

DISTRICT PEACE COMMITTEES IN SOMALIA



Traditional Conflict Resolution and the Emergence of the District Peace Committees

Traditional conflict resolution structures have and continue to play an important role in the prevention and resolution of conflict, especially in areas with limited access to formal justice systems. The Somali people (in Somalia, Djibouti, the Ogaden region of Ethiopia, and North-Eastern Kenya) have had their own long standing traditional systems for resolving conflict within and between clans at the grassroots level. Over the years, these traditional informal structures have evolved into more inclusive structures and have developed links with formal government structures. These structures are referred to as District Peace Committees and have developed direct linkages with the relevant government authorities as well as civil society organizations. Similar formal peace committees can also be found in Ghana, South Africa, Kenya, and Sierra Leone. Outside Africa, they can be found in Nepal and Northern Ireland.²

In Somali inhabited areas, where peace committees are established, they often play an important role in conflict management, especially at the grassroots level. Their work includes conflict early warning, settling issues related to: land, water, marital and gender-based violence cases, inheritance and property disputes, murder, rape, banditry, inter-ethnic/inter-clan conflicts, as well as smaller cases of petty crime and theft. Most of these cases are resolved through the use of Somali customary law (*xeer*), where offenders are expected to pay compensation as a form of retributive justice or through a formal justice system where the police and judiciary play a key role.

The peace committee members are appointed through a system of elections. This electoral process is designed to be inclusive, involving women, youth and minority groups, as well as more traditionally powerful groups such as elders, religious leaders, and business men/women.

In Somalia, the electoral process for peace committees is designed to satisfy a number of factors:

- **Diverse Clan Representation:** As most Somalis strongly identify with their clan, any organizational structure that takes into consideration a balanced representation of the locally relevant clans is beneficial.

¹ Photograph provided by SOYDEN

² http://www.un.org/en/land-natural-resources-conflict/pdfs/UNDP_Local%20Peace%20Committees_2011.pdf

- **Representation of Different Sections of the Community:** These generally include women, youth, elders, civil society groups, internally displaced persons, and government officials. This ensures that the committees are inclusive of a variety of views and opinions.
- **Passion and Independence:** Members should be passionate about what they do and not rely on a lot of financial assistance or supervision to conduct their duties. It's a job done purely on voluntary basis.
- **Public Participation:** By ensuring that community members are given the chance to take part in the process of electing their leaders, the committees are able to make a claim to legitimacy.

These qualities enable them to have a neutral approach to their work.

Learning from the Kenyan Experience

A well-known success story of peace committees in the Somali community can be found in Wajir county, Kenya. In 1993, a group of women set out to reconcile members of three conflicting clan communities who had clashed over administrative boundaries and positions in government. They brought together elders from the three clans, as well as elders from the minor clans, to participate in a dialogue meeting. The seven day dialogue process culminated in the signing of the 'Alfatah Declaration' which set out strategies for the return of peace and enhanced future relations between the conflicting parties as well as the community as a whole³.

Over the next decade, the design of the Wajir peace committee was replicated and rolled out across the rest of Kenya (in Somali and non-Somali areas). The committees have built strong relationships with the local administration to the extent that in every area a district commissioner is the patron of the peace committee. The committees meet regularly with government authorities, and those that meet a set of common standards are able to register and receive government funding to conduct peacebuilding activities.

The peace committees are in regular contact with the security committees in their areas and are able to provide vital security information that is important for authorities to respond adequately. Peace committees are not only based within a single geographic location but work in cross-border contexts. Joint peace committees have been established on the Kenya-Somalia border where they work to address cross-border conflicts. To this effect, committees in Mandera, El Wak, Wajir and Garissa on the Kenyan side work with those of Beled Hawa, El Wak, Lower Gedo, Upper Juba, and Lower Juba in Somalia.

The design of district peace committees in Somalia draws heavily from the Kenyan experience.

