BETTER ASSISTANCE IN CRISES RESEARCH

Power, trust, and pre-cooked programmes: the accountability of social assistance in Somalia

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Summary

Social assistance in Somalia has become deeply embedded in the country's political economy and struggles with systemic diversion and corruption, which negatively affects how programmes on accountability of aid function in practice (Majid *et al*. 2021; Ground Truth Solutions 2023; Africa's Voices Foundation 2022b; Loop Somalia 2023). This paper examines systems for accountability of social assistance in Somalia. It explores how and why accountability outcomes and pathways are not working for people, particularly for marginalised groups. It is based on consultations with people receiving social assistance, community representatives and leaders, community-based organisations, local authorities, local and international non-governmental organisations, United Nations agencies, international donors, and the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. The report examines opportunities for strengthening accountability capacities and pathways based on community-generated suggestions and feedback from social assistance decision makers.

About the authors

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Executive summary

Somalia is an enormously challenging place for aid agencies and governments to provide accountable and effective assistance. A long-running war means that the internationally recognised government does not control all of the country, cannot reach all of its citizens, and is engaged in active conflict with Al-Shabaab,[1] the main Islamist insurgent group in Somalia. Aid agencies also largely cannot reach people in areas not under government control, where access to aid is still very restricted (McCullough and Saed 2017; REACH Somalia 2022). Government capacities at all levels are growing but limited. Needs for assistance in the face of drought, floods, conflict, and chronic poverty are both urgent and widespread; but funding to meet those needs is stretched and facing donor fatigue after decades of large-scale humanitarian support (OCHA 2023b, 2023c; World Bank 2022b).

Reflecting these challenges, aid has become deeply embedded in Somalia's political economy and struggles with systemic diversion and corruption (Majid *et al*. 2021; Ground Truth Solutions 2023; Africa's Voices Foundation 2022b, Loop Somalia 2023). This paper examines systems for accountability of social assistance in Somalia. It explores how and why accountability outcomes and pathways are not working for people, particularly for marginalised groups. It is based on consultations with people receiving social assistance, community representatives and leaders, community-based organisations, local authorities, local and international non-governmental organisations, United Nations agencies, international donors, and the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. The report examines opportunities for strengthening accountability capacities and pathways based on community-generated suggestions and feedback from social assistance decision makers.

Political structure of Somalia

'Somalia is a Federal State composed of two levels of government: the federal government and the federal member states, which include both state and local governments. Federal Member States (FMS) also dispose their own constitutions and armed forces.

South-Central Somalia includes the following FMS: Jubbaland, South-West, Benadir, Hirshabelle and Galmudug. Mudug region is divided between Galmudug and Puntland, with Galmudug controlling the southern half of the region. Puntland, as an autonomous state within the Somali Federal State, was established on 1 August 1998.

Somaliland declared its independence in 1991 while the civil war was occurring in the rest of Somalia. Somaliland remains largely internationally unrecognised.'

EUAA (2023)

Source: Authors' own. Quotation cited.
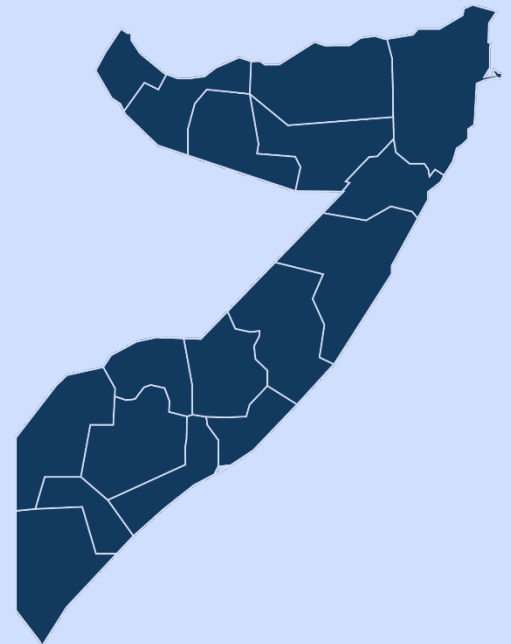
Accountability pathways describe relationships in the public sphere between duty bearers and communities or citizens (Sabates-Wheeler *et al*. 2019; Fox 2016). For social assistance, they are based on power dynamics and trust between aid providers and state authorities (duty bearers) and those receiving assistance (recipients and citizens). These relationships rely on information flows (transparency), decision-making (participation), and recourse and redress processes, audits or monitoring, and programme adaptation to

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[1] For more information on Al-Shabaab, read the Council on Foreign Relations' *backgrounder*.

reinforce these pathways. For assistance to be accountable, there is a need for transparency and participation. People need to know what is being provided and have spaces to participate in the design and delivery of that assistance (Fox 2016).

The clan system in Somalia is central to social hierarchies, mediating access to and exclusion from social assistance. International aid actors are paying more attention to clan dynamics and making greater efforts to include social groups marginalised from assistance, but aid has become deeply embedded in exploitative political economies, making progress difficult. Communities often do not trust the government because they have little exposure to its policies and agendas with regard to social assistance. Local authorities are meant to link community structures with district- and federal-level government, but are often left out of decision-making processes for social assistance.

Our research examined decision-making for social assistance and who participates in programmes, when, and for what purpose. Research participants repeatedly raised concerns around 'pre-cooked programmes' designed behind closed doors, reinforcing perceptions that social assistance in Somalia is a privilege rather than a right.

People receiving social assistance are often reluctant to share information that could hold people diverting or corruptly abusing assistance to account, as they fear retribution and losing the support they are receiving (Int. 24; Int. 26; KII 12; KII 18; Loop Somalia 2023). When they are consulted, people feel interactions are extractive and one-way, rather than being dialogues based on collective decision-making or transparent discussions (Int. 27; Int. 31; Int. 39; Bhandira 2022).

Donor requirements and agency policies create perverse incentives and constrain prospects for more meaningful accountability – including corruption and aid diversion being identified and more effectively dealt with. Notably, 'zero tolerance' approaches to diversion by donors and aid agencies create incentives for implementing organisations not to report or transparently discuss instances of diversion or corruption because they may lose funding and have programme costs related to cases declared ineligible.

People do not feel informed about, consulted on, or able to influence elements of social assistance such as targeting approaches and transfer values. These key design decisions therefore feel closed and opaque, making it hard for actors outside the aid system (governments, recipients and communities, and civil society) to hold aid providers to account. People interviewed wanted to see an increased appetite to address corruption and diversion that goes beyond community-level investigations and zero tolerance approaches.

There have been significant investments in third-party monitoring, feedback, and grievance and redress mechanisms, both at project- and agency-specific and collective levels (Bhandira 2022; CCCM Cluster Somalia 2022; LaGuardia *et al*. 2019; Moman and Mohamed 2019; WFP 2023). However, aid providers and independent key informants interviewed reported a continuing struggle to use the data being collected and act based on feedback being received. They saw this as partly a coordination issue, highlighting the need for better response rates from organisations, as well as referral pathways to actors providing complementary services, and partly a gap in government involvement and oversight. There are still insufficient linkages to duty bearers that could connect concerns raised in feedback processes to broader accountability efforts, involving government and civil society beyond aid agencies.

'AAP [accountability to affected populations] is becoming increasingly synonymous with data, and the need for more data to better understand community perceptions needs. However, there is a serious risk that, as with M&E [monitoring and evaluation] some 15 years ago, AAP is also becoming increasingly hung up and indeed blocked by this search for more data about community perceptions – *without ever meaningfully answering the 'so what' question. "We know what communities think and feel about the aid system and responses – so what are we going to do differently as a result of all this data and information?"'*

Bhandira (2022: 21)
(italics in the original)

There are difficulties in maintaining a strong understanding of community dynamics and supporting community participation in programme design when providing aid on a large scale. Interviewees saw a need to manage tensions between scaling up social assistance and having effective community engagement, and

supporting systemic accountability systems and processes that are not programme-specific. Sustaining these initiatives across project contracts and short timelines is a challenge.

Community members, leaders, and organisations, whether they received social assistance directly or not, suggested three broad areas of improvement for accountability in its design and delivery in Somalia: proactive public information sharing and decision-making through more system-wide (as opposed to programme-specific) approaches; improvements in the functioning of existing mechanisms to escalate feedback to decision makers; and expansion of the concept of representation.

Minority rights groups and community-based organisations commended progress on reaching more marginalised people, including through overcoming language barriers and paying increased attention to diverse recruitment in aid organisations. Organisations that prioritised clan mapping and adjusted their recruitment accordingly were seen as having fewer intrinsic clan biases, or biases were 'diluted' (KII 5; KII 7). Communities perceived that organisations with broader clan representation provide more equitable assistance.

Interviewees in civil society and government felt that government at local and federal levels should have a larger role in designing social assistance and in taking actions in response to community feedback. In particular, local government authorities should be more engaged and supported to represent wider community interests. Progress on strengthening government roles will require further efforts to build trust between aid actors, government, and civil society, partly through continuous and proactive dialogue.

List of acronyms and abbreviations

AAP	accountability to affected populations
BASIC	Better Assistance in Crises
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FMS	federal member state
FSC	Food Security Cluster
Int.	Interview
IVR	interactive voice response
KII	key informant interview
MoLSA	Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs
MPCA	multi-purpose cash assistance
NGO	non-governmental organisation
SAGAL	Social Transfers to Vulnerable Somali People
SomReP	Somali Resilience Program
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VRC	village relief committee
WFP	World Food Programme

Contents

1. Introduction

This paper examines the perspectives of different stakeholders in Somalia about the accountability of development and humanitarian assistance provided to people. The focus is on social assistance, by which we mean transfers to poor and vulnerable people that both humanitarian and social protection actors provide, and the interlinkages between humanitarian and social protection programmes providing social assistance to people in crises.

The paper explores what people appreciated or found challenging when navigating accountability pathways in Somalia. It forms part of a wider body of research on accountability of social assistance within the Better Assistance in Crises research programme, which includes a literature review (Seferis and Harvey 2022) and complementary study in the Kurdish regions of Iraq (Seferis, Karem and Harvey 2024). Together, this work aims to contribute evidence on the factors, processes, and capacities that enable greater accountability of social assistance in crises.

The research questions that the study set out to examine were:

- How are humanitarian and development approaches to accountability for assistance linked?
- What does it mean to be 'locally accountable' in relation to social assistance in Somalia?

In examining the first question, we paid particular attention to intersections with accountability approaches related to governance, peacebuilding, and protection efforts; the roles of digital technologies and the media; the roles local authorities played; and tensions and trade-offs between downwards accountability to people in Somalia and the need for aid agencies to be accountable to donors.

