmented environments.

Peace implementation has come into increasing focus for both scholars and practitioners, with attention shifting from the question of how peace agreements are forged to the challenges of sustaining them.² Existing research points to factors including power-sharing, third-party guarantees, and institutional reform as central to successful implementation,³ while at the same time emphasizing its contested political nature.⁴ This scholarship has predominantly centred on national-level agreements, with relatively less attention on those forged at the local level. In Somalia, influential studies that predate the 2012 federal system point to the enduring strength of local customary processes and the persistent weakness of national peace efforts.⁵ Yet how local and national processes interact during implementation has received limited analytical attention. Emerging research on trans-scalar peacebuilding offers a useful framework for analysing multilayered dynamics,⁶ but its application to the implementation of local agreements in contexts like Somalia – where the layered and fragmented nature of governance and authority shape the prospects for sustaining peace – is still underexplored.

Galkayo town is positioned centrally, both geographically and politically, in Somalia's fragmented political landscape. In many ways, it serves as a microcosm of the country's broader peace and conflict landscape. It lies at the intersection of competing identity groups, two of Somalia's Federal Member States (FMS), and a major trade corridor, all factors influencing the country's ongoing process of state formation. The 2017 agreement is an important but fragile marker of peace in a wider context of volatility and violence. The agreement successfully ended large-scale conflict and fostered improved relations and investments across the divided town of Galkayo, making it an important case concerning the implementation of local agreements. More recently, however, in 2024, waves of revenge killings have tested its resilience, highlighting both its achievements and its vulnerabilities.

Background – Peace Implementation

Two dominant approaches to studying peace implementation can be identified: content-focused and process-focused.⁷ The content-focused approach examines how specific provisions of agreements – such as power-sharing, security arrangements, and institutional reforms – affect their durability.⁸ This approach, rooted in the liberal peace paradigm, tends to emphasize state-building measures and the role of external interventions, neglecting the dynamic interplay of local-global actors and implementation challenges. In the process-focused approach, however, peace implementation is seen as an iterative and dynamic process that must adapt to shifting political, social, and economic dynamics. Flexibility in the design of agreements are known to have differing influence on their outcomes⁹ and adaptability is recognized as necessary to navigate changing contexts of peace and conflict.¹⁰ Sociological perspectives highlight the relational aspects of implementation, focusing on rebuilding trust, repairing fractured relationships, and fostering new norms and institutions.¹¹ Integrating these perspectives, Joshi¹² argues that effective implementation depends on accounting for multiple actors, geographies, and timelines, while other scholarship emphasizes sustained political will, adaptability of governance structures and sequencing of measures, such as elections or security reforms, in stabilizing or destabilizing peace.¹³ Together, these insights highlight the importance of sustained engagement, flexibility, and context-specific approaches in implementation processes.

While these perspectives highlight important aspects of peace implementation, they tend to focus on national-level agreements. In Somalia, where governance is fragmented and political authority is contested across multiple levels, understanding local agreements requires a trans-scalar lens.

Situating Local Agreements in a Trans-scalar Peacemaking Framework

Local agreements are shaped by interconnected local, national, and global influences. These agreements may be situated in specific geographies and respond to localized conflict drivers, such as land disputes, clan rivalries, and resource management, but they are influenced by broader political and security dynamics.¹⁴ The "local" is best understood as a "territorialized space" shaped by "transversal, transnational, and even global" forces.¹⁵ This relational perspective challenges binary distinctions between the local and global, highlighting the need of a trans-scalar analytical framework to understand the interdependencies and multi-level impacts shaping peacebuilding outcomes.

Local agreements, as in Galkayo, illustrate the interplay between localized conflict and broader political and economic dynamics. They engage diverse actors, including local elites, traditional authorities, civil society groups, and at times, international mediators.¹⁶ Even as these agreements address immediate concerns, they are also shaped by external factors such as regional dynamics, international aid systems, and global actors and structures. In today's digital age, including in Somalia, diaspora populations and social media often play significant roles in peace and conflict dynamics/processes.