Establishment of District Peace Committees

The first DPCs in Somalia were established as early as 2009 by the Somali Youth Development Network (SOYDEN), with support from Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), Conflict Dynamics International (CDI)⁴, and other donors. In South and Central Somalia, **38** district peace committees have since been established, each having between fifteen to twenty one members. These committees are spread out across ten regions and are highlighted below:

³ Menkhaus, K (2008) 'the rise of a mediated state in northern Kenya: the Wajir story and its implications for state-building'. In Africa Focus Volume 21 (2) 23-38

⁴ Since 2014

**Lower Jubba
Region**

Kismayo,
Badhaadhe,
Dhobley, Diif

Gedo

Beled Hawa,
Luuq, Dolow,
Elwak, Bardere

Hiraan

Beledweyne,
Mataaban

**Middle
Shabelle**

Jowhar

Bakool

ElBerde, Wajid,
Hudur

Nugal

Burtinle

**Lower
Shabelle**

Barawe

Galgaduud

Dhusamareeb

Bay

Baidoa,
Berdale,
Dinsoor

Banadir

Wartanabada, Waaberi, Wadhajir, Hodan, Dharkenley,
Howlwadhag, Hiliwaa, Yaqshid, Boondheere, Shibis,
Abdiaziz, Shangani, Kaaraan, Hamar-Weyne, Hamar-
Jajab, Dayniile, Kaxda

Election and Selection Process

Prior to the establishment of District Peace Committees, a pre-assessment is conducted to:

- Identify individuals and existing institutions engaged in peacebuilding activities and initiatives
- Understand roles played by community sector groups and local institutions (Government, NGOs, African Union Mission in Somalia) towards promoting peace in the district
- Note challenges facing each institution or group
- Analyze and map conflict situations (past and current)
- Identify and prioritize other problems facing communities

Once all data has been gathered and a decision made, the election/selection process begins. Based on the assessment, 120 people are selected from the district wards and villages and invited to a three day training on conflict prevention, management, and resolution. The 120 participants consist of 30 women, 30 youth, 30 elders, 10 religious leaders, 10 private sector/business community members, and 10 IDPs. After conclusion of the training, the participants are divided into their respective sector groups and given the platform to elect/nominate individuals to represent them in the District Peace Committees. Each sector then nominates their preferred candidates and the plenary confirms the choices after making any adjustments to ensure fair clan representation. The higher the numbers of clans living in one area, the more members of the DPCs. Women make up 30% of the membership of DPCs. Once the DPC has been set up, the members are then tasked to elect/nominate five executive officials that include; a chairperson, vice chair, executive secretary, treasurer, and early warning monitor.

Women's Engagement

Women within the newly established DPCs make up between 28% and 35% of the total number of members. Many of the newly elected female members, prior to joining DPCs, were active members within their communities but were not fully engaged in peacebuilding processes. In some areas, women were said to be a key resource for peace but were invisible because of the highly patriarchal system within their districts.

Currently, there are a total of **204** women in all the DPCs.

Work of the District Peace Committees

The DPCs integrate both traditional and modern conflict intervention mechanisms to prevent and solve conflicts within their areas. The DPCs are preferred as they cost less than the formal courts system and are more accessible by communities in conflict. In many areas, informal justice systems are greatly supported by the local communities and people believe that there is swift deliverance of justice. In some areas, the peace committees have created a reputation and are respected and called upon by local governments and other traditional leaders to assist in dispute resolution.

Since their inception, District Peace Committees have conducted a considerable number of peacebuilding activities within their districts as well as outside their jurisdiction (e.g. related to cross district/region conflicts). These activities range from reconciliation and mediation efforts to providing trauma healing services to those in need.

Moreover, many committees liaise closely with judicial and security forces and have linked their mediation efforts to formal legal structures. According to reports by SOYDEN, the peace committees' efforts have helped manage incidences of violent conflict and created a sense of mutual respect and trust within the communities.

The issues most commonly brought before the district peace committees revolve around clan conflicts, farmer versus herder altercations, conflicts over land/housing/inheritance, and gender-based violence cases.

Through their work, DPCs have been able to:

- create a safe space for peacebuilding
- foster trust and building community cohesion
- mitigate conflict and prevent further escalation of violence

The work conducted by the DPCs consists of:

Conflict Early Warning & Violence Prevention

Support respective local governments in sharing security related information. DPCs are supporting communities to handle conflict issues in their respective districts and are able to work in a coordinated manner with their respective local governments to share conflict early warning information to enable timely response.