In relation to the second question around meanings of local accountability, we examined how different groups – including community representatives, recipients of assistance, frontline staff, and government officials – perceived accountability, the capacities needed for assistance to be effectively accountable, and how the ways in which groups participate in the design and delivery of assistance influence accountability. Key definitions for the study are set out in Box 1.1. **This paper refers to 'accountability' as the overarching term for the relationship between duty bearers and community members, or otherwise specifies 'social accountability' (between citizens and the state) and 'humanitarian accountability' to affected populations (between aid recipients and providers).**

Box 1.1: Key definitions

Social protection: A set of policies and programmes aimed at preventing or protecting all people against poverty, vulnerability, and social exclusion throughout their lifecycles, with a particular emphasis on vulnerable groups (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler 2004; SPIAC-B 2019).

Social assistance: One form of social protection. The main social assistance modalities for the poorest and most vulnerable people and households are food, cash or in-kind transfers, fee waivers for education and health, and state subsidies. We focus on regular food and cash or in-kind transfers that beneficiaries receive without having to make a contribution. These transfers can be given either unconditionally or with conditions linking support to recipients' participation in public works, attending health clinics, or other activities. The transfers sometimes integrate livelihood, nutrition, or other support, and are then referred to as 'cash plus' programmes. Social assistance in crises can be provided by development or humanitarian actors. Humanitarian assistance uses the same modalities of food, cash, vouchers, and other in-kind transfers as development assistance, but can have different objectives, usually framed around saving lives and alleviating suffering (Slater and Sabates-Wheeler 2021).

Social accountability: This is the umbrella term for mechanisms that seek to operationalise direct accountability relationships between citizens and the state (Forster, Malena and Singh 2004). Social accountability includes 'the extent and capacity of citizens to hold the state and service providers accountable and make them responsive to needs of citizens and beneficiaries' (Grandvoinnet, Aslam and Raha 2015), as well as 'a pro-active process by which public officials inform about and justify their plans of action, their behaviour and results and are sanctioned accordingly' (Ackerman 2005).

Accountability to affected populations: This is the commitment to use power responsibly by taking account of, giving account to, and being held to account by the people humanitarian organisations seek to assist (IASC 2017). In this paper, we either refer to social accountability in social protection programming, or accountability to affected populations (AAP) for humanitarian frameworks. 'Accountability' is understood as a general term that encompasses the framing of rights and responsibilities between rights holders and duty bearers in relation to social accountability and AAP.

Marginalisation: According to the United Nations Human Rights Office and United Nations Development Programme, marginalisation is when:

> disadvantaged [groups] are commonly poorly represented in political structures and decision-making bodies and consequently have little control over decisions that affect them. Lacking a voice in shaping their own circumstances, they are vulnerable to neglect. And when disasters strike, these communities are most likely to be at the back of the line for humanitarian assistance, if not totally forgotten.
> UNDP (2010).

Marginalised groups often include women and people living with disabilities, who face additional risks, such as gender-based violence or sexual exploitation and abuse, when social assistance provision is not accountable.

Aid diversion: The European Union (EU) defines aid diversion as: 'Aid taken, stolen or damaged by any governmental or local authority, armed group, or any other similar actor. Such act is to be considered diverted aid even if the aid is re-distributed to other people in need other than the intended beneficiary group' (ECHO n.d.).

Corruption: Transparency International (n.d.) defines corruption as 'the abuse of entrusted power for private gain.'

Clan identity in Somalia: The Somali social system is characterised by hierarchical clan units. The majority of the population belong to four patrilineal clan families: Darod, Hawiye, Dir, and Rahanweyn (Hill 2010; Hinds 2013). These are divided into subclans, which can be divided further, illustrating the complexity of the clan system. Minorities comprise three distinct social groups: the Bantu, the Benadiri, and 'occupational groups' (Hinds 2013: 7). Occupational groups include: the Midgan or Gaboye, who are traditionally hunters and leatherworkers; the Tumal, traditionally blacksmiths; and the Tibro, traditionally 'ritual specialists' (*ibid*.: 12).

Source: Authors' own. Information sources cited.

2. Research methods

A team of Somali and international researchers conducted qualitative research through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the stakeholder groups outlined below, and carried out a review of existing literature and available data.

The Better Assistance in Crises (BASIC) team used a community-centred approach to identify gender-balanced key groups targeted for social assistance. Baidoa (Bay district), Northern Gedo (Gedo district), and Mogadishu (Banaadir district) were selected as locations in South-Central Somalia where communities, including internally displaced people (IDPs), were exposed to different social assistance programmes (humanitarian cash transfers as well as social protection assistance), and the team worked outwards to consult community leadership, local authorities, and frontline aid providers in the area.

Interviews with social assistance recipients, IDPs, community representatives/leaders, frontline providers, and local authorities took place between February and March 2023, with analysis in May and June after transcripts and translations were completed. Following the initial analysis, the team conducted key informant interviews (KIIs) with international stakeholders (social assistance decision makers) between July and October 2023.

To reinforce community recommendations on increasing transparency and public discussions around social assistance, the BASIC Research programme added an external engagement component in September 2023. Initial research findings were broadcast to the public in Somalia via Radio Star; the team followed up with additional consultations with local authorities that did not participate in the in-depth interviews to get their feedback on the findings and solicit recommendations for programming. In November 2023, BASIC hosted a discussion with social assistance decision makers, where participants reflected on the findings and community suggestions, and debated the proposed opportunities to strengthen accountability of social assistance in Somalia.

The research on accountability in Somalia comes with limitations. First, to focus on social assistance across humanitarian and social protection programmes, the researchers concentrated on government-controlled areas that were accessible to a range of aid providers and did not have the opportunity to conduct primary research in other parts of the country to compare findings (notably Somaliland and areas under Al-Shabaab's control). Second, the rapidly changing context in Somalia meant that between inception and completion of the research, the regions experienced additional shocks (drought and flooding), subsequent displacement, and the rollout of the Universal Social Registry in November 2023, which changed the social assistance landscape for communities (Somali Dispatch 2023).

Table 2.1: Interviews with research participants and key informants

Participant group	Number
Community members, representatives, and social assistance recipients – cited as *interviews*	21 (50% women)
Frontline providers of social assistance (local and charitable non-governmental organisations, civil society organisations, local authorities) – cited as *interviews*	13 frontline staff 8 local authorities
Social assistance decision makers and designers (federal government representatives Federal Government of Somalia/federal member states, international non-governmental organisations, United Nations agencies, donor agencies) – interviews with government representatives are cited as *interviews*, and with international representatives as *KIIs*	5 government 10 international
Research institutions, humanitarian support functions, third-party monitors – cited as *KIIs*	6 individuals
Total	63 (40% women)

Source: Authors' own. Created using project data.

This paper cites interviews with research participants in Somalia as interviews (abbreviated as Int.), and with key informants outside of Somalia as key informant interviews (abbreviated as KIIs) to distinguish between the types of interviews. All interviews were qualitative and semi-structured around similar themes; interview guides were different for research participants within Somalia and for those working on/in Somalia but representing regional or international institutions.

3. The social assistance landscape in Somalia

Humanitarian funding and structures have been the main sources of social assistance in Somalia for the past three decades (Daniels and Anderson 2018). Social assistance has therefore been long term but planned in short-term cycles, predominantly focused on meeting food needs, externally funded, and primarily delivered through international aid agencies. There have been recent efforts to move towards more social protection and development approaches with the launch of the national Social Protection Policy (2019), as well as larger-scale World Bank- and EU-funded programmes that aim for greater government ownership and are labelled as social protection, though still primarily implemented by international organisations. Multiple externally led social assistance interventions continue, with a growing proportion providing cash.

The scale of vulnerability and needs in Somalia is extremely high (OCHA 2023b, 2023c; FEWS-NET and FSNAU 2023): 8.25 million people were estimated to be in need of humanitarian assistance in 2023, of which the humanitarian response aimed to reach 7.6 million, while 'over 1.48 million people were internally displaced between January and August 2023, including 592,000 by conflict' (OCHA 2023a). Projections for the August–December 2023 period estimated that about 4.3 million people were likely to experience high levels of acute food insecurity and 1.5 million children acute malnutrition (IPC 2023).

The shocks continued to compound: in November 2023, the United Nations (UN) under-secretary-general for humanitarian affairs raised the alarm that 'after suffering its worst drought in 4 decades, #Somalia is now grappling with 'once in a century' floods' (Griffiths 2023). Meanwhile, the amount requested for humanitarian relief in 2023 was only 37.4 per cent funded as of October that year (OCHA 2023a). The level of need, combined with funding shortages, makes it difficult to design and finance universal schemes that provide equitable coverage in line with the national Social Protection Policy.

Moreover, the humanitarian response remains concentrated in and around urban centres, and structured around displacement. Social assistance cannot be delivered to many vulnerable communities in hard-to-reach areas because of security and access constraints; in particular, those parts of the country controlled or influenced by Al-Shabaab.[2]

The Social Protection Policy sets out social protection as a right, with the intention to establish a universal system rooted in the Constitution (MoLSA 2019). However, the policy remains largely a statement of ambition because there is no capacity or financing to fully implement it. While donors support broader state financial governance beyond social assistance,[3] aid inflows and aid dependency have weakened government accountability, entrenching 'the politics of spoils' (Gundell and Allen 2017: 27).

Financing for social assistance is largely based on international aid, with government spending on social protection 0.9 per cent of gross domestic product in 2020 and 0.5 per cent in 2021, which the World Bank notes is 'significantly lower than the average 1.5 percent in developing countries and in sub-Saharan Africa and far too low to meet Somalia's needs'(World Bank 2022b: ix). Taxation in Somalia is not a reliable source of income for the government, as few people pay taxes, and the system is marred by diversion and corruption – a symptom of conflict that has continued for over 40 years (KII 1). Informal taxation, such as payments to gatekeepers (see Box 5.4) and other community representatives, fills this void (van den Boogaard and Santoro 2023).

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[2] In August 2023, the Food Security Cluster reported that 'Access by humanitarian partners to approximately 1.4 million people in need of life saving humanitarian food assistance in 23 districts classified as either completely inaccessible or with high access constraints remains challenging' (Somalia FSC 2023b: 4).

[3] For example, through World Bank support to the Financial Governance Committee.

