

“Voice of the voiceless”¹

Learning from SORADI’s project to strengthen
accountability in Hargeisa

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1. Introduction

From February 2015 – January 2018, the Social Research and Development Institute (SORADI) developed and implemented a pilot project to strengthen accountability within Hargeisa Local Council (HLC). This project was one of more than 70 projects supported through the Implementation and Analysis in Action of Accountability Programme (IAAAP) in Somalia, an adaptive UK Aid funded programme working to generate evidence for action around greater accountability.

This case study draws out some of the rich learning that emerged over the course of project implementation. It captures the views and reflections of a diverse range of people involved in the project and presents a selection of learning points that may be useful to all those interested in governance reform (especially in capacity building in Somaliland and other similar contexts). Furthermore, the study attempts to draw out learning on the relationship between accountability and gender and social inclusion – that is, the particular constraints to accountability facing certain social groups, and how these may be tackled.

The paper draws upon interviews with a total of 22 key informants (KIs) who have been involved in different ways with SORADI's accountability project.² These include members of the Hargeisa Accountability Reform Forum; members of the sub-district level Ga'an Libah Accountability Forum; people who have received training at workshops organised by SORADI; and SORADI staff involved in designing and implementing the project. Key informants come from civil society (including NGOs, activists, youth groups and media), political structures (including clan representatives), and local government employees.³

Key messages:

1. **The power of diversity, or 'coalitions for change'**: the breadth and diversity of members in SORADI's Accountability Fora has been fundamental to their ability to influence, and their authority rests on their collective weight: 'the whole is greater than the sum of its parts'.
2. **The inclusion of women and marginalised groups in accountability initiatives requires intentionality** – cultural, political and religious norms actively inhibit women's participation so need to be directly addressed in initiatives that aim to be inclusive. A one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to be robust enough to bring ordinary women or minorities into the conversation.
3. **Understanding the rules of the game is key.** Decision-making within the 'black box' of Government can be complex and opaque. 'Insiders' who understand how the system works are often essential in understanding and providing the right entry points. SORADI engaged former politicians and well-connected advisors within the Forum to help navigate the way.

² 14 in depth interviews with single interviewees, and four interviews with two- to three people.

³ Anonymity has been maintained for interviewees, except where an individual has explicitly stated that they are happy to be named, in which case interviewees may be identifiable from the quotes.

2. Setting the scene: An overview of accountability challenges in Hargeisa.

Somaliland's governance structures and systems are often classified as belonging to a hybrid political order, combining traditional and modern political institutions (Hoehne, 2013). Significant achievements over the last three decades include durable peace, an 'increasingly sophisticated, constitutionally based nation-state democracy' (Walls & Kibble, 2010), several presidential elections, local elections and other important steps in a democratic transition away from clan-based systems. Nevertheless, this hybrid system presents some major challenges, "threatening democratic progress and undermining the authority and legitimacy of the state institutions as well as the leading traditional authorities in the region" (Hoehne, 2013: 199). Walls and Kibble (2010: 31) further argue that the Somaliland state is "still negotiating the relationship between identity, nation and territory in which there is a differential commitment to democracy between the political elite and the wider population".

Hargeisa Local Council (HLC) suffers both from extremely poor accountability, and very low capacity, in the ranks of its elected representatives.

Key informants in this study highlighted how the flawed nature of the electoral system enables the appointment of councillors (proposed by elders from the major clans) without the experience, qualifications and knowledge necessary to perform the role.⁴ Blurred lines of accountability between the Mayor and councillors (the latter elect the former) exacerbate this problem, whereby the Mayor operates within poorly defined boundaries between executive and legislative functions. Interviewees noted that some councillors are frequently out of the country, focused on central politics or personal interests, or otherwise engaged in non-council tasks. However, formal complaints are rare: "the clan system means that nobody is brave enough to call time on this", according to one senior civil society representative.

Municipal staffing is also problematic: staff are often poorly trained, appointed for clan connections rather than merit, and poorly paid, resulting in high turnover.⁵ Key informants from the Reform Forum emphasised that, in the absence of structures to enforce accountability or monitor performance, rules are not followed, job descriptions are not systematically developed, and absenteeism is common. In such a context, service delivery is inefficient, and opportunity for complaint or redress is heavily compromised (for further details, see SORADI, 2017a).