Galkayo, a Microcosm of Somalia's Trans-scalar Political Economy

Somalia is commonly characterised by its fragmented political and territorial landscape,¹⁷ where multiple forms of political order are found.¹⁸ It is deeply entangled with external processes that shape its political and economic landscape.¹⁹ In trans-scalar terms, Galkayo can be viewed as a microcosm of Somalia's wider peace and conflict tapestry. Galkayo town is located at the central crossroads of Somalia both geographically and politically. The city is physically divided by an imaginary line that marks the border of two FMS – Puntland and Galmudug – which is also the border of two major clan families and two powerful local sub-clans. This borderline was created through the 1993 Mudug Accord,²⁰ soon after the collapse of the state, that marked an extended ceasefire arrangement which held but effectively stopped social interaction across the town for over twenty years, including customary inter-clan forms of negotiation.²¹ Furthermore, the prolonged ceasefire and the emergence of the more stable polity of Puntland over subsequent years, which incorporated northern Galkayo, enabled a level of investment and prosperity in the northern portion of the town, which contrasted with the more fluid, unstable situation in southern Galkayo and areas to the south.

This created inequalities and grievances between the two sides. Therefore, unlike Puntland which joined the new federal arrangement, in 2012, as an already existing polity, the new FMS of Galmudug, which included southern Galkayo was established in 2017. Strategically located along one of Somalia's most important trade corridors, Galkayo functions as an important economic hub linking northern and southern Somalia. These trade corridors and hubs are 'sites of power' associated with revenue accumulation and processes of state formation.²² Bell and Wise characterise such spaces or corridors from a peace process perspective as 'routes of passage', where conflict and peace dynamics often intersect, influencing stability across spatial scales.²³

The central region of Somalia including Galkayo, is recognized as a source of many of Somalia's political elites, however the capitals of Puntland and Galmudug (Garowe and Dhusamareb respectively) are located more centrally within their respective states, drawing attention away from Galkayo; elite political contestation primarily takes place in the capitals. Southern Galkayo is also strongly connected to the national capital, Mogadishu, where many of its elites live, reflecting the spatial complexity of the town.

Somalia's federal system serves to structure political contestation most visibly during electoral cycles. Elections tend to pit the incumbent executive at the centre (Mogadishu) against the peripheries (the Federal Member States), with the leadership of both vying for control over electoral processes to enhance their respective chances of re-election.²⁴

The Post-Agreement ‘Peace’

The post-agreement peace/conflict environment in Galkayo is precarious yet holding. While tensions and sporadic incidents have fluctuated since 2017, a series of revenge killings in and around the town in 2024 have posed the most significant challenge to the agreement since its signing.²⁵ Despite these recent challenges, the overall peace/conflict trajectory in the town has been largely positive, marked by improved social relations and interactions across the internal divide.²⁶ Additionally, the establishment of Galmudug as a relatively coherent FMS has brought material and political investments particularly in Galkayo South, narrowing the inequality with their northern neighbours. However, rumours or episodes of conflicts in the hinterlands do reverberate within the town, often prompting people to retreat to their respective clan-identified territories.

The recent escalation of revenge killings has been primarily linked to tensions between the Lelkasse clan of northern Galkayo and the Sa'ad clan of southern Galkayo. The Lelkasse, the second major Darod sub-clan in the north of the town, had engaged in bilateral inter-clan agreements with the Sa'ad, the major subclan of Galkayo South and a signatory to the 2017 agreement as part of its implementation. This was formally recognised in the Bandiiradley agreement in 2020.²⁷ While multiple factors have contributed to rising tensions in Galkayo, a critical reason has been the difficulty of enforcing the terms of the Bandiiradley agreement, in particular, that a perpetrator of a murder should immediately be brought forward by his clan and executed in order to avoid escalation by revenge killings. Under customary law – *xeer* – elders typically intervene quickly to mediate disputes to prevent them from escalating, but this requires that the elders and clans have the authority and clan buy-in to do this.

Managing Trans-scalar Interactions

The Somali peace/conflict context involves complex interactions between the local, the sub-national (FMS), the national (FGS) as well as regional, international and transnational levels. Galkayo is no exception, and a key success of the 2017 agreement-making process was the ability of a (Somali) UN employee and other facilitators to bridge the complex and multiple layers and influences between some of these layers. This was challenging – it required bending the usual risk-mitigation measures and security protocols enforced by international agencies which typically limit meaningful interaction between their staff and local populations.²⁸

An important motivating factor for elite support to the Galkayo agreement was the risk that an unresolved conflict on the border between two FMS risked unravelling the overall political settlement which included the formation of Federal Member States. The two states of concern – Puntland and Galmudug – represented two of the major clan families within Somalia (the Darod and the Hawiye). The political settlement and statebuilding project, supported by considerable international resources and pressure, provided considerable incentives amongst the wider political elite to come to an agreement to avoid undermining the national settlement and international support and rents.