A complex web of aid programmes, funded through both humanitarian and development modalities, has developed in recent years. In 2021/22, assistance was scaled up to respond to severe drought and the threat of famine, with humanitarian funding reaching US$2.2 billion in 2022, double the annual amount provided for the previous six years (Hailey *et al.* 2023). Over 50 per cent of that funding in 2022 went to the Food Security Cluster (FSC) (co-led by the World Food Programme (WFP) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)), which reached 6.2 million people with food and cash assistance (Hailey 2023; Somalia FSC 2023c);[4] 52 per cent of the response was paid in cash, 36 per cent in vouchers, and 12 per cent in kind (Somalia FSC 2023c).

In 2023, the FSC aimed to provide food and cash assistance to 6.7 million vulnerable households, particularly newly displaced people, and pastoral and agro-pastoral populations (OCHA 2023c). As reported on the FSC online interactive dashboard, as of 4 December 2023, as part of the 2023 response thus far, '3.1 million individuals were reached by 106 FSC partners in 69 districts achieving (28 per cent) against the HRP [Humanitarian Response Plan] target', with the majority (62 per cent) of the response covered by WFP (with partners), while non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and FAO (with partners) accounted for 26 per cent and 12 per cent, respectively (Somalia FSC 2023a).

Multiple other in-kind social safety net interventions exist. For example, WFP runs large-scale programmes for vulnerable people in targeted areas, to improve nutrition and build resilience, including a school feeding programme (reaching 190,000 schoolchildren in 2022) and nutrition activities (to over 410,000 pregnant and lactating women, and nearly 2 million children, in 2022) (WFP 2023).

Cash-based assistance, paid to mobile phones and through electronic vouchers, has been scaled up in recent years in Somalia. In addition to the FSC interventions, the international humanitarian response also involves multiple other cash-based transfer programmes, which are either labelled 'multi-purpose' or earmarked for specific sectoral objectives and can be unconditional or conditional. Multi-purpose cash assistance (MPCA) aims to support the most vulnerable households to meet their urgent basic needs, with:

(1) a first-line response to enable access to basic needs and services for newly displaced populations and urban and rural populations in extreme access constraints and hard-to-reach areas;
(2) a second-line response to protracted Internally Displaced Persons and urban and rural populations in moderate and low access constraint areas.
OCHA (2023c: 42)

OCHA also reports that:

Multi-Purpose Cash Assistance (MPCA) has been widely used in the Somalia response in recent years. In 2022, partners scaled up MPCA to respond to the drought emergency. MPCA partners in Somalia reached some 7,198,731 individuals by September 2022, compared to 1,484,610 in 2021. MPCA currently accounts for about 23 per cent of the cash and voucher assistance used to provide emergency relief in Somalia.
OCHA (*ibid*.: 43)

The Somalia Cash Working Group (previously co-led by WFP and Concern, with a planned transition in 2023–24 to United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and an elected NGO (OCHA 2023c)), 'aims at improving the coordination of cash assistance, quality of implementation of cash assistance and Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning as well as ensuring a systematic and evidence based cash and market programming for the Somalia response' (ReliefWeb n.d.). Table 3.1 shows an illustrative selection of examples of consortia and programmes that provide emergency, longer-term, and shock-responsive cash-based assistance.

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[4] This is under the Food Security Cluster (FSC)'s first objective of improving access to food. The FSC's second objective is protecting livelihoods, which reached 500,000 people in 2022 (Somalia FSC 2023a).

Table 3.1: Examples of ongoing and recently completed social assistance interventions in Somalia

Programme	Funding, donors, and implementers	Description
BRCiS Consortium – Building Resilient Communities in Somalia	Created in 2013, led by the Norwegian Refugee Council, 8 national and international members, and donors including the United Kingdom Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, World Bank, United States Agency for International Development, Qatar Fund for Development and others. Over US$240m implemented in activities since 2013.	Portfolio of interventions implemented in all federal member states. The second phase of the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office's support to the consortium targeted 423 communities across 34 districts for nearly four years, including supporting '3,048 households with long-term safety net programmes and 477,589 people with emergency food assistance and shock-responsive MPCA and unconditional cash transfers through local early action or early response phase' (NRC 2023: 12).
Child Sensitive Social Protection	€30m funded by Germany (through the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and KfW Development Bank) and implemented by the United Nations Children's Fund in partnership with Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.	Launched in late 2023, aims to support over 27,000 pregnant and lactating women and their families through cash transfers, as well as strengthening functional state institutions through capacity building and use of increasingly available social services by 2025. It aims to: 'Align with current social protection initiatives, reinforce local capacities, improve access to essential social services and decentralize coordination structures' (UNICEF 2023). The programme is an expansion of the Baxnaano ('uplifting') programme but is designed to align with the Social Transfers to Vulnerable Somali People (SAGAL) universal targeting approach outlined in Table 3.2 (UNICEF 2023).
Livelihoods Cash Plus	A core element of FAO assistance in Somalia.[1]	Cash-based transfers (provided as mobile money and/or electronic vouchers) linked to inputs and services (agricultural inputs, animal health services, etc.) to safeguard livelihoods. Provided in response to acute needs and as longer-term interventions to strengthen livelihoods and build resilience. For example, one FAO-implemented project in 2019–21 supported by the United States Agency for International Development's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (which comprises the Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance and Office of Food for Peace) targeted over 88,000 households (532,500 people) with emergency cash plus livelihoods assistance and 2,200 households with longer-term cash support over 14 months alongside training, mentoring, and savings guidance (FAO 2022).
Somali Cash Consortium – MPCA	Established in 2018. Funded by European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Operations and led by Concern Worldwide with five other implementing partner NGOs: the Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development, Cooperazione Internazionale, Danish Refugee Council, Norwegian Refugee Council, and Save the Children (Somali Cash Consortium 2022).	Monthly unconditional cash transfers to vulnerable populations in disaster-/conflict-affected Somali regions. For example, in 2022, the drought response top-up programme distributed a three-month unconditional cash transfer to 17,500 households across ten districts in five target regions between late February and early March (Somali Cash Consortium 2022).
Somali Resilience Program (SomReP)	SomReP started in 2011, aiming to strengthen capacity of pastoralist, agro-pastoralist, fisherfolk, and peri-urban host and IDP communities, with a focus on women, young people, and people with disabilities. Members include the Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development, Adventist Development and Relief Agency, CARE, Cooperazione Internazionale, Danish Refugee Council, Oxfam, World Vision, and Shaqodoon. Donors include Australia, Germany, Denmark, the EU, FAO, Switzerland, the United States, and the World Bank (SomReP n.d.).	In 2022, SomReP supported 3,142 families in the areas most affected by disasters/crises with cash transfers under the '"Crisis Modifier", a tool that allows families to access 3-month funding, meet immediate needs following a disaster (such as a missed rainfall), and remain in their homes' (COOPI 2023).

[1] 'Overall, cash assistance is an increasingly important part of FAO's overall programme in Somalia. FAO Somalia's cash and voucher expenditures for 2018–2020 amounted to approximately USD 104 million through 15 projects, reaching more than 3.3million people. FAO Somalia's CVA [cash and voucher assistance] portfolio also accounts for 64 percent of FAO's total CVA expenditure between 2018–2020' (FAO 2022: 8).

Note: This is a selective illustrative sample of social assistance interventions in Somalia; it is not a comprehensive mapping.

Source: Authors' own. Data sources cited.

There have been efforts to shift from short-term humanitarian approaches and funding to longer-term social protection approaches. Two key interventions are the World Bank-funded Baxnaano ('uplifting') programme and the smaller EU-funded Social Transfers to Vulnerable Somali People (SAGAL) programme (Table 3.2). The Baxnaano programme, originally designed to respond to the 2019 drought (World Bank 2022a), is credited as a World Bank grant to the Government of Somalia and as a programme is implemented by WFP, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and local partners (Khan and McDowell 2024). A project implementation unit sits within the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA) (World Bank 2022c: 12). The government is aiming to take greater responsibility for implementation of the Baxnaano project and launched a unified social registry in November 2023. Its hope is to use the registry to connect current social assistance programmes with broader human capital initiatives such as economic inclusion, employment, and larger support packages (KII 5). The smaller SAGAL programme is delivered by the Somali Cash Consortium, made up of international NGOs, but with a unit housed within the MoLSA; its objectives include building government capacity at federal, state, and district levels.

Both programmes have management units set up at federal level. However, each has different focal points within the MoLSA, which affects how the programme communicates with and is perceived by local authorities because they do not interact directly with each other (KII 7). Birch finds that:

> it is not clear how the government is exercising leadership over social protection programming, or its position on key policy questions. For example, Baxnaano and SAGAL and their donors hold differing positions on issues such as targeting approaches and the unified social registry now in development. Both work under MoLSA, but the project teams are said to have little interaction. In a context where aid dependency is so high, the incentive for both is to prioritise reporting to donors above reporting to the government. Despite the evident need for stronger coordination, donorship has fragmented. The Donor Coordination Group does not meet frequently and early momentum in this area appears to have been lost.
> Birch (2023: 23)

Moreover, the programmes face the same challenges as other social assistance interventions in supporting communities in hard-to-reach areas; if vulnerable people are in areas under Al-Shabaab's control, access to international aid is very limited (McCullough and Saed 2017; REACH Somalia 2022). This directly influences accountability in social assistance.

Table 3.2: Overview of the Baxnaano and SAGAL programmes in Somalia

	Baxnaano[1]	SAGAL[2] (Social Transfers to Vulnerable Somali People)
Timeframe	2019–24	2020–24
Donor	World Bank	EU
Implementers	MoLSA, WFP, UNICEF	MoLSA, Somali Cash Consortium (led by Concern Worldwide and implementing partners Danish Refugee Council, Norwegian Refugee Council, and Save the Children)
Objective	● Cash transfers to help poor and vulnerable households meet immediate needs and build resilience, address negative coping mechanisms, and promote human capital investments via links to nutrition services ● Support delivery systems and institutional capacity to establish building blocks of a national shock-responsive social protection system	● 'Improve resilience of households to conflict and climate-related shocks and disasters. ● Provide cash-based social transfers complemented by systems building with government for delivery of social protection' (Birch 2023: 12)
Budget	International Development Association grants: 2019: US$65m; 2020: US$40m IDA grant to scale up the shock-responsive component of Baxnaano in response to drought, floods, and the locust crisis Additional World Bank financing: 2021 and 2022: US$318 million	€27m
Funding focus and approach	Large injection of initial funds, Unified Single Registry, systems building	Less funding, longer-term layered approach (KII 2); cannot focus on entire timespan of the first 1,000 days of a child's life, nor fully cover target caseloads
Recipients	200,000 poor and vulnerable households (approximately 1.2 million individuals) with children under the age of five in 21 districts across all federal member states and Somaliland	44,221 families (265,326 individuals), with a focus on IDPs, returnees and poor host communities, and supporting children, young people, and older people
Coverage	Predominantly rural, expanding to urban	Predominantly urban
Targeting approach	Layered approach: (1) district selection based on distress ratings; (2) community selection based on accessibility to UNICEF, WFP and partners, and payment service providers; and (3) community-based participatory targeting of households	'Categorical (first 1,000 days, youth, elderly) then community-based' (Birch 2023: 12)
Benefit duration	Enrolled for three years, then continuation of benefit on eligibility re-certification process	*Unknown*
Transfer value	US$20 per month (paid quarterly)	US$20 per month
Delivery	Mobile money, paid to mothers or female caregivers of children	Mobile money
Shock-responsive component	Locust-affected households: temporary US$40 top-up monthly to existing beneficiaries; US$60 to non- beneficiary households for up to 6 months (WFP reached over 970,000 beneficiaries in 2022 through this vertical and horizontal expansion)	Yes
Sources	Birch (2023); Samuel Hall and Development Pathways (2023); WFP (2023); World Bank (2022a, 2022c); World Bank (2021)	Birch (2023); EU (n.d.); Save the Children (2023)

[1] Baxnaano is supported by two World Bank projects: the Shock Responsive Safety Net for Human Capital Project and the Shock Responsive Safety Net for Locust Response Project.
[2] SAGAL is one component of the European Union Trust Fund's €98m Inclusive Local and Economic Development (ILED) programme (accessed 30 November 2023).
Source: Authors' own. Data sources cited.