Within the municipal administration, there are almost no women in senior positions. Male and female civil servants described a high degree of gender 'capture', whereby cultural barriers – and specifically, the role of clan in allocation of such positions – mean that it is virtually impossible for women to be recruited except for the most junior or menial of roles. Several key informants noted that for those women who have managed to secure junior or mid-level positions, there is very little opportunity to progress: jobs are not advertised and the Mayor and Executive Committee are responsible for senior recruitment. Moreover, three separate interviewees flagged that the almost-exclusively male environment constitutes a further impediment for ordinary women's ability to access the municipal authorities and seek accountability: "It is critical to get women into offices and capacitated – without that, it will continue to be impossible for women to access local government" (Reform Forum member).⁶

⁴ High school education and experience in public service are minimum requirements but in practice these criteria are overlooked.

⁵ The HLC has a human resources policy with detailed criteria for recruitment but it is not put into practice.

⁶ However, according to Waylen (2014), even increasing the numbers of women in politics may not necessarily make a substantial difference as institutions are gendered through numerous mechanisms that result in gender bias.

Across society more broadly, and within HLC specifically, the power of the major clans remains paramount. Major clans dominate, and almost all decision making (outside of the home) remains firmly in the hands of (male) clan leaders. Walls et al. (2017: 59) find that people in Somaliland are becoming increasingly disillusioned with the ‘politicisation’ of clan and the rise of ‘clannism’ and that “[t]here is wide agreement from respondents that one of the most fundamental barriers to greater participation from women in the political realm lies with clan structures”.

The estimated 3-5% of the population that belong to minority clans live in deep political, social and economic exclusion. SORADI staff report that two out of ninety HLC staff in senior positions are from minority clans, and most minority clan representation within HLC is only at the most junior levels e.g. as street sweepers. Whilst recognising incremental improvements and a few individuals who had managed to successfully break through the huge cultural barriers, minority clan interviewees were emphatic that discrimination, stigma and systematic political and social exclusion remained widespread and, for the most part, enduring (minority clans have no representation within HLC, or any senior jobs in the municipal administration).

People in Hargeisa are frustrated by poor governance, but many are unaware of their rights, how local government functions, or how to seek accountability. Interviewees highlighted how ordinary citizens have no voice, very little access to information – and sometimes very little interest in demanding accountability from local government. This confirms findings from the Ga’an Libah mini survey which found that 52% of the respondents believed that the Local Council does nothing for them, and a further 10% did not know what council does for them (SORADI, 2017b).⁷

⁷ Likewise, Altai (forthcoming) has found that knowledge of duty bearers is higher for national/federal institutions than for State and local institutions; and that women, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), vulnerable people, respondents without education and older people all assess their knowledge to be significantly worse than other respondents.

Almost all negotiation between communities and local government is done through clan leaders; this strategy extends even to workers within local government, who may be deployed by clan leaders to resolve problems. However, interviewees noted that relying on clan contacts to solve individual problems is not a reliable option, and increasingly, traditional elders now expect to be paid for brokering conversations.

Cultural norms mean that women may sometimes face additional challenges (compared to men) in this scenario:

two respondents described how women are often unable to lodge complaints or pursue accountability pathways without a male clan representative, who may well require payment. Moreover, spending long periods of time waiting in offices can be especially challenging for women who often need to attend to both productive and reproductive roles. While this may not be universal, interviews provided several accounts of women being told to leave when they come to the municipal offices – or simply moved to the back of the queue. One Somaliland gender expert involved in the SORADI project noted that: “People simply don’t know their rights. Male dominance is so normalised, women don’t even realise they are excluded. And there are no policies to ensure inclusion”.

Beyond gender and clan-based inequality, internally displaced peoples (IDPs), youth and persons living with disability (PLWD) also face discrimination and exclusion. Despite a network of disability-focused civil society activists, one key informant from the SORADI Reform Forum noted that in Somaliland, cultural norms are highly discriminatory, and PLWDs are often seen as “useless” and “viewed negatively”. She went on to flag that: “Even labour laws are discriminatory, because they require mental and physical fitness. And there are no parliamentarians with disability”.

Nevertheless, although accountability pathways are highly differentiated according to social group, it is important to highlight that disempowered women and minorities are not ‘without agency’.

Two interviewees described how, over the last two decades, minority activists, lawyers and politicians have made some in-roads in challenging discrimination and gaining political representation. Since 2003, for example, there has been (only) one Deputy Minister from a minority group – numbers have not increased since then - the only position out of 87 high level positions such as ministers, deputy ministers and heads of government agencies and commissions. Others spoke of how economic independence for women is bringing change. In an increasingly large proportion of households, women are now the major bread winners, in charge of their own source of income and often able to make decisions about (or at least have a say in) household expenditure, and even responsible for paying ‘blood money’.⁸ These various examples illustrate what the literature often refers to as hidden, visible and invisible faces of power (VeneKlasen & Miller, 2002).

