

## Good Governance Impact Example Series

## Somalia: Engaging Grassroots Traditional Governance Initiatives

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Somalia has not had a strong central government since the collapse of the military regime in 1991. This has led to two decades of lawlessness, destruction and displacement causing the decay of all public institutions, continued violence, failed peace talks, “warlordism”, chronic famine and food insecurity, and, in the recent past, piracy and religious extremism. Many internationally supported strategies have attempted to support a stronger central government and rebuild trust, law and order. These efforts have included 15 separate negotiation processes. However, they have not succeeded in establishing a viable, legitimate government.

**Key governance themes:** public service delivery, accountable decision-making, transparency, responsiveness

In several parts of the country such as Somaliland and Puntland, however, new entities of governance have emerged which enjoy legitimacy from the citizenry. They have largely moved beyond the widespread violence and chronic instability that have plagued the southern parts of Somalia. In these relatively stable and autonomous areas, a wide range of indigenous institutions such as council of elders (*Gurti*), peace seekers (*Nabad doon*), women associations and other local CSOs have replaced the formal administrative structures. They play a variety of roles in defining community priorities, maintaining peace and making resource allocation decisions. They largely use a traditional Somalia system of governance which consists of sets of contractual agreements (*xeer*) and customary laws, that define the rights and the responsibilities of the individual within the family, clan and among neighbors. Currently, nearly all tensions are resolved through *Nabad doons* and through councils of clan elders (*shirar odiyaaal*).

Mercy Corps does not run stand-alone governance programs in Somalia but since 2005, when we first set foot in Somalia, the organization has mainstreamed governance into development programs to revitalize grass roots home-grow institutions and find solutions that work specifically in Somaliland, Puntland and other regions. Mercy Corps has focused on enhancing the capacities of these indigenous structures and initiatives to contribute to peacebuilding, emergency response and provision of basic services like education and water to rural and urban poor communities. Work with indigenous structures in Somalia has also created employment opportunities for youth. Mercy Corps embraces the principles of “Do No Harm” in all its programming in Somalia by building the capacities to disengage; and uses grassroots, “bottom-up” approaches to build capacities of local communities to engage in dialogue with each other and officials.

Mercy Corps, through the USAID-funded Promoting Peace and Reconciliation Program in Puntland and Somaliland, has worked with local communities and traditional structures of governance to reduce violent conflict and ease social tensions. By using available indigenous alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, Mercy Corps has helped avert conflict and built trust among warring communities. The program has supported dialogue forums, advocacy messages, and community projects that addressed the causes of violence. For instance over 35 local community projects were implemented to address one of the root causes of conflict – equitable use of natural resources. The projects included the planting of tree nurseries, income-generating activities, vocational training, and solid waste management projects in Somaliland and Puntland.

In Somaliland and Puntland, Mercy Corps has revitalized traditional systems of decision-making based on councils of clan elders to strengthen traditional governance structures and national government actors and promote accountable governance and engaged citizens.

Some of the outstanding achievements of such grassroots governance processes so far include clan elders in Sanaag and Karkaar developing customary policies (agreed to by Puntland authorities) to manage competition over water resources. In Warsengeli, clan elders negotiated an agreement with the government of Puntland to provide security following clan conflicts in Bossaso town. In all program communities, Mercy Corps advocates for the inclusion of women and youth in the traditional set of governance structures it helps build.



Somali elder during a meeting of traditional leaders in Somaliland.  
Photo: Jeremy Barnicle/Mercy Corps. Somalia, 2007

On other fronts, Mercy Corps is addressing gaps in national and local government services delivery through construction and rehabilitation of schools, water and sanitation facilities and clearance of roads. Mercy Corps has created temporary jobs through cash for work programs involving over 5000 young people since 2006. They programs have provided income to the poor, educated young people on the dangers of drug abuse, and stopped environmentally harmful practice of charcoal production.

Other good governance strategies used by Mercy Corps in Somalia include demonstrative approaches where communities and government officials are invited to Mercy Corps tendering and bidding processes to model and foster grassroots democracy, accountability, and provides practical first-hand experience in planning and managing projects that address community needs. Already government officials and local NGOs are taking increased

responsibility for projects and services that deliver tangible improvements to communities in livelihoods, education and water and sanitation. Mercy Corps continuously engages local government officials and ministry officials in Puntland and Somaliland to foster responsiveness and participation.

*This Good Governance Impact Example is one of a series included in Mercy Corps' Guide to Good Governance Programming. For more information, please contact Ruth Allen, Director for Community Mobilization, Governance and Partnerships at [rallen@bos.mercycorps.org](mailto:rallen@bos.mercycorps.org)*