4. Accountability of social assistance: the ecosystem

Since social assistance in Somalia has historically been delivered through humanitarian programmes, approaches to accountability have mainly been framed around humanitarian AAP as opposed to broader citizen engagement and social accountability initiatives. The main focus has been on mechanisms to engage communities, particularly through village relief committees (VRCs), which are asked to undertake community-based targeting, mechanisms to provide information and enable people to provide feedback (notably through call centres), and third-party monitoring approaches (Nzimbi and Thurston 2023). Therefore, accountability mechanisms are primarily about trying to provide structures and opportunities for people to give feedback to aid agencies about the assistance they are receiving. The role of government or wider civil society is largely absent from how accountability of social assistance is framed and approached.

Table 4.1 sets out the main accountability mechanisms and approaches currently in operation for social assistance programmes in Somalia. The challenges described are the authors' conclusions based on the evidence reviewed or otherwise directly cited from other sources.

Table 4.1: Accountability mechanisms and communication channels for social assistance programmes in Somalia (2023)

Channel	Functions	Challenges
Community representation structures		
VRCs *Collective*[1] *Face-to-face*[2]	● Targeting (area + recipients) ● Recipient selection + verification ● Community engagement and feedback	● Can be seen as biased/influencing aid access ● Often one committee manages all representation in an area ● Unpaid/uncompensated ● Can exclude minority representation (language barriers) ● Unclear how much committee members share information from aid providers with communities and vice versa (interviews suggest not much) ● Another layer of power brokers ● Issues raised collectively do not reach aid decision makers (inability to affect advocacy)
Public meetings *Collective* and *Programme-specific*[1] *Face-to-face*[2]	● Public sessions held between aid providers and community representatives (usually VRCs) on various topics ● Ad hoc sessions	● Currently not accessible to wider public, raising questions about whether information is shared with the broader community ● Currently, meetings are about providing feedback on existing programmes, rather than co-design or broader participation ● Lack of clarity on who within the community has authority to speak on behalf of the collective ● When decision makers make recommendations/take actions, the feedback loop is usually not closed with communities – so decision makers cannot be held responsible

(continued)

Table 4.1 (continued)

Channel	Functions	Challenges
International aid agency mechanisms		
Household visits *Programme-specific*[1] *Face-to-face*[2]	● Needs assessments ● Recipient selection + verification ● Monitoring (including post-distribution monitoring)	● Power imbalance ● Teams often do not speak local dialects, difficult to communicate ● Officers/enumerators collect information and leave; they do not systematically provide information to families or collect their feedback
Interactive voice response (IVR) *Programme-specific*[1] *Virtual*[2]	● Provides information on entitlements and eligibility ● Trouble-shoots technical issues with receiving assistance	● Language barriers when local dialects are not available ● Technological barriers if people cannot access a device to use IVR
Text messages (SMS) *Programme-specific*[1] *Virtual*[2]	● General information on programmes and behaviour change messaging ● Provide information on entitlements and eligibility	● One-way communication: provider → recipients ● Language and literacy barriers ● Technological barriers if people cannot access a device to use SMS text messages
Third-party monitoring *Programme-specific*[1] *Face-to-face*[2]	● Independent monitors from different districts (mitigate community conflicts of interest/ promote anonymous reporting) ● Process monitoring via household visits	● Programme-specific monitoring focuses on programme metrics and performance ● Unclear referral pathways
Independent grievance redress mechanism/ complaints and feedback mechanism (e.g. Talk to Loop, Ground Truth Solutions research) *Collective*[1] *Face-to-face* and *Virtual*[2]	● *Face-to-face*: quantitative and qualitative research on perceptions of aid, feedback on assistance provided ● *Virtual*: toll-free number and online platform (including IVR)	● Difficult to attribute feedback to specific organisations/programmes: people do not consent to sharing personally identifiable information, afraid that providers will trace it back to them, leading to their removal from lists or expulsion from camps ● Referral pathways are not systemic – they depend on organisation-specific initiatives (reactive)
Government-led and International aid agency mechanisms		
MoLSA hotline (Govt. led) (in progress) ***Hotlines*** (International aid agency) *Collective* and *Programme-specific*[1] *Virtual*[2]	● Toll-free numbers ● Provide information on entitlements and eligibility ● Trouble-shoot technical issues with receiving assistance	● Not everyone receives hotline numbers ● Sometimes hotlines are unavailable (they do not connect), sometimes no one answers ● Hotlines do not 'speak' to each other (i.e. they are run separately by individual organisations) ● FAO has the most comprehensive call centres in Nairobi (Kenya) and Garowe (Puntland) – but no one speaks Mai dialect ● Language (dialect) barriers and channel – recipients feel 'intimidated': 'they don't understand us' (CLEAR Global 2023) ● Digital data concerns in Somalia about how personal data is stored and shared (Musa and Wasuge n.d.), as highlighted in the World Food Programme call centre blog

[1] *Collective* vs *Programme-specific*
[2] *Face-to-face* vs *Virtual*
Source: Authors' own. Created using programme documentation and KIIs.

5. Challenges and limitations to accountable social assistance

After three decades, aid in Somalia has become firmly entrenched in the dynamics and structures of society, politics, and the economy. Evidence suggests that aid is being routinely and systematically controlled, diverted, taxed, and corruptly abused at local and national levels (Majid, Abdirahman and Adan 2023; Bryld *et al.* 2017; Harmer and Majid 2016; Human Rights Watch 2013). Although aid diversion is a major focus of current discussions on the future of social assistance in Somalia, there are broader trends in the political economy of aid and programme design implications that also undermine or fragment accountability pathways.

In this section we first examine how clan dynamics and marginalisation affect accountability pathways for social assistance, and the implications for current discussions about corruption and aid diversion in Somalia. We go on to analyse community and government perspectives on government ownership of social assistance programmes and sidelined roles for accountability, including how this influences trust as a key foundation for accountable social assistance. We then outline research participants' feedback on their lack of participation in the design of social assistance, as well as communication gaps and the lack of action taken based on people's feedback as core challenges to accountable social assistance. Finally, we examine the question of capacity when it comes to establishing and maintaining robust accountability pathways.

5.1 Clan dynamics and marginalisation

The ability of people to access accountable social assistance and for aid providers to ensure the intended recipients are supported depends on attention to clan dynamics. Without it, people from minority and less powerful clans and subclans are likely to be excluded because they have been systematically neglected over decades, in part because of the aid sector's blindness to clan dynamics (Maxwell *et al.* 2016; United Nations Accountability Project–Somalia 2019; Hill 2010). There are signs that this is starting to change (Hailey *et al.* 2023), with more attention being given to marginalisation, greater willingness to ask questions about clan identity, and increased prominence of minority-led organisations and their research, such as Minority Rights Group.

Box 5.1: Power and influence in Somalia: factors that influence control over social assistance

Clan structures in Somalia are the source of identity, trust, and influence for different individuals and groups. Broadly, there are three critical factors for (clan-based) power and influence in Somalia:

1. District-level political decision-making;
2. Dominance in the humanitarian system;
3. Dominance in the business/economic system.

What are they influencing?

- Identification/amplification of issues a particular area/community faces, and prioritisation for social assistance.
- Aid allocation – who is included or excluded from recipient lists.
- Aid decision-making (programme design) and employment.

Source: Authors' own.

Power, influence, and marginalisation

Clan affiliation in Somalia is central to how power is exercised and issues are resolved, and where decisions are taken (Adan 2022). Since 2000, clan dynamics have been structured into Somalia's political system. Representation at national level is clan-based. Members of parliament do not have a geographic constituency; rather, they represent clan interests. To stay in power, they endeavour to keep constituents happy and divert resources to areas where their people are. Neighbouring clans experience a 'push and pull' for resources and daily conflict, while geographically distant clans have political relations that are either positive or negative at macro level.

Cultures of participation are also linked to clan power dynamics. Some groups are 'marginalised in plain sight' having been displaced from rural to urban areas due to conflict or climate change (Thomas and Opiyo 2021). As they integrate into urban life, dominant clans see them as a political threat, particularly as Somalia seeks to transition to a 'one person, one vote' system. Historical marginalisation has meant that the capacity and influence of clans varies greatly. In the past four decades of international aid, clan dynamics and power imbalances have affected both who receives assistance and who provides it.

Until the 2020s, the majority of social assistance relied on community-based targeting to identify eligible vulnerable households and individuals (Samuel Hall and Development Pathways 2023). This community-based targeting often relied on dominant clan-based power structures that clashed with international organisations' criteria of vulnerability, creating targeting errors, and concerns around aid diversion and corruption (*ibid.*; KII 4). In many cases, minority and marginalised groups could not communicate with aid providers or community structures due to dialect differences (CLEAR Global 2023).

Key humanitarian and social protection donors increased the focus on the inclusion of marginalised groups, starting with research, and are now pushing for more stringent programme requirements to ensure better and broader accessibility. A Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs report on minority inclusion was a pivotal moment, when donors recognised that 'vulnerable' or 'marginalised' groups were not well defined – or not defined at all (Thomas and Opiyo 2021: 5). Increasingly, aid organisations focus on marginalised people and involve minority rights groups in discussions on social assistance provision, as well as discussions on accountability for vulnerable women at risk of gender-based violence or sexual exploitation and abuse (UNFPA 2021; Women's Refuge Commission and Adeso 2018).

