Pathways for National Dialogue - Policy Brief for International Stakeholders



1. Introduction

A study by the Heritage Institute for Policy Studies (HIPS) and the Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) has found strong public support exists for a Somali-owned and inclusive national dialogue as a necessary path to address the country's deep political divisions, rebuild trust, and support both peacebuilding and state-building efforts.

This study, based on focus group discussions including civil society actors, women, young people, and members of marginalized communities, comes at a critical moment: Somalia's political class remains ill-prepared for the transition following the end of the current government's mandate on 15 May, with low public trust and ongoing disputes over Somaliland's secession, clan power-sharing, federalism, electoral arrangements, and the nature of state institutions continuing to threaten stability.

2. Key Findings from the Study

- Participants from across the country, from the newly created Northeast state to Jubaland, reported a low level of trust in the legitimacy of political leadership and institutions, particularly regarding the organization of a credible national dialogue.
- They wanted a dialogue facilitated by a neutral convening authority, such as universities, think tanks, religious institutions, or civil society organizations.
- The participation of women, youth, and marginalized groups has been very limited and largely tokenistic, excluding them from meaningful involvement.

- Participants expressed cautious support for international involvement in the national dialogue process, mainly to provide technical and financial assistance.

3. Major Priorities

The study identified several major political issues that must be addressed in a national dialogue, particularly the Somalia-Somaliland dispute. Since 1991, Somalia and Somaliland have met numerous times but have been unable to reach agreement on the fundamental question of union or separation. Moreover, the few agreements reached have not been implemented.

Participants also noted that the 4.5 clan power-sharing system, initially intended as a temporary arrangement, has become inadvertently institutionalized and called for a political framework based on citizen participation and universal suffrage.

Federalism was also identified as another significant issue. The Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) and the Federal Member States (FMS) disagree on the allocation of authority and responsibilities among. The FGS advocates for three levels (federal, state, and municipal), while some FMS prefer two levels (federal and state), as outlined in the 2012 constitution.

Political actors are divided over both the interpretation and understanding of federalism, particularly regarding the composition of the federation and the distribution of powers and responsibilities. Meanwhile, communities in pre-1991 administrative regions, including Banadir, Lower Shabelle, Hiran, and Gedo, have expressed dissatisfaction with the current arrangement.

Finally, the study identified the status of Mogadishu and electoral and constitutional arrangements as key issues that should be addressed in a national dialogue.

4. Implications for International Stakeholders

The study clearly highlights the importance of international community involvement in supporting national dialogue and promoting the inclusion of women, youth and marginalized communities.

However, participants cautioned against externally imposed frameworks with pre-determined outcomes. A balance between international support and Somali ownership is therefore critical. Participants emphasized that the international community should encourage political elites to expand participation and engagement, while avoiding processes dominated by elites.

The success and legitimacy of the dialogue will depend on local ownership, credible conveners, and strong and timely international support.

5. Policy Recommendations For the International Community

- The study calls for the international community to support a credible national dialogue grounded in Somali ownership and led by Somali mechanisms. This includes providing support to universities, think tanks, and civil society coalitions to help them serve as neutral conveners.
- International partners should also promote inclusive participation by supporting often-excluded groups such as women, youth, and marginalized communities. Such support should be long-term rather than limited to one-off conferences.
- Additionally, international actors should encourage Somali stakeholders to link dialogue outcomes to implementation by establishing follow-up mechanisms.
- Finally, greater coordination among international actors is essential; multilateral and bilateral efforts must be better aligned.