The capitals of Puntland (Garowe) and Galmudug (Dhusamareb) act as centres of political gravity for their respective regions, pulling traditional and official authorities in Galkayo in opposite directions. Mogadishu, capital of the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS), also exerts influence, highlighting the overlap between national and state-level politics.

Election cycles only intensify these dynamics. In 2024, for example, local youth activists in Galkayo highlighted the preoccupation and physical presence of Galkayo elders in Garowe, the state capital, accusing them of neglecting insecurity and the rising revenge killings in their own town.²⁹ Their elders prioritized their presence in the state capital due to the pressures of upcoming elections for the state president, further incentivised by the prospect of receiving financial 'benefits'.

Additionally, the ongoing power struggles between Puntland's President, Abdullah 'Deni and the ruling cabal at the federal government in Mogadishu over recent years underscore deeper, unresolved centre-periphery tensions within Somali's nascent federal system. While these tensions have had limited direct impact on Galkayo's peace since the 2017 agreement, they highlight the stabilising and destabilising factors at play that impact the ability to sustain peace in the town.

At the subnational level, Galkayo remains divided and continues to function with dual government administrations, separate District Commissioners and Governors, and separate government justice systems. While cooperative relations exist, the motivations for deepening cooperation across the town's divide in the interests of Galkayo often depends on individual interest, capacity and support, which fluctuate over time. Some officials prioritize the civic or public interest for the whole town, while others are more focused on their own political or clan interests. Amongst part of the population, particularly amongst the youth, there is a growing vision of a long-term solution in the form of a distinct autonomous administration for Galkayo city, under a federal mandate. Drawing inspiration from the city of Dire Dawa in Somali Region of Ethiopia,³⁰ this vision speaks to the frustrations and challenges of peace and security stemming from the town's fragmented governance.

The central regions of Somalia, including Galkayo, have long been well-connected to diaspora populations, who play a significant role in shaping region's political and economic dynamics.³¹ As early as 2003, the influence and engagement of the diaspora was identified as critical to peacemaking in present-day Galmudug.³² Today, diaspora continue to be critical actors as migration and transnational relations intensify. In 2024, local elders in Galkayo reported the use of WhatsApp groups connecting local and diaspora populations as new platforms for clan mobilisation with clan-based conflict articulated through social media reaching external audiences.³³

Elders in Galkayo argue that these new dynamics complicate their ability to intervene, mediate and de-escalate conflict. At the time of writing, a former Somali General and prominent peacemaker during the Galkayo agreement-making process, who originates from Galkayo, has been an actively seeking diaspora support for a united clan position on Galkayo, consulting constituencies in the US and Canada to do so. This underscores the ongoing significance of transnational actors in Galkayo's peace and conflict dynamics.

International engagement, particularly in the humanitarian, development and security sectors, play an important role in Somalia, including in Galkayo, by providing material and financial resources. However, these efforts are often constrained by a deeply entrenched political economy of aid, where international resources are frequently captured by competing interest groups.³⁴ A key catalyst for the outbreak of conflict in Galkayo in 2015 was an EU-funded road project that exacerbated long-standing sensitivities and historical inequities in development and access to resources between the north and south.³⁵ Moreover, international engagement remains ad hoc in character with a lack of institutional continuity and memory. Since the agreement in Galkayo, UN engagement and resources in Galkayo have significantly declined, and there has been limited recognition and learning from the Galkayo agreement-making process. While attention on and investment in supporting a cessation of hostilities and an Agreement during the height of conflict, continuing attention (and resources) over time is more difficult. This lack of sustained attention further limits their ability of international actors to support its implementation or to apply its lessons to other local and national peace processes.

Continued Adaptive Mediation

The Somalia context, defined by its low levels of formal institutionalization and the salience of informal institutions like the clan system, benefits from continuous adaptive mediation processes that are flexible and sustained to maintain localized agreements. In this context, politics are personalized, transactional and typically short-term in nature, which complicates efforts to institutionalize peace. International actors, on their part, invest more in forging local agreements rather than sustaining them, creating further challenges to their durability.