Box 5.2: Clans and accountability in Somalia

Gundell and Allen (2017)[1] chart traditional Somali understandings of accountability and corruption from the pre-colonial period up to the present day. The primary role of the clan and traditional form of justice (*xeer*) meted out by clan elders in providing protection and accountability (particularly in rural areas) is a powerful form of social control as clan members are responsible for the actions of their peers. Gundell and Allen document the collapse of trust in public state institutions, the rise of clannism, and the continuing relevance and weaknesses of traditional elder-based accountability mechanisms. Their findings include:

- There are pre-colonial Somali conceptions of accountability; for example, '"*xisaabtan*" – the Somali dictionary translation for accountability – refers to the idea of "checks and balances," or the need for some oversight of entities that are in power, such as elders or traditional rulers' (*ibid.*: 3).
- 'Generally, in the public Somali discourse corruption is not accepted and is often seen as being un-Islamic.' (*ibid.*: 3)
- 'The Somali word "*bililiqo*" signifies a sort of authorised looting that would take place after the defeat of a certain group, state, or clan.' The authors discuss how this can be applied to the withdrawal of the United Nations Operation in Somalia in 1995, when looting of humanitarian aid solidified the transfer of public assets into private hands. These assets were not owned by either the state or individuals; therefore, such looting was not viewed as stealing: 'this justified form of looting persist[s] and underlies much of the corruption seen in Somalia presently' (*ibid.*: 4).

[1] Funded by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development through the Implementation and Analysis in Action of Accountability Programme.
Source: Authors' own. Information sources cited.

Research participants still perceived these hierarchies without noticing much of the effect of inclusion initiatives. A woman receiving social assistance in Baidoa noted that:

> *community background plays a great role when it comes to our respect in the society, therefore, only the majority clans and people with interest are considered when it comes to what is to be done, not the general interest of the whole community.*
> (Int. 44, woman receiving social assistance, Baidoa)

International organisations often do not analyse the contextual dynamics between VRCs and communities, nor do they consider clan dynamics more broadly before intervening (KII 3). Moreover, practitioner turnover is considerable and inhibits progress on engaging with communities and identity groups (KII 1). An upcoming child-sensitive social protection programme attempts to address marginalisation risks through geographic targeting criteria, selecting districts in particular states based on clan prevalence, but is ultimately constrained by working in areas already selected by either the Baxnaano or SAGAL programmes (KII 7).

While this type of analysis of clans, access, and power is becoming more prevalent for larger social assistance programmes, it remains at the macro level and recipients may not feel any benefit. An international key informant noted that aid providers are still 'unable to tell which clans will be the main recipients per district' (KII 8). As Jaspars, Adhan and Majid note:

> Aid workers and government officials seem to constantly be working with two realities at the same time. One is the official reality where aid is distributed efficiently using new technologies (cash transfers, new quantitative indicators, electronic or digital systems) and where people can be made resilient. The other reality is one where politics and power are prominent, where the distribution of resources is determined by kin and other alliances, and the most vulnerable are marginalised or excluded.
> Jaspars, Adhan and Majid (2020: 52)

Aid providers interviewed were also cognizant that 'access may cause exclusion', in the sense that organisations provide aid where they can access communities, which may not be where the most marginalised people reside, which has created pull factors to areas such as Mogadishu, Baidoa, and Dolow where aid is concentrated (KII 2). For example, the SAGAL programme provides social assistance to pregnant and lactating women in areas with functional health clinics, whereas more marginalised populations may not have access to a health centre at all (Thomas and Eno 2022; KII 2). Conversely, the concentration of social assistance strengthened infrastructure and services in Mogadishu, Baidoa, and Dolow, which provided new opportunities for displaced and marginalised clans to access education and aid, as well as exposure to accountability systems (KII 2). This exposure could create more direct engagement between duty bearers and marginalised groups – if language and representation barriers are addressed.

Efforts to better analyse clan dynamics and ensure international aid does not exacerbate inequalities are largely top down, enforced by large donors of social assistance (KII 1). Donors' demands and requirements play a mixed role in relation to accountability efforts. As one key informant noted, 'donor requirements kill accountability – yet they are a key reason why marginalised groups are on everyone's agenda' (KII 1). On the one hand, donors push to mitigate exclusion of certain groups, making marginalisation a top priority; but their zero tolerance approaches to aid diversion mean implementers are reluctant to engage with communities and explore its nuances, as discussed in subsequent sections.

At the local level, organisations work to counter power imbalances through complementary processes. In late 2022, some organisations introduced a quota for minority groups, as well as food security surveys at village or IDP camp level to complement recipient identification done by VRCs. This was intended as a form of verification to reduce the power of VRCs, which are often dominated by the majority clan in a given area (KII 7). Providers reflected on challenges in maintaining a strong analysis and understanding of local clan dynamics and power structures in large-scale programmes (KII 4).

These initiatives to better tackle clan-based marginalisation are relatively recent in the long history of aid in Somalia. Social assistance is still largely project-specific, so it is difficult to find evidence that these efforts together produce better results in terms of marginalised groups' access to aid and more accountable assistance. This may also be because international providers see clan dynamics as a targeting and allocation issue, with many perceiving this to be a 'field problem' as opposed to something that concerns decision-

making and senior management in Mogadishu or Nairobi. This view of the problem perpetuates a 'don't ask don't tell' approach to ground-level adaptations to national-level guidance and policies on inclusion (KII 1). It is also difficult to determine what it means to be a minority when classification has hitherto been subjective (KII 12).

Interviewees also raised concerns that organisations that have been working in the same communities for a long time could favour certain districts and clans, creating a 'symbiotic relationship' between aid organisations and these groups, in addition to legitimising power structures (KII 1; KII 18). These dynamics contribute to fractured accountability pathways and aid recipients' reluctance to speak out against duty bearers or hold them to account.

Organisation affiliations: international and local social assistance providers

Aid agencies also need to pay attention to clan dynamics in staffing their organisations (KII 15). Dominant power structures are often reflected in the demographic composition of aid organisation staff, 'replicating societal hierarchies' and exacerbating elite capture of aid (KII 1; KII 4). Dominant clans that have made advances in education, economics, and politics, are often the most qualified people during aid recruitment; they in effect become the decision makers (KII 9).

One local authority representative spoke of a 'British clan' of international donors, implementers, and Somali clans working with them (Int. 12, woman with local authority office, Baidoa). Merit-based recruitment can contribute to clan-based power imbalances – people who are experienced and educated (highly qualified) are often not from historically marginalised clans. Minority rights groups advocate for quotas or affirmative action that focuses on training opportunities as well as experience, since many people belonging to minority groups may not have the same language skills or professional experience as other applicants.

Aid organisations' awareness of and progress in addressing these imbalances internally range from 'blindness' to proactive counter-measures (KII 4). As with targeting, there is a tendency to see clan dynamics as a 'field problem' instead of a systemic issue, and there have been concerns about the sensitivities of collecting, analysing, and especially publishing any data on staff affiliation.

Some organisations are taking more proactive approaches. For example, some confidentially map staff affiliation and clan dynamics during recruitment (KII 9). The issue of staff's clan affiliation and their interactions with communities is further complicated because some internationals are Somali expatriates or Kenyans with strong links to Somali clans, which can be positive or negative for community engagement and accountability (*ibid*.).

When aid organisations attempt to counterbalance power dynamics and mitigate aid diversion by filling key positions with people from outside of the region of intervention, the result is often staff who do not speak the dialects needed to communicate with vulnerable communities, especially more marginalised groups (KII 2; KII 5). Nonetheless, organisations that have prioritised clan mapping and adjusted their recruitment accordingly appear to have fewer intrinsic clan biases, or biases are 'diluted' (KII 5; KII 7). This is a promising finding given community perceptions that organisations with broader clan representation at all levels provide more equitable assistance.

Social assistance providers that are actively seeking solutions are looking at how to systematise these initiatives and ensure 'this knowledge is not forgotten' through staff turnover; for example, by using the Humanitarian Response Plan (OCHA 2023c) and, especially, protection entry points to address aid diversion for marginalised groups. But some believe this could cause political tensions that could jeopardise the harmonisation and scaling-up of social assistance across districts (KII 4). For the moment, no one has found a way to make clan affiliation within organisations a public topic that can be discussed openly and acknowledged.

Local organisations are also part of clan dynamics and often represent the dominant clan in an area. Many local organisations centre on a particular leader, which means they have a clan- or family-based identity (KII 7). More marginalised groups have less social, political, or economic capital to form organisations that would have the capacity to deliver aid. So, localising aid based on current international standards (capacity, scope, compliance, etc.) may further entrench power imbalances. Interviewees noted that a good marker of a more inclusive local NGO in Somalia would be how many clans/groups are represented in its leadership.

There were also fears that as local organisations become more involved in providing assistance, there would be fewer independent civil society organisations not involved in aid provision that could play a whistle-blower role in terms of aid diversion, corruption, and gatekeeping.

Box 5.3: Omitting clan affiliation: risk mitigation or an excuse for inaction?

Many aid providers note the dilemma in asking affected people about clan affiliation and the sensitivity surrounding the collection of this type of data at individual or household level. Yet in the 2019 United Nations Operation in Somalia and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees *Voices Unheard* survey (UNSOM and UNHCR 2019), only around 25 per cent of respondents chose not to provide information on their clan affiliation (excluding in Somaliland, where the clan question was not included in the questionnaire):

> it was argued that asking questions about minority clan exclusion might result in harm in the form of reprisals against individuals or might result in increased social tensions. Whilst this principle is an important one, there was an apparent tendency to rate the risks of doing harm as a result of a change in policy as higher than the risk of maintaining a status quo that was acknowledged to be doing harm in the form of excluding some groups in a discriminatory way.
> Thomas and Opiyo (2021: 43)

Source: Authors' own. Information sources cited.

5.2 Aid diversion, corruption, and gatekeeping

The topics of aid diversion and corruption have been at the forefront of aid discussions in Somalia for decades, with a recent resurgence following a 2023 UN report on diversion (Lynch 2023). While the terms are often used interchangeably in the literature and by BASIC Research participants, distinctions matter (see Box 1.1 for key definitions). Whereas aid diversion relates to armed groups or other external parties keeping or demanding a portion of assistance, corruption is about aid providers abusing their power to influence or retain aid for personal and financial gain. Both corruption and aid diversion are occurring in Somalia, therefore attention is needed on both how aid actors negotiate and engage with armed actors, and how authorities put in place measures to manage risk and tackle diversion – but also action to stop internal risks of abuse of power (Hailey *et al*. 2023).