⁸ Money or compensation paid by an offender (usually a murderer) or his/her family group to the family or kin group of the victim

Box 1: Different pathways to accountability?

During the data collection, members of SORADI’s Reform Forum were asked which citizens face particular challenges in accessing accountability. Here are some of the responses from a selection of the interviewees, reflecting the diversity of exclusionary characteristics:

“Definitely women – they are not part of the system; they don’t have access to where decisions are made; they are the least educated and don’t know anything about how systems work, their rights and obligations. We don’t have an exact figure, but half of the households are female-headed, most of whom trade in the market, paying taxes to government – if women knew their rights they could demand greater accountability. It’s impossible to get an appointment with a political leader if you don’t have male friends”.

“Youth are very excluded – the whole system of clan and traditional elders and how they manage politically and socially is set up in a way that they don’t give space to youth. Women and youth are not consulted – yet they are the majority of voters. Nevertheless, male youth are at least part of the system in a way that women aren’t...”

“Life is very low for minority clan members when it comes to economy, interaction with society and social contact, education or health issues – for example, there is no inter- marriage and wide discrimination. There is no special emphasis for service delivery in the minority clan area. We have no rights in politics since Somaliland was created; we have no role in politics in HLC or parliament. The election [...] requires money for campaigning, our numbers are limited, and the community can’t put money into campaigns or sponsor a candidate”.

“People Living with Disability – there is a network, but it is a group that doesn’t have recognition within the community; they are not doing well enough to integrate, their issues aren’t taken up – women and youth are what everyone discusses. This is because there are strong men advocating for these two groups, not for People Living with Disability. Male allies are the key”.

3. The project

Within this context, and directly informed by research undertaken in an earlier phase of the project, SORADI set out to deliver a 12-month project, to strengthen citizen participation and accountability of the HLC. The holistic approach was intended to tackle demand and supply side issues that constrain accountability: on the one side, working with rights holders to raise awareness and demand for accountability, and on the other side, building the capacity of duty bearers to better deliver services. Overarching both these strategies was the facilitation of dialogue between the demand and supply sides. A detailed description of the project components and activities can be found in SORADI's final report (2017c). The four key project strands that this case study draws upon are:

1. The Reform Forum: the creation of a municipal level task-force of diverse activists and thought leaders committed to improving accountability within HLC by analysing the challenges and proposing and advocating for solutions.
2. The community-level accountability forum: the mirror image of the Reform Forum, the Ga'an- Libah Community Forum was designed to work at a local level to pilot a grass-roots level engagement between local activists and the lower administrative levels of government.
3. Capacity building of local government officials to build understanding of their roles, their rights, and key aspects of good governance such as gender and social inclusion. This involved seven sessions over three weeks.
4. Capacity building and awareness raising workshops with Hargeisa youth, to build understanding of, and reflection upon, rights, empowerment and accountability. These workshops were one-offs.

For both the (municipal and community level) accountability fora, SORADI conducted stakeholder mapping to identify champions, criteria for selection were developed for both local level and city-wide level, and great care was taken to ensure diversity across the fora. For example, SORADI ensured that the Reform Forum included people with a deep 'insider knowledge' of how it functions (e.g. three former mayors); people with expertise in challenges facing marginalised groups such as minority clans, youth and women; representation from the business community; and representation from the media.

For the youth training, SORADI worked with local civil society organisations (CSOs) to select young people for two separate workshops. One group was comprised exclusively of minority clans. Both groups comprised a mix of male and female youth, and each group was encouraged to select members to form a youth council.

4. Key learning

4.1 Capacity building

Local government training

The capacity building work with municipal employees and youth groups, delivered by members of the Reform Forum and other experts, was universally commended and welcomed by the participants as well as Forum members. A range of successful outcomes were described by participants from “being more welcoming to the community and responding to their needs” to “understanding equal opportunities and knowing our rights, including paternity leave” (local government representative). This study was not able to validate such claims but seeks to draw out lessons regarding the effectiveness of the capacity building process and strategy.

Both political economy analysis (PEA) and careful design is required to develop a training schedule that is both politically viable and convenient.

The opportunity for training was not taken up by the councillors; several interviewees from the Reform Forum were very sceptical about the councillors being willing to get involved, one of them noting that: “People say they are untrainable, that they don’t even recognise their own inadequacies”. Moreover, the project timing (in pre-election period) was a further impediment; political timetables take precedence over project/ programme funding cycles and so organising training outside of the pre-election period is likely to be more effective. Furthermore, SORADI staff suggested that study tours and learning from other more advanced regional councils and local governments could also be a more appealing (and effective) approach to councillors’ training.