Informal human security peace structures are considered to have access to important information in relation to security, and understand the local conflict dynamics. Their role is important and they are able to provide conflict early warning information to relevant authorities to initiate rapid response. The DPCs thus

act as a link between the government and the community. The DPCs also regularly meet with their respective local government leaders to share information on the work being done as well as on the clarification of roles and responsibilities.

Reconciliation and Mediation

DPCs support communities within their districts, to solve conflict issues. DPCs help provide peaceful settlements to disputes while restoring societal relationships. These structures have helped communities establish consensus and have been able to provide a safe space/platform for conflicting parties.

Trauma Healing

Select DPCs, through training from the Somali Youth Development Network, have been equipped with skills to identify and address cases of conflict and trauma.

In early 2013, SOYDEN in partnership with the Wajir Peace University Trust (WPUT) and other groups designed a community volunteer program, Quraca Nabadda, or “the Tree of Peace” to support a grassroots community-healing and social reconciliation program, using the STAR (Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience) model from Eastern Mennonite University.

DPCs have been trained and have participated in community dialogue circles that have given communities a safe space to engage. The QN approach is in 3 steps;

- Story telling: telling and listening to each other’s stories.
- Community healing: looking at trauma through a collective lens and healing as a group
- Somali art and cultural symbols: the use of Somali art (poems and songs) and cultural symbols (the Quraca) to share their trauma

Impact and Success Stories

Peace committee members reported seeing changes within their communities. There has been a change in attitude and behavior towards each other such that communities are jointly sharing resources like watering points and other amenities. Even among themselves the fact that the peace committee members come from diverse clans and different social standings and are still able to work together was considered a positive sign. Communities have become aware of this thus their attitudes have begun to change.

When community conflicts occur, community members approach the peace committees on their own initiative. Conflicts, while still existing, have become manageable, and communities trust peace committees more and confide in them. The committees have gained trust among the community members, and have built a good relationship and interaction.

Case study 1: Hamarweyne District: DPC helped resolved a murder case, which involved two fish traders. The two traders got into an argument and in the process one lost his life. The DPC coordinated with the family of the deceased man, the court and the defendant to reach a peaceful resolution.

Case Study 2: Hodan, Hamarjajab and Karaan: The members of the DPC are part of pilot mediation committees under the Ministry of Justice with the purpose of providing alternative justice in the absence of credible, trustworthy and unaccountable judicial process.

Case Study 3: Dayniile: one young man was killed accidentally when his friend was toying around with a pistol. The youth escaped from the district and the body was taken to the CID (criminal investigation department) office, with the family refusing to bury the body until the killer was arrested. The district authority requested the DPC to intervene in the case. The DPC approached the family of the deceased to get their approval for mediation and then reached out for discussion. The DPC helped reach an agreement where blood compensation was paid to the family of the deceased man. The body was then released from the CID for burial. This mediation was witnessed by the district authorities and the police.

Case Study 4: Kaxda: DPCs got involved a murder case in an IDP camp where a lady was accidentally killed by police officers. The DPC facilitated a mediation proceeding between the police and the family of the deceased woman. An agreement was reached to pay the family of the deceased woman with 500million Somali shillings (50 camels valued at Sh.So 10million each) and the reinstatement of the 5 police officers who committed the crime.

Case Study 5: Baidoa: the DPC in Baidoa were called in to solve a case where a man from the Elay sub clan killed a woman from the Gawaweyn sub clan. The DPC convened a meeting with the families from the two groups to discuss dispute resolution. The two groups, through the DPC intervention, agreed on several key issues;

- to pay a blood compensation of Sh.So 3,000,000 (three million Somali shillings)
- to pay another Sh.So 1,000,000 (one million Somali shillings)
- to pay the funeral cost of Sh.So 14,000,000 (fourteen million Somali shillings)
- to pay a compensation charge of Sh.So 45,000,000 (forty five million Somali shillings); 15,000,000 upfront and 30,000,000 to be paid within 3 months
- to release the perpetrator of the crime

Case Study 6: Baidoa: the Baidoa DPC settled a family dispute over land inheritance. The members of one family were in a tussle over land belonging to the family patriarch who had passed on. The DPC helped resolve the case and finally agreed to sell the land for \$10,000 and each family member was given their share according to the Islamic Sharia law.

Case Study 7: Baidoa: the peace committee convened a reconciliation meeting between two families who had a dispute over land, which had resulted in the injury of one man. The peace committee resolved that the perpetrators apologize to the victim and his community as well as take care of the medical bill until he fully recovers.