An important aspect of accountability is being able to hold those responsible for corruption or diversion to account. Corrupt practices should be exposed and those responsible fired, arrested, or otherwise sanctioned, but there are few examples in Somalia of this taking place publicly. Key state institutions (the auditor general, attorney general, judiciary, and Parliamentary Financial Committee) lack the resources and technical skills – and most importantly, the political power – to fight corruption (Majid *et al*. 2023; Jaspars *et al*. 2020).

A key component of this local diversion is gatekeeping, a well-researched aspect of humanitarian aid in Somalia (Ground Truth Solutions 2023; Bryld *et al*. 2017; Mumin 2019; UNSOM and UNHCR 2019; McCullough and Saed 2017; HRW 2013). Box 5.4 describes some of the key dynamics of gatekeeping. Bryld (2023) and Thomas and Majid (2023) argue for recognising the role of informal power structures, and that:

> aid agencies should explore developing formal contracts with the owners of the land where IDP settlements have been established. Rent could then be transparently paid – absorbed as part of broader programme costs – and fair and independent reporting mechanisms could be established to help check abuse.
> Thomas and Majid (2023).

Box 5.4: Gatekeepers and systems of influence

There are more than 518,000 IDPs in Mogadishu, displaced from the countryside by drought and conflict. Gatekeepers have developed a business around accommodating them, providing protection and basic services – including dispute settlement, help in emergencies like illness or births, and facilitating crowdfunding for small camp upgrades.

'Gatekeepers are a diverse group 'ranging from community leaders, to businessmen, to militias, to landlords/owners – some are from the IDP communities while others are not', notes a briefing by the UN's Camp Coordination and Camp Management cluster. 'The relationship to and with the IDP community is similarly diverse.'

> While some gatekeepers can be criminal or abusive, at the other end of the spectrum are IDPs themselves, elected as leaders by other camp residents – people who 'care deeply about the well-being of the inhabitants of their settlement', research by Tana found. Rather than being arbitrary and unregulated, a separate study of eight settlements by Tana noted they were actively managed and built on 'broadly shared values and norms'. This included an initial registration process, involving questions aimed at sniffing out potential jihadist insurgents, and regular information-sharing meetings where problems are publicly discussed.
> Mumin (2019).

Source: Authors' own. Information source cited.

Aid diversion is nothing new for Somali communities, colouring their perspectives on fairness and accountability of social assistance:

> *There are a lot of diversions. NGO staff, gatekeepers, and local authority officials are not fair. I might not prove this in a court of law, but there are proven and perceived truths. What I am telling you is the perceived truth.*
> (Int. 25, community leader, Dolow)

Recent research suggests that in some cases, IDPs only get 30 per cent of the aid they are entitled to receive because of different layers of gatekeeping (Hailey *et al*. 2023).

Current discussions around aid diversion focus on community-level corruption, much like the analysis of clan dynamics, with a sense that it does not apply to national or international actors. Aid providers are often frustrated with the lack of transparency surrounding aid diversion reporting and analysis, which makes accountability to communities in the face of corruption allegations exceedingly difficult. One key informant complained that 'seminal reports and findings are available to donors but confidential for everyone else – how is this helpful to other actors or communities themselves?' (KII 6). Another noted that no one ever names a project or an organisation in aid diversion reports, so there is no link to whistle-blowing because the potential loss of funds 'disincentivises disclosure and ownership' (KII 9).

As the literature suggests, gatekeeping practices exist on a spectrum, from perceptions of fair payments made for services accessed (i.e. choosing to pay as a way to fill the vacuum left by a lack of public services) to outright exploitation and corruption (Ground Truth Solutions 2023). Zero tolerance approaches to diversion by donors and aid agencies make it difficult to understand when recipients choose to participate in informal taxation and when they are forced to contribute to corruption and diversion.

Key informants felt the zero tolerance approach made the gatekeeping issue 'completely unsolvable' (KII 10). An interviewee described how their organisation received a complaint of someone having to pay US$10 to a gatekeeper. When they investigated, other cash recipients said they had also paid, but they chose to do so because 'it's actually for services' (KII 7). When the organisation reported this to the donor, the costs related to providing cash to the entire group of people who reported paying something to the gatekeeper became ineligible for the project. The donor expected the interviewee's organisation to cover the cost.

Another key informant noted:

> *You know for a fact it will affect the future funding, because costs are automatically ineligible if diverted… You complete the cycle of cash transfer, you follow the steps properly without a mistake, but then you have a community leader or camp manager going to the beneficiaries saying they know they receive the cash; you must pay $10/month because you get cash. We investigate, find out how many people are affected, try to get money back to people, if they are part of community committees, they are removed… but according to donor procedures, those costs are disqualified. So, what's the incentive to report – or even have a properly functioning system?*
> (KII 2)

The renewed focus on diversion and corruption comes with a degree of inertia and business as usual for many social assistance providers. Donor requirements for reporting and compliance were seen as driving what was prioritised, but with few incentives to transparently report problems.

The focus on gatekeeping and diversion by authorities omits other types of corruption that involve international aid agencies more directly, such as bribes Somali NGOs must pay to obtain contracts, or as part of recruitment processes (Majid *et al.* 2023). Frontline aid agency teams are also reportedly directly involved in diversion (see Box 5.5).

Box 5.5: Representation and exclusion: a form of diversion?

> *There is a high level of corruption involving the implementing staff, the authorities especially the IDP and returnees commission who directs NGOs which IDP to target and which ones not, and gatekeepers collude. There are IDPs who receive more than 7–9 projects at a go. Project benefits are commercialised and there are many businesspeople who are involved. They buy the benefits of [a 6–9-month] cash transfer project at the cost of one month and continue receiving the rest. The issue of registration and fingerprints is manipulated. For us, the main focal points are the IDPs themselves, I don't work with gatekeepers or directed by the IDP and returnees' commission. They always give me a hard time, but I don't care. I am managing [the organisation] from individual well-wishers and I am not going to accept others to abuse me or the charity because Allah will ask me that. They don't even invite me to the coordination meetings because they know I will unearth many things that are happening. I know how each NGO is working and what they are doing and who is covering them. It is only that I don't have the authority and the platform to share the information I have.*
> (KII 18, international charity worker, Baidoa)

> *Cash assistance in Baidoa is an important business commodity. Businesspeople buy eligibility from the NGO staff, gatekeepers, and local authorities, at the cost of excluding needy people.*
> (Int. 15, community leader/elder, Baidoa)

Source: Information sources cited.

Aid agencies have made an effort to start at community level by providing recipients with information on assistance from the outset, so they can hold decision makers to account. In December 2022, the deputy head of UN agencies visited Baidoa because of the uproar over aid diversion, but was received by frustrated actors on the ground who saw nothing new in the situation.

The plan was to work through local advocacy groups and networks tasked with following up with decision makers on programme objectives, eligibility requirements, and information about payments. But competition for funding and 'control of aid' meant the mechanisms used to share information and collect feedback were those owned and managed by aid providers. Media organisations' offers to disseminate information were not taken up by social assistance providers, who preferred to use their own communications teams (KII 6).

The larger the agency or programme, the more perceived control they have and seek to maintain over the reporting mechanisms that monitor their own activities. There is a clear need to substantiate claims and empower fraud investigators to act when abuse occurs, as well as examine perceived risks that lead to paralysing policies, such as zero tolerance for payments to gatekeepers: 'It's about power dynamics and *choice*. If people are skimming off the top before they receive, there's no choice in it' (KII 9).

A crucial challenge identified in the interviews with social assistance decision makers is how to answer the question, 'Who is supposed to be responsible for this? When things are good everyone wants to take credit, when things are not good there is a push to find one entity that is responsible' (KII 6). Others believe that diversion and corruption 'will always be there, [we] just need to reduce it' (KII 11). Interviewees from international agencies suggested several opportunities for shifts in the design of social assistance programmes that might help to mitigate diversion and corruption. They included:

- **Shifts in transfer values:** Humanitarian cash assistance uses a higher transfer value (based on a percentage of the minimum expenditure basket, i.e. the estimated value of a family's basic needs in a month). The assumption is that large amounts attract diversion; social protection programmes provide significantly less cash, which disincentivises gatekeepers to request money. However, to date there is no documented evidence that lower transfer values discourage diversion.
- **Shifts in targeting approaches:**
  o SAGAL's universal approach: categorical targeting (of pregnant or lactating women, for example) removes the power of gatekeepers to influence enrolment.
  o Baxnaano's shift to proxy means testing could reduce diversion attributed to community-based targeting.
- **Leveraging technology and digital cash:** Using mobile money means that it reaches recipients without alerting other people, and two-factor authentication (voice and personal identification number) ensures cash reaches intended recipients (KII 8).
- **Reinforcing accountability best practices on programme entitlements and duration to mitigate perceptions that information gaps are evidence of corruption:**
  o Constant messaging, engaging in an interactive way (KII 11).
  o Grievance redress mechanism monitors and enumerators from other districts (and therefore clans) will mitigate diversion/corruption by frontline staff, as they will not have connections to local communities: 'travel is too far for them to return and extort [money]' (KII 8).

5.3 Government ownership and sidelined roles in accountability pathways

Government leadership and ownership of social assistance programmes in Somalia feature prominently in policy and programme documentation, but this has not translated into government-led design and implementation of social assistance (McLean *et al*. 2021). The continuing dominance of international aid agencies in the design and delivery of social assistance limits the ability of government at federal, regional, and local levels to play a strong role in accountability systems. The governance of Somalia is also contested, with Al-Shabaab continuing to control and influence large parts of south and central Somalia (Mubarak and Jackson 2023). As noted above, the role that Al-Shabaab was playing in accountability was beyond the scope of this study.

It is important to unpack the potential roles of different levels of government in accountability of social assistance in Somalia, to understand the roles and responsibilities of duty bearers in establishing and maintaining strong accountability pathways.

1. **Policy and strategy:** The government is responsible for setting the policy framework for social protection and making political choices about what types of social protection to invest in and prioritise. Yet, in practice, the Government of Somalia has limited power, financing, or influence over international aid actors (Jaspars *et al*. 2023).
2. **Responsibilities to assist and protect:** Under human rights law and as part of global commitments (such as the Sustainable Development Goals), the government has responsibilities to prevent hunger, ensure basic needs are met, tackle malnutrition and so on; it should be possible for citizens to hold it to account for those responsibilities.