Reaching senior government officials with training also seems to require a very specific, targeted project that devotes much more time to strategising on entry points and incentives. Based on this experience, PEA needs to explore what the motivations (and disincentives) might be for senior officials to participate. As with the councillors, training of senior management during this period proved impossible, and it was thus easier to get mid- and lower ranking officials. In the end, 36 mid- and junior officials were provided with twice-weekly training over three weeks.

Deep-rooted resistance to female staff members participating in the training was only overcome by going straight to the top. SORADI suggested that, at mid- and lower levels of the administration, attendance at the training was perceived to be an advantage, and thus those responsible for deciding on the attendance (all men) were inclined to retain this opportunity for other men. SORADI was repeatedly told that the female staff members “can’t leave their offices”. After persistent lobbying, senior SORADI staff finally sought the intervention of the Executive Secretary to ensure that at least a few of the capacity building slots were given to the (very few) women within the administration. One Reform Forum member suggested that it would be worth analysing and targeting the Mayor’s incentives further in this regard, as involving him as a champion “could make the Mayor feel like he is at the cutting edge, for example he could go down in history as the first Mayor to appoint a female Chair”. This observation is born out in the wider literature that provides support for accountability programming which is based on careful support for individuals who play catalytic or interlocutor roles – related, but not identical to the concept of champions (Tembo and Chapman, 2014; Booth and Chambers, 2014).

Engaging with religious beliefs and norms – and how they interact with gender - is an important element in presenting how accountability needs to work for all. Various key informants, including training participants, flagged that the module on gender and social inclusion met with some resistance amongst the municipal staff members, for different reasons. Whether this is explicitly religious or cultural is not clear from the interviews, but different interviewees referred to perceptions of religious barriers, even suggesting that it would be useful to involve an Imam who could validate and justify the promotion of equal opportunities, inclusion and gender equality with reference to the scriptures (supporting McCullough and Saed (2017) on the involvement of religious leaders to promote accountability).⁹ Whilst interviews showed that some of the trainees were demonstrably open to learning and gave value to the concepts of equal opportunity after the training, some fundamental tensions were felt to remain, as evidenced in the following quotes:

“We learnt about equal opportunity between men and women in reality. Our culture puts a special emphasis on men. But there is a clash between religion and gender: it is not right for women to deal with major complaints” **(Female local government representative)**

“Some of the men were not happy, they challenged me, saying this is a western concept” **(Female workshop trainer).**

⁹ McCullough and Saed (2017: 16) highlight some of the complexities of working with religious leaders to promote accountability in Somalia, but in recognition of the strength of their influence, argue that “Sufist leaders, by contrast, have been less vocal on matters of political corruption but have tended to be more open to the inclusion of women in political processes. Sufist leaders did not take a position on clan-based voting or vote-buying but openly supported the 30 per cent quota (UNSOM, 2016)”.

Related directly to this point, and in line with comments from both trainees and those delivering the training, is the need for **more time and extended training to make a difference in an area where there are entrenched socio-cultural beliefs, such as those around gender norms.** As one interviewee noted: “People simply don’t recognise the challenges faced by women and minorities in their daily lives. Gender is widely understood to refer to women only. People don’t understand about marginalisation and injustice” (SORADI staff member). There was a broad consensus that single-day workshops on issues such as gender are not effective in embedding change in behaviour or attitude, and that focusing on a core issue and ‘staying with it’, as is being done with the work on election law reform by the Reform Forum, is more likely to result in change: “One day is only enough to break the ice” (Reform Forum member and trainer).

Alternative explanations were also offered to explain male resistance to female inclusion in the training, extending beyond cultural norms into more personal resentment, fear and habits. An interviewee from the Reform Forum posited that qat consumption – a predominantly male habit – results in low productivity within the workplace, noting that this was evident even in the SORADI capacity building sessions. This concern then plays out as resentment or insecurity amongst colleagues: “Men responded differently on gender. Men feel threatened as women are better at their jobs. Women are more honest and work harder, it is commonly recognised” (Local government representative, male).

Youth workshops

Great appetite for more capacity building and appreciation of the workshops by the young people was tempered by the recognition that real change requires long term engagement, which was not possible through the single workshops with the youth groups. The workshops were rated as extremely valuable by the three young people interviewed for this study, and there was keen interest in more training. They noted that this was an unusual initiative, and that the discussions, as well as the teaching, had been very interesting and important. Asked about what they had learnt, the young

people demonstrated awareness of the concept of accountability, from articulating priorities and needs in a consultation, to monitoring councillors. This suggests that there is still some value in such one-off events, even if more is needed to be transformational:

“We learnt about our rights, and how to gain our rights; a sense of empowerment; and a lot of practical information about how to deal with situations!”
(Minority youth informant).