Case Study 8: Jowhar: DPCs helped solve a case where a 13 year old girl was raped in Jowhar. The peace committee mobilized the criminal's community who paid compensation of 700,000 Somali shillings (roughly one thousand dollars) to the girl's family, thereby avoiding further tensions.

Case Study 9: Waaberi: two brothers refused to give their sister her share of the inheritance left by their father, sidelining her because of the fact that she was a woman. There is the belief that a woman will be married off and her inheritance would not serve any purpose as she would be taken care of by her husband. The peace committee managed to mediate resulting in the girl retaining her inheritance right.

Case study 10: Kaaraan: two men were in a dispute over the ownership of a house. During the war, the former owner had been displaced and when he returned he found that the house had been occupied by a 'new owner'. The peace committee members intervened and the 'new owner' apologized and agreed to move out.

Case Study 11: Beledweyne: the peace committee convened a meeting aimed at resolving a murder case involving two sub clans of the Sheqaal clan. It was resolved that the perpetrator's clan should pay for burial expenses and participate in the burial ceremony. It was also resolved that perpetrator's community members should immediately start paying blood compensation in accordance with the existing laws (*xeer*) on blood compensation within the Sheqaal clan.

Case Study 12: Dharkenley: the peace committee has played a mitigating role in the looming conflict over the occupation of houses that were abandoned during the civil war and subsequently occupied illegally by newcomers, causing much tension within the community.

Case Study 13: Baidoa: the peace committee organized a meeting to discuss a rape case that resulted in violent conflict between two families. Before this meeting, tensions were gradually building up between the two families. The perpetrator's family had to pay a fine of \$200 to the victim's family. Both communities agreed to forgive each other.

Challenges Identified by Committee Members

Most DPC members have pointed out that their work has not been without challenges, as is the norm when working in conflict areas, but they have continued to meet regularly and solve disputes. Some of the challenges reported included;

- Lack of identity cards, can make it difficult for peace committees to identify themselves to security forces or government officials;
- Lack of funds to conduct peacebuilding activities and hold meetings. It can be hard to organize a meeting that requires participants to come from far away, likewise committee members have to provide for refreshments and transport costs from their own pockets;
- Some of the peace committees lack training on mediation, reconciliation or trauma healing. This therefore makes it hard to adequately tackle some issues;
- Some peace committees' lack support from local administrators. In line with this, it is important to note that the lack of support seems to be tied to a lack of interactions between administrations and committees.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Peace committees play an important role in society, particularly in areas with limited or lack of access to formal justice facilities. They have helped fill in the void in areas in many of these areas. Peace committees have demonstrated the capacity to manage levels of violence by issuing sufficient early warning, allowing early response to occur. They have also been able to restore some sense of community under the most difficult circumstances thus building mutual trust and confidence among the people.

Peace committees in Somalia have managed to be gender sensitive and have incorporated women into the group. Women who make up a third of the total number of members have proven to be vocal and active in the peace building field.

It is important to note that the concept of peace committees is still work in progress and could probably take some time before the federal government fully incorporates them into more formal structures at the national level. It is however beneficial in the meantime for peace committees to create linkages with the local administration and work their way up towards the national government.

Peace committees however face a lot of challenges in their regular work and a lot needs to be done to address some of these issues in order to maximize on their expertise.

- Regular experience-sharing workshops can help peace committees identify best practices and challenges, and come up with solutions to these challenges;
- There is need to train peace committees on mediation, reconciliation as well as on trauma healing to ensure that they are properly equipped to handle predominant issues in their communities;
- Particularly sensitive issues especially around gender based violence are often addressed in a manner that does not focus on the victim, appropriate training and guidance could be provided to committee members to ensure that victims of GBV are treated with dignity;
- Peace committees could be supported financially (on a small scale) in order to enable them to conduct their peacebuilding activities. The support does not need to be large, but something small to assist them organize meetings and provide for refreshments and transport for participants during their meetings;
- There is need to build and strengthen relations between peace committees and local administrations. In order to understand the work that peace committees do, the local administration needs to have frequent meetings and dialogue sessions with them;
- To allow peace committees easier access to the communities as well as government officials, it is necessary for its members to be issued identity cards