3. **Provider of social assistance:** Through new instruments that are more focused on social protection, the government has a role through line ministries as a provider of social assistance to the most vulnerable segments of the population. In practice, most implementation responsibilities remain with international aid organisations. With at least theoretical government ownership, the government has some oversight responsibilities to hold implementing organisations to account.
4. **Sovereign authority:** The government issues aid agencies with the necessary permissions to operate in Somalia, and these agencies must report to the government.
5. **Law and security:** The Government of Somalia has a duty to uphold the law and provide security; it can therefore hold people legally accountable through prosecution for corrupt abuse or diversion of aid. It has security and legal responsibilities (under international humanitarian law and human rights law) to provide safe access to assistance for people receiving it and aid organisations.
6. **Local governance:** Local authorities have responsibilities at district and local levels to ensure people's access to basic goods and services.

The aid system tends to focus on accountability at project level, providing mechanisms such as call centres to allow people to provide feedback on implementation. Organisation-specific accountability systems continue to dominate feedback mechanisms for social assistance in Somalia because they are extensions of programme objectives and set-ups (Bhandira 2022: 21; KII 12).

This neglects the role of the state as a duty bearer and questions of how citizens can hold the state to account for its responsibilities (Ochieng 2010). It leaves a gap in recognising the authority of organisations beyond project implementation (Fox 2016). It is also unclear what constitutes accountability beyond delivery because aid providers cease to recognise responsibilities for what happens to aid once they have handed it over (Knox-Clarke *et al.* 2020). Local authorities are meant to link community structures with district- and federal-level government but are often left out of decision-making processes for social assistance (Wasuge, Musa and Hagmann 2021).

Most accountability mechanisms for social assistance in Somalia are therefore not collective or government owned. This poses challenges around data sharing and use, which complicates referrals and the ability to act on feedback, because organisation-specific data is 'easy to compartmentalise and ignore' when it is not publicly available or shared (KII 6). Where collective mechanisms are in place – such as an emerging and recently operational MoLSA hotline – programme-specific equivalents make it difficult for community members to distinguish between the two.

Moreover, the few collective mechanisms in place struggle to hold aid providers to account. Community members and people receiving social assistance who prefer to use collective, anonymous mechanisms often do not consent to sharing their personal information with the organisation providing assistance for fear of retribution (e.g. community blame for reporting an issue/causing problems) or losing access to aid (KII 12). This is because people's personal data (name, location, and phone number) is linked to registration; unless they trust the organisation, recipients feel that sharing this information, even with a third party, could put them at risk of expulsion or abuse.

There have been recent efforts to involve government actors more systematically in social assistance programming, notably through the Baxnaano and SAGAL programmes. Interviewees from international organisations perceived that the Baxnaano programme was co-designed with the federal government. Federal member states (FMS) were 'intricately involved in key decisions' such as programme objectives, district selection, and recipient eligibility (KII 5). Baxnaano liaison offices are posted in every FMS, where the government has to 'buy into' recipient selection methodology for both the regular programme and its shock-responsive components, including horizontal or vertical expansion. These offices also connect with district-level representation, especially to manage grievance and redress mechanisms (KII 5).

There is, however, a sense that international social assistance agendas for Somalia do not align with the government's social protection policy or programme priorities. Government interviewees noted that even if the government has different intentions and priorities, it feels it must capitulate to other agendas to keep aid coming into Somalia: 'The government does not have the resources to support its needy population and is always forced to accept anything even if the right procedures were not followed' (Int. 3, MoLSA representative, Mogadishu). Consequently, the Social Protection Policy lacks the weight needed to influence the design of current social assistance programmes.

Crucially for accountability, international aid providers feel that 'if no one is taking the policy seriously, the government is not held accountable – and neither are donors… the government that is supposed to implement the policy ignores the policy' (KII 2; KII 15). At the federal and FMS levels, international aid providers felt they had 'good engagement' – but beyond this macro level, not as much (KII 7). Some found it difficult to engage with the government because of lack of formal coordination mechanisms, although the new government has been in place for over a year (KII 2). Lack of national funding and a disconnect between policy and available resources mean decision-making for large-scale social assistance programmes is internationally led, with varying degrees of government input.

Community perspectives on the role of government within social assistance varied greatly and appear to be based on direct, personal experience of the government's presence in the area. Some interviewees saw government actors as excluded from internationally funded social assistance programmes, while others felt that they played a critical role. There was a general perception that the government was not receptive to community feedback, but also was not involved in designing social assistance programmes. Box 5.6 gives examples of these contrasting perspectives.

All of the stakeholder groups interviewed noted the differing roles of the federal government and local authorities. Local authorities were not mentioned as programme design decision makers, but rather as key actors in aid coordination at the district level, mainly for geographical targeting and monitoring NGOs:

> *The local authority is everything because we don't do anything without their consent. We engage them but maybe they want a higher level of engagement, which even at our level we may not be able to do. At the operational office, we have limits.*
> (Int. 23, charitable NGO frontline staff, Dolow)

However, this close involvement at the district level often does not translate to national coordination mechanisms.

Trust is a key driver of accountability pathways (Sabates-Wheeler *et al*. 2019, Fox 2023). Interviewees consistently noted that fragmented accountability mechanisms were undermining what little trust there is between communities, aid providers, social assistance decision makers, and the government, particularly at the federal level.

Federal government officials feel mistrusted, due to Somalia's long conflict and history of humanitarian actors bypassing government structures: 'The tradition of lawlessness over the past 30 years made humanitarian actors behave like the government of Somalia. They feel upset if we tell them anything about accountability' (Int. 1, MoLSA representative, Mogadishu); 'I think the donors and implementing agencies don't trust using the government system or think the government doesn't understand what its people need, and that is the NGO mentality of the past three decades' (Int. 3, MoLSA representative, Mogadishu).

Government engagement: what is meaningful?

'The government's priorities are youth employment and a productive safety net while the current social assistance is more humanitarian-related and short term. Because the government is not engaged meaningfully and donors just do what they think and find easy for them, they fund unconditional and non-universal targeting projects, which are prone to excessive diversion and exclusion.'
(Int. 4, MoLSA representative, Mogadishu)

'They don't engage us during the design. They design their programmes, and after approval and when it is difficult to make changes, they come to us saying that they are involving the government or community. **They bring one ready meal, and they give us a menu to choose the food order, while we have no choice, and if we question the test, they tell us you have no capacity. Meaningful engagement** *for government means being part of the needs assessment, identifying priorities, designing the proposal or what to do to address the needs, being part of the implementation, and monitoring and learning from the project mistakes if any. In this case, the government can own the activities of the project and what is handed over to them.'*
(Int. 1, MoLSA representative, Mogadishu)

'There can be meaningful engagement when the Somali people through their representatives at local and national levels (government) design the social assistance or become part and parcel of the design process, implementation, and monitoring with proper checks and balances.'
(Int. 3, MoLSA representative, Mogadishu)

Box 5.6: In their own words: community perspectives on government engagement

Government constraints in providing accountable, equitable social assistance are based on clan, communication and capacity (KII 7):

*We have no problem with the government officials except those involved in humanitarian and social assistance targeting, who mostly **push NGOs to target the villages they come from** or focus on how they get more from the projects.*
(Int. 25, community leader, Dolow)

*The district commissioner and his two deputies have a big role because they decide on location targeting with implementing agencies. After that, they have little role. **The implementing agencies are only answerable to their donors and give no room for local authorities and communities.***
(Int. 12, minority group representative, Baidoa)

*I was displaced from my [place of] origin due to the drought after I was left with nothing, by the deaths of all [the] animals that I had, and my farm dried. I came to settle in Dolow. Before, I was in my village. I knew nothing about government and leadership, but since then I have known a lot of things at this town, which has some learned people who benefit us sometimes. We have had the opportunity to meet the DC [district commissioner] and his staff who visited the site and oversee the situation of the [IDPs] where they directed the aid providers at the camp. **Although [they do] not frequently visit us, they know our situation and we have a good relationship.***
(Int. 28, IDP woman, Dolow)

Government officials do not listen and respond to our feedback and complaints.
(Int. 37, female gatekeeper, Baidoa)

I am living in this IDP site for almost four years now and I have never encountered any individual or group of persons claiming to be from the government who asked how we are doing and what our concerns were, and I haven't had the opportunity to talk to any government official, therefore, there is no way they would listen to our suggestions and opinions. I don't know the reason, but I believe as our government they have a responsibility towards their citizens. They have left all the responsibilities to humanitarian agencies who have no capacity to reach all the community members.
(Int. 40, IDP woman receiving social assistance, Baidoa)

The only responsibility of the government in my district that is fulfilled is keeping us safe, maintaining law and order to keep the place secure from any armed forces that may be a threat, but we have no other relationship as a government and its citizens. The government has no idea whether we die of hunger or not, the only thing we are surviving with after God is the assistance we receive from organisations and our neighbours. We have no chance to meet them and discuss our worries [with] them because if we visit the social affairs office, we do not meet anyone. Either the doors are not opened or we are told the person responsible isn't available.
(Int. 42, male community leader, Baidoa)

The government in my area do not have any idea [about] the community members at the IDP [camp] whatsoever, because I have never seen anyone enquiring from us any information claiming to represent the government since we have settled here.
(Int. 32, IDP elderly woman SA recipient, Dolow)

Since we are living in a politically unstable country where there is no well-established government who can cater for its citizens, the local government are doing [their] best to support the displaced and also the host communities in Baidoa. The government are involved and participate in the activities of the programme implementation through provision of security, guiding the implementing partners, for they are more knowledgeable when it comes to the community and also providing legal formalities of documents when needed.
(Int. 44, woman receiving social assistance, Baidoa)

Finally, others sympathised with the perception of government being left out of social assistance decision-making:

The status of government involvement and participation in the programme is no way different from the community; just like the community, the government is also involved in the programme when everything has already been concluded, only left for the programme to be implemented.
(Int. 33, IDP woman and community leader, Dolow)

Source: Authors' own. Information sources cited.

Interviewees across stakeholder groups highlighted frustrations in trying to strengthen government-led social assistance schemes, with little trust (and even interaction) between different layers of government and affected communities. Communities often do not trust the government because they have little exposure to its policies and agendas with regard to social assistance. It is therefore difficult to use local government structures to implement newly established systems for delivering and communicating about social assistance, in addition to insecurity and access concerns.

Trust and government ownership of social assistance projects over the years also go hand in hand. Local authorities and community leaders, engaged for years largely as 'approvers' rather than designers, perceive that donors only trust their international partners: 'The priorities of the donors are totally misplaced. They missed the connection with the communities and government authorities. They only trust their implementing agencies, but they also need to give space to the communities and their government authorities' (Int. 21, Local authority, Dolow).