Nevertheless, the youth informants showed a fairly high level of scepticism about the quality of existing governance arrangements:

“If you speak about your rights in Somaliland, nobody will give you your rights, so it is not worth thinking about” (Young person involved in SORADI training).
“I know the functions and roles of the municipality, but these Councillors don’t give any support in practice” (Youth minority representative).

Within such a context of disempowerment, generating demand for more workshops – as the project successfully did - is an important first step in stimulating a sense of purpose and potential amongst these young people.

The project’s approach to youth engagement was to balance the advantages of targeted approaches, with broader integration and coherency. The two youth groups were separated into minority and non-minority clans, permitting the discussions and agenda to be tailored to the specific needs and challenges facing different youth. For example, given lack of minority clan representation in the Council, youth from minority clans have no connections or possibility of raising their voices and priorities, in contrast to youth who can access clan elders with links to councillors. It was important for minority youth to have the chance to air their specific grievances, and to hear and be inspired by a leading minority rights activist (who would not have had the same significance for the non-minorities). Interviews confirmed that this approach was critical, since the different youth appeared to have very different life experiences and concerns – for example, access to and engagement with social media was minimal for minority youth.

However, to mitigate against silo-ing, the longer-term approach was for representatives of the minority youth group to link to the sub-district committee, Ga’an Libah (further details below).

This would ensure that their specific priorities could be built into the wider community-level accountability engagement, providing both an opportunity for voice and agency, as well as further opportunities for capacity building through the diverse leadership and expertise within the community forum. At the time of drafting this paper, this linkage had not yet really taken shape, but the concept was being actively discussed by community forum members. Again, interviewees noted that a longer-term engagement through repeat youth workshops would significantly improve the likelihood of achieving this outcome, and two minority clan interviewees suggested that one-off events cannot really contribute to catalysing a social movement in the longer term.

Within the minority group, clan identity – and a sense of shared grievance – appears to have created a common framework for discussion that superseded gender differences. Whilst dividing such a group into male and female youth is often recommended as a way of ensuring that all voices are heard, the (male) trainer was convinced that having a mixed group did not constrain participation of young women because the overall focus was on the rights and empowerment of the minority clan as a whole, creating a shared identity with which all could engage and relate.

4.2 Advocacy

Reform forum

“We can act as a voice for marginalised people... We have to continue, and we have to re-create this forum in other cities. Imagine the impact if other city forums were also working in Berbera and Borama!”

(Reform Forum member)

The high-profile nature of the Reform Forum has undoubtedly been instrumental to its effectiveness, ensuring access and traction that other groups have not been able to command. Several members flagged that the former mayors within the Forum have been crucial for this, not only because of their network and connections, but because they understand both the formal and informal structures and how they operate. Reform Forum members and SORADI have confirmed that Somaliland Parliament has been responsive to the problems that they have raised and is committed to working with them. Another example is the Reform Forum’s access to the Attorney General on repeated occasions to discuss their proposed re-draft of the election law: “Even getting meetings is a good indicator of success. No normal person is able to do that” (Reform forum member).

The diversity of the committee is widely agreed to be a key ingredient in their effectiveness, bringing a wider range of voices and perspectives, more contacts as well as greater legitimacy. Women, minorities, activists, politicians, media and business are all represented. Reform Forum members highlighted the effectiveness of advocacy when they approach government as a group, as opposed to single-interest representatives. The effectiveness of this approach is clearly backed by the wider literature on effective developmental programming (Hudson et al., 2018: Summary):

“People’s power and capacity to act is always conditioned by the social context and political system. But regardless of context, developmental leadership invariably relies on three core elements:

- First, on motivated and strategic individuals with the incentives, values, interests and opportunity to push for change;
- Second, because leadership is fundamentally a collective process, on these motivated individuals overcoming barriers to cooperation and forming coalitions with sufficient power, legitimacy and influence;
- Third, coalitions engage in a battle of ideas to help reshape society’s rules. Coalitions’ power and effectiveness partly hinges on their ability to contest one set of ideas and legitimise an alternative set”.