For local agreements such as the Galkayo Agreement, continuity in mediation and ongoing engagement have been critical in addressing evolving challenges and navigating structural complexities in the implementation phase – attention by national and international actors tends to fade in the implementation phase, when it is still needed. Our previous analyses of the process to forge the 2017 Agreement highlights the importance of mediators who possess “credibility leverage”³⁶ – committed individuals like Ilham Gassar and General Abdiwel Jama Hussein ‘Gorod’, who had been key in bridging divides across multiple levels as part of a wider ‘peace network’. Yet, retaining committed peace activists and practitioners with the necessary experience and credibility in these processes is difficult. Often, these individuals are ‘moved on’ or marginalized due to changing political realities, creating further challenges in sustaining mediation efforts. Even if they remain committed to addressing the ‘unfinished business of peace’ in Galkayo, as both General Gorod and Ilham Gassar have been, they do so with limited support from the international peacebuilding world.

The challenge of inconsistency and fragmentation in sustained mediation efforts is embedded in international engagement, where short-term timelines, ‘projectisation’ and limited strategic coherence are common.³⁷ A European donor involved in the 2017 agreement-making process observed that subsequent investments in the implementation phase were often ad hoc, rather than part of a strategic and sustained approach. This lack of continuity is compounded by the highly complex and volatile context of Somalia, where priorities and limited resources shift over time. The UN played a positive role in the initial agreement-making process in 2016, leveraging its convening power at both federal and local levels; key individuals within the UN, working in Mogadishu and Nairobi, were instrumental in bridging multiple layers of influence and fostering coordination across diverse actors.³⁸ However, as personnel shift and resources fluctuate, sustaining an engagement becomes difficult. The strong political will in 2016 to support the newly conceived state building project has waned and given way to a series of fragmented local projects, further diluting the effectiveness of international support.

Conclusions

The Galkayo peace agreement, now in its seventh year, stands as a significant yet fragile marker of stability in Somalia's fragmented political landscape. Its endurance—despite ongoing security challenges, fragmented governance, and periodic violence—reflects the potential of adaptive, trans-scalar mediation efforts, customary governance mechanisms, and the sustained commitment of local actors. Unlike many national agreements, which often emphasize formal power-sharing frameworks, Galkayo's process relied on flexibility, iterative problem-solving, and localized legitimacy rather than rigid institutional designs. However, this flexibility also exposes a key vulnerability: the process has remained highly dependent on the leadership, networks, and credibility of individuals. Without continued support to carry forward the agreement's implementation, peace in Galkayo rests on personalized mediation efforts, raising concerns about sustainability if or when these individuals step away or lose influence.

At the same time, the underlying structural challenges in Galkayo's post-agreement context keep it precarious. The absence of a unified security framework continues to leave the town vulnerable to revenge killings and cycles of violence, while governance remains fragmented, with dual administrations and overlapping authorities. These governance and security gaps reinforce localized insecurities, which can easily spill over into broader political and clan rivalries, especially during election cycles or periods of wider regional instability. This fragility underscores how sustaining local agreements requires not only localized agency but also improved governance capacity and coordinated security arrangements that are responsive to evolving risks.

Galkayo's experience furthermore highlights challenges in international peacebuilding practice – the tendency to focus on the negotiation and signing of agreements, while neglecting the long-term, complex work of implementation. The relative success of the Galkayo agreement rests heavily on ongoing, adaptive mediation by local peace actors, yet this work has received little sustained support from either Somali institutions or international peacebuilding actors. To reduce the risks associated with personalized mediation and support more resilient local processes, international engagement must shift from short-term project cycles to sustained, flexible approaches that recognize the need for continuous negotiation, conflict monitoring, and adaptive problem-solving over time. Lastly, this brief and its associated academic paper contributes to wider debates on peacemaking in Somalia and other fragmented political contexts by demonstrating that local agreements can endure—but only if they are understood as processes, not products.

This requires moving beyond static 'implementation plans' to approaches that embrace continuous negotiation, political economy analysis, and governance mechanisms capable of adapting to the volatility of fragmented settings. By applying the trans-scalar analytical framework developed, future peace efforts can better link local agency, economic incentives, diaspora engagement, and multi-level peacemaking, offering more sustainable and contextually grounded strategies for building peace in Somalia and beyond.

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About Us

PeaceRep is a research consortium based at Edinburgh Law School. Our research is rethinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

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PeaceRep is funded by UK International Development from the UK government.



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