The Reform Forum uses non-confrontational approaches, which members believe to be critical too. Despite the frustrations and sense of outrage that surfaced in interviews when discussing the level of injustice and exclusion that the current electoral system represents, the members try to ensure that their approaches are evidence-based, well-documented and professionally managed. One Reform Forum member observed that: “All the members are well briefed, committed and turn up on time... Even if we don’t agree, we try to reach consensus”. This approach was felt to have met with much more responsive and engaged reaction amongst some of the councillors, as compared to that of the Save Hargeisa social media movement. During the data collection, some Save Hargeisa activists were reportedly detained after deploying more aggressive advocacy approaches on their website. Citing this as a comparator, Reform Forum members emphasised that detention of the Reform Forum members would be ‘unthinkable’.

This approach, which gives priority to relationships, echoes lessons from other DFID programming. For example, the main DFID programme illustrating the possibilities of adaptive or contextualised approaches is the Mwananchi Accountability Programme. It covers six African countries, whose learning emphasises contextualised understandings of incentives, interlocution, and the building of relationships over tools (Tembo, 2013). Likewise, IAAAP partner GLOPPI has found trust and cooperation to be an effective approach in strengthening accountability in Somaliland (GLOPPI, n.d.).

Deploying a problem-driven approach, Reform Forum members were emphatic that, amongst many competing priorities for advocacy, the most significant barrier to good governance in Hargeisa is the low capacity and poor quality of the elected leadership. They argued that radically changing the profile of these elected leaders is essential if any meaningful change in governance is to be achieved. This shared understanding explains why the election law was selected as their priority focus, to get better people into the leadership.

Many Reform Forum members see the drafting of the election law (not yet approved by parliament) as the greatest success of the Reform Forum to date. Although it has yet to be seen as to whether this law will be successfully passed and implemented, the process of identifying the problem aligns with global thinking on successful approaches to ‘problem-driven’ programming, whereby: “... constructing local problems is the entry point to beginning the search for solutions that ultimately drive change. A problem that matters is one that gets attention and mobilises action. Such action requires coalitions – groups of agents mobilised to work together to solve common problems that they cannot solve on their own” (Andrews et al., 2015: 126).

Box 2: Summary of the proposed reforms advocated in the Reform Forum’s draft election law:

1. Better qualified councillors - the application of minimal educational criteria for candidates to the Council
2. Reduced number of councillors –a reduction in the absolute numbers of candidates
3. Constituency based councillors – a proportion of the councillors be linked to voting constituencies, to provide for greater area-based accountability.
4. The election of both the Mayor and Deputy Mayor directly by voters
5. The adoption of a “closed party list system” for the selection and election of the candidates.

Deploying the former mayors to advise on tactics, the Reform Forum devised their approach on the **understanding that influencing executive government, rather than parliament, is more effective.** One interviewee from the Reform Forum explained that, whilst parliament passes laws, it is much more efficient (and effective) when the proposals being supported come from government. As a result, the Reform Forum members had met with the Solicitor General (who recommends laws for government) on several occasions to get his inputs into the proposed law that the Reform Forum had sponsored, hoping to address his concerns whilst simultaneously getting his support and indeed ownership of the bill.

As identified in the capacity building learning, the importance of understanding and engaging with religious barriers was also identified with regards to the advocacy work. One gender expert interviewed noted that, when faced with resistance to advocacy around women’s voice and agency, and in particular to combat the idea that this is a Western notion not relevant to Somali contexts, it was helpful to cite songs from centuries back in which women are calling for justice. She emphasised that Islam advocated including everyone in decision making, and that education is for all. Another Reform Forum member recommended that: “we must address religious barriers and engage moderate Sheikhs”. This supports findings from a study of women’s political participation by Parke et al. (2017) that the rise of Somali political Islamic movements may present opportunities for women’s public and political participation, rights and influence as in contrast to a more clan-based political and social identity.

Drawing on these very specific suggestions to develop an influential social norm change approach is key: for example, experience from Kenya shows that drawing on “locally owned knowledge and strategies to identify entry points and modes of engagement to shape programming will contribute to more effective support and minimise the risk of doing harm (including in terms of rejection of a women’s empowerment agenda on the basis that it represents foreign or Western values)” (Domingo et al., 2016: 11).

Women’s representation within the Reform Forum – and their emphasis on women’s rights – was seen as a crucial aspect of accountability for all.

Several (male) Reform Forum members described the accountability deficit specifically facing Somali women, exemplified by the significant numbers of Somali women who are bread winners and tax payers, but are often neglected – as in the case of female street vendors and market traders who have no access to toilets in their places of work. The new accountability fora were seen as an opportunity to provide space for them to express their needs and priorities (via the gender activists and leadership within the Reform Forum), which would then be channelled to the Mayor through the Reform Forum. They emphasised that the Reform Forum was not re-inventing the wheel – the Reform Forum was careful not to focus their advocacy on the question of women’s political representation, which was being championed by an existing network, Nagaad.¹⁰ The role of the Reform Forum was thus to “complement and enhance, improve space for others, but stay focused on our specific issues” (Reform Forum member).

The role of media, both traditional and social, was identified as very important to effective advocacy approaches. Social media provides outreach which can help ensure initiatives such as this are able to reach critical mass and gain momentum. For example, SORADI’s own Facebook page streamed one capacity building event under this project to more than 8,000 followers – phenomenal outreach that can potentially increase the impact of single events exponentially. Both youth and Reform Forum members emphasised the relevance of the media: “Media really helps to persuade people.... If we air urgent issues in the media – social media and regular media – it’s really important. Everyone watches and listens to the media” (Reform Forum member). However, the KIIs demonstrated that the (non-minority) youth representatives were much more engaged with social media than their minority peers (whose access was primarily constrained through their lack of resources).

Views within the Forum itself diverged somewhat as to whether its mandate is to be a ‘voice for the voiceless’, a ‘bridge’ between citizens and state, or a research and evidence-based pressure group making recommendations to power holders. All three descriptions are in the objectives of the Reform Forum, but members appeared to place different emphases on its role. Although the unity of the group appeared to be very solid, resolving this question seems an important priority since it relates closely to the legitimacy of the Forum: on whose behalf are they acting? Nevertheless, in accordance with its members, it is clear that the Reform Forum has become a mechanism of accountability in the absence of a viable or functioning alternative. Whilst this is not necessarily a sustainable situation in the long term, they believe that if the key reforms for which they are calling are implemented, then more effective accountability alternatives (e.g. democratic election of qualified candidates) will become possible.

Sustainability of the Reform Forum is tied to the drive and commitment of its (voluntary) membership. All members of the Reform Forum interviewed for this paper were clearly determined to continue with the process, so that the end of project funding through IAAAP will not be mission-critical. In addition, the promising start of a new political administration was seen as positive, on the basis that “they will probably welcome this forum to show they are doing something new” (Reform Forum member). However, SORADI’s role in managing the fora, maintaining momentum and encouraging members was also recognised as key, and a certain disquiet surfaced amongst some members at the idea of losing this support: “Without SORADI, the forum will struggle to stand, because they facilitate and provide research and evidence to underpin the advocacy” (Reform Forum member). This concern is also linked to the point noted above regarding the identity of the Forum itself (i.e. are they speaking for others, and if so, how can they legitimately claim to be doing so without the evidence to underpin the recommendations).

¹⁰ NAGAAD is a network comprising 46 women’s organizations across Somaliland, focused on advocacy for women and children’s empowerment.

Local forum

“The forum is like the seed from which the bigger tree will grow”

(Member of the community sub-district accountability forum)

Like the Reform Forum, the Ga’an-Libah (GL) Community Forum’s legitimacy and strength lies in its diverse composition. Thirteen people, including four women and representatives from (Gaboye) minority clans, with established relationships with both older people and youth forums, ensure that the GL is as representative as possible.

To avoid conflict, the GL Community Forum has been careful to communicate their intention to explicitly fill an accountability gap – not to work alone, but to complement other efforts. As such, the GL Community Forum began by mapping out potential spoilers in terms of other groups that might feel left out or replaced by the community forum, in order to engage with them and reassure them. According to one GL Community Forum member, the members reached out to say: “We need you to help us with information as you have more understanding about how the system works, but we won’t mess with your financial interests, we won’t challenge or replace you”.

GL Community Forum members identify a lack of trust and the dysfunctional relationship between citizens and state as fundamental barriers to service delivery. On the one hand, according to one Forum member, “people simply don’t know what the responsibilities of government are, it’s all about assumptions”, and on the other, the “public say they only see the municipality when the latter want tax”. As a result, the Forum is keen to engage both supply and demand sides, in an attempt to address what members describe as a: “...huge disconnection between citizens and their local representatives – and no system of co-planning or accounting to the public about what has been done. The municipality and public are like Tom and Jerry – the municipality tells a lot of lies to cover up”. (GL Community Forum member)

Although GL Community Forum members have had to prioritise collective needs of the whole sub-district, rather than targeted needs of the most marginalised, their structure and approach is geared to ensure that they gather the viewpoints of all the groups within the area. The idea is that the various representatives within the Forum will be able to help strategise around priorities of any particular group, knowing the issues in much greater depth, and indeed to represent those groups directly in advocacy initiatives with local government.

Like the Reform Forum, the GL Forum emphasises that collaboration is a much more effective approach than other more combative strategies. Members noted that honest dialogue is a more productive form of engagement than accusations, as well as reducing risk for Forum members. The Forum members are leaders and activists but, as they operate more at the district than the municipal level, they are unable to access the key power holders in quite the same way as their peers in the Reform Forum have done: “The main challenge with the community forum is how to meet with the Councillors, Mayor or Deputy... we only get access to local officials and the chairman, but they can’t make important or strategic decisions” (Elder in the GL Community Forum).

The GL Community Forum’s work is not yet as developed as the municipal-level Reform Forum work, but their initial activities have been focused on extensive data collection in order to have the same evidence-based approach. Robust social mapping and questionnaires (supported by SORADI) within the district have allowed Forum members to clearly identify the priorities and issues – such as garbage, roads and security. This is then followed by an analysis of relationships, to inform the particular advocacy strategy.

Although it is too early to make an assessment of the sustainability of the GL Community Forum, which is still at a relatively early stage in terms of intervention and advocacy, certain key factors are in place. For example, the members are committed and are volunteers, and the issues are locally determined, critical priorities – all of which increases the potential for sustainability after the IAAAP funds come to an end: “We are all volunteers. We are not dependent on the office project per se, and as we

are not gaining individually from the project there is no reason for the work to halt just because the programme has finished” (GL Community Forum member).¹¹ This very locally-owned and driven model aligns with the success criteria identified in the international literature, which suggests that transformational change requires drawing on “nuanced local knowledge to enable an understanding of where opportunities lie Local actors have the legitimacy, relationships, embeddedness and staying power required” (Derbyshire et al., 2018: 8).

¹¹ SORADI has also provided some additional stability to help carry the momentum forward by ensuring that the Forum has access to office space for one year after the end of the project. After that, there are plans within the Forum to raise money via members' subscriptions/ fee, or other local fundraising opportunities.

5. Conclusions

Carooga Saboolka *I blow my conch shell*

Adduunka ku ciilan *On behalf of the poor*

Anaa cudha haysta *Suffering in this world;*

Anaa Cabdillah *For the marginalised*

Wargeys u ah caydha *I am a microphone*

Gaariye (1951- 2012); cited by a member of the Reform Forum to describe his vision of the Reform Forum's purpose.

Whilst it was beyond the scope of this study to evaluate the impact of the SORADI project, it has nevertheless been able to harvest the learning from a wide range of stakeholders involved in its delivery, including their views on its success, the strengths and weaknesses of the design and the delivery, and how these have been navigated and adapted.

To conclude, some headline project learning – that broadly confirms the wider literature – is:

1. The power of diversity, or ‘coalitions for change’.

The breadth and diversity of members in SORADI's accountability fora has been fundamental to their ability to influence, and their authority rests on their collective weight: ‘the whole is greater than the sum of its parts’.

2. The inclusion of women and marginalised groups in accountability initiatives requires intentionality.

Cultural, political and religious norms actively inhibit women's participation so need to be directly addressed in initiatives that aim to be inclusive. A one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to be robust enough to bring ordinary women or minorities into the conversation.

3. Understanding the rules of the game is

key. Decision-making within the ‘black box’ of Government can be complex and opaque. ‘Insiders’ who understand how the system works are often essential in understanding and providing the right entry point. SORADI engaged former politicians and well-connected advisors within the Forum to help navigate the way.

4. Aiming at the highest leadership is critical to ensure meaningful change – but requires careful consideration of (their) incentives and strategising. Capable and accountable counsellors are essential to making the hybrid governance structures function effectively. Offers of capacity building and workshops need to be carefully framed to appeal to these incentives. Project cycles need to be flexible to accommodate political timetables.

5. Non-combative approaches appear to be preferable and more effective in this context.

A collective passion for social justice can be channelled into very measured – even highly technical – actions and proposals (such as the draft election law) to great effect, without generating backlash from spoilers.

6. Changing deep-rooted accountability customs – and accountability vacuums – requires time.

If project funding is for one year only, the ultimate success of a small project such as this depends on its sustainability. Committed volunteers and diverse funding sources are key. Communities themselves may be able to assist with data collection that can inform advocacy.

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Implementation and Analysis in Action of Accountability Programme (IAAAP) is a four-year UK Aid-funded programme aiming to generate and promote a robust evidence base that will inform, influence and support a broad range of Somali and international actors to hold government more accountable.

For further information, please see www.somaliaccountability.org