Interviewees suggested that giving the local government a chance to represent wider community interests (and seeing how it influences accountability), complemented by continuous and proactive dialogue, could help to strengthen trust between the government, communities, and aid providers in designing and delivering social assistance.

Box 5.7: Trust and social assistance in Dolow, Gedo district

Dolow has a large concentration of social assistance programmes, in part because of the combination of IDPs and vulnerable communities with relative peace and security. The Government of Somalia also focused on the area because of this level of access. Drought-stricken areas in southern parts of Somalia 'like to look for the aid' (Int. 31, woman receiving aid, Dolow). IDPs keep coming to the Dolow region, because 'they are looking for aid and we get it here' (*ibid*.). Yet some IDPs reported that aid was not distributed according to need and was diverted to local people (KII 3).

There is a general mistrust between local authorities and the Jubaland state government, which is the main interlocutor for international organisations providing aid in the area. Local authorities complained about 'big deals' being negotiated in Kismaayo [a regional hub] where they were not involved. They felt that because they did not have a 'smooth relationship' with the authorities in Jubaland, their concerns and priorities were not taken into consideration, which prevented aid from reaching areas in need (KII 3). There were also different ideas about who represented the community at the local level – local authorities, VRCs, or community groups – and who was 'only taking care of clansmen' (Int. 29, male community representative, Dolow).

Source: Authors' own. Information sources cited.

5.4 Lack of participation in social assistance design

In this section we examine levels of participation on social assistance programmes: who participates, when, and for what purposes. Without meaningful participation it is difficult for assistance to be accountable at local levels. The overall picture is one in which people's ability to be meaningfully informed and participate in assistance through the programme cycle is very limited. The UN's Somalia National Community Engagement and Accountability (CEA) Strategy and Action Plan (May 2022–24) notes that 'all too often programmes are designed for donors, managers and others, without the engagement and active participation of diverse and inclusive communities' (Bhandira 2022: 1).

Evidence suggests that vulnerable people such as women, IDPs, minorities, young people, and people with disabilities have few opportunities to participate in decisions about aid. A 2023 survey by Ground Truth Solutions found that:

> Only certain people can influence decisions about aid, including camp leaders, camp committees, village heads, clan elders, and district authorities, whereas ordinary people's voice is not heard. Men are more able to influence aid than women who, due to cultural or religious barriers, have fewer

opportunities to participate. IDPs, minorities, youth, and persons with disabilities were also mentioned as having the least influence.
Ground Truth Solutions (2023: 6)

Similarly, Development Pathways found that only a third of households thought they could contest or complain about the choice of recipients (Samuel Hall and Development Pathways 2022: 32).

In a survey of IDPs and host communities, Thomas and Opiyo also found minorities were less well consulted in the design of interventions, and that:

minority settlement respondents were less likely to know how to complain, less likely to have made a complaint and where they had complained were more likely to report that no action had resulted… They got their information from different sources (the radio) and were much less likely to be consulted or to attend community meetings.
Thomas and Opiyo (2021: 6)

Research participants complained about extractive consultations with little space for dialogue, particularly when community engagement was limited to agency-appointed community representatives and direct programme recipients. There is an inherent tension between short timelines for delivery of assistance and accountability mechanisms, which follow longer-term, development-oriented processes.

Accountability channels and programme touchpoints for communities and recipients are important to examine. Existing mechanisms do not necessarily provide the opportunity to participate in programme decision-making that communities and recipients are requesting. Interactions with providers are reserved for recipients and focus on implementation, often being limited to trouble- shooting and satisfaction with delivery processes. These are less like accountability pathways and more like programme implementation requirements, where providers' needs, not community priorities, set and drive the agenda.

It is therefore unclear what the community knows (or should know), and information sharing is not linked to programme performance metrics.[5] The majority of feedback data collected through organisation or programme-specific channels is not public, even via aggregated reports or anonymised analysis. For emerging social assistance programmes that use MoLSA channels, it is unclear whether this feedback will be made public (KII 7). Integrated mechanisms and referrals are opaque to many communities, who choose not to trust them for fear of losing the little assistance they have (Int. 30; Int. 31; Int. 40, 44).

What are seen as 'pre-cooked programmes' contribute to community sentiments that social assistance is designed 'behind the scenes' (KII 18). Closed-door design for social assistance programming excludes a number of key stakeholders such as young people, women, people with disabilities, local organisations advocating for community priorities, and frontline staff of charitable organisations with valuable insights into community–aid provider relations. Attempts to include community perspectives are hampered by many layers of contracting when donors work with their partners and the federal government without direct community involvement (KII 18). Box 5.8 provides examples of views from different stakeholders interviewed about people's ability to participate in decision-making processes.

Most programmes struggle to involve a wide range of community members, interest groups, and potential recipients, even during the implementation and monitoring phases of an already established project (KII 2). Aid providers interviewed raised concerns that engaging communities before projects are approved creates serious risks in terms of managing expectations and potential insecurity or aid diversion if plans are known in advance. Frontline teams engaging directly with communities are usually not part of the programme design either, so they often do not feel they have the ownership or capacity to involve communities in co-design:

[Programme] design is important but when we are designing, we are not sure whether it will be approved, and the community will think what was designed has been approved and we hide from them. Sharing project details with community members may also cause security issues and that is why we can't share details until the implementation time.
(Int. 16, local NGO representative, Baidoa)

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[5] Baxnaano and SAGAL programme documents.

Box 5.8: Participation in decision-making processes for social assistance in Somalia

The system which is used by the programme officers tends to benefit the already fortunate ones in the society. The main problems arise from the community consultations, where the programme officers meet solely some individuals who claim to [be working in] the community's interest while it isn't the case, and discuss the social assistance to be implemented while the rest of the community members who have all the right to know are not there.
(Int. 44, woman receiving social assistance, Baidoa)

We involve the [community] when we are doing assessments to identify the needs only. We don't involve them to design projects. Mostly we get the needs of the communities and partners using the same information to develop the projects and agree with donors. Even we as local NGOs are only involved once the project is approved.
(Int. 16, local NGO representative, Baidoa)

When developing the proposals even myself I only provide information to those developing it, I have little input.
(Int. 23, charitable organisation frontline staff member, Dolow)

As local NGOs, we are not involved in the program design; the main partners write proposals and agree with the donors, and we implement them. All our activities and partnerships are project based, with no relation after the project ends.
(Int. 26, local NGO frontline worker, Dolow)

The programme implementers are the ones who decide our involvement since we have no power to decide anything. Through being a recipient, the communities are involved in the programme by being a beneficiary of the implemented service. Apart from the community leaders who represent the community by being the mediators between us and the organisations, the rest of [our] involvement is the same, either involved as a recipient or never involved.
(Int. 27, woman receiving social assistance, Dolow)

Source: Authors' own. Information sources cited.

Moreover, programme quality elements and processes needed to meet donor requirements, such as needs assessments, targeting methods, risk analysis, and vetting of payment systems, appear to be at odds with involving people in the design.

Many IDPs consulted recognised the difficulty in responding to the needs and preferences of large groups of displaced people, because their needs are varied and on a massive scale. However, several noted that 'if there is assistance to be provided to the community they should be consulted' (Int. 38, female community leader, Baidoa), signalling an understanding that wider community engagement could be done without necessarily raising expectations or increasing security concerns.

People interviewed saw participation as narrowly linked to particular projects and organisations. Community engagement therefore focuses on making sure recipients understand specific programme entitlements such as duration and complaints mechanisms (KII 9). Some social assistance recipients, especially IDPs, described positive interactions with aid providers: 'We meet and talk during selection where we are asked about our situation, information about my household and myself, and what I should expect since I am among the beneficiaries' (Int. 41, IDP woman, Baidoa). Yet this continues to be on aid agencies' terms. The same woman went on to say that while aid providers listened, they did not act on suggestions:

For example, we suggest that they assist in a way which would improve our lives and that we are able to cater for our needs in future, like investment and life skills; they then implement garbage collection, which we can do on our own.
(*Ibid.*)

Community representatives and local authorities also mentioned concerns about losing access to aid for their constituents if they demanded action, with some claiming they had direct experience of assistance being redirected elsewhere if international organisations perceived them as being difficult: 'If we ask for changes in the project activities, we are intimidated that the project will be taken to other districts. Because our people need assistance, and we don't have resources to assist we are obliged to accept' (Int. 21, local authority representative, Dolow).

There is a strong sense of inconsistency across social assistance providers and programmes when it comes to consultations and participation. Thomas and Opiyo (2021) report on extractive data production with little local input into design, little feedback to participants, lack of coordination on research among aid actors, repeated data collection, procedural 'box ticking' monitoring and evaluation, with limited uptake or sharing of findings: 'Organisations follow their protocols and different organisations have different ways and protocols. Some consult [on] their programme with the community leader, others with the community leader and members. The rest just implement what they want to implement without consulting' (Int. 38, female community leader, Baidoa).

Providers recognised these inconsistencies, but focused on coordination as a mitigation measure: 'Almost all implementing agencies have their own way of implementing projects and managing accountability, but we share our different experiences' (Int. 22, charitable organisation frontline staff member, Dolow). This excludes communities and authorities from exchanges on programme approaches.

Box 5.9: Community definitions of decision-making

Programme accountability means – programme design and implementation are all-inclusive.
(Int. 24, local NGO worker, Dolow)

*Involvement does not mean telling you what to do and asking which locations to target but asking **what the need is and what should be done, how [it] should be done, who does what, and the control and measuring approaches, among others.***
(Int. 12, minority group representative, Baidoa)

***Just because we are needy, it doesn't mean we don't have a choice.** If we [were] involved in project design, we would tell the implementers our main priorities.*
(Int. 30, woman receiving social assistance, Dolow)

Source: Authors' own. Information sources cited.

5.5 Communication gaps and limited use of feedback

Who collects feedback and who funds feedback initiatives ultimately influences what type of feedback communities provide. Attempts to build checks and balances into accountability systems may not serve their functions if communities and recipients cannot distinguish between programmes and aid providers. Collective, independent feedback mechanisms such as Talk to Loop have gained traction since 2021 because they provide an anonymous and confidential service that links multiple channels (hotline, website, SMS, interactive voice recordings) to a central feedback and complaints mechanism (Bhandira 2022; Loop Somalia 2023). Information provision (on available assistance) has improved somewhat for men, but it is mainly through camp leadership, which can mean the information does not reach groups such as women or marginalised clans and subclans. This 'exacerbates power imbalances' (Ground Truth Solutions 2023: 14).

There was a general understanding among aid agency staff interviewed that diversifying communication channels is crucial to providing information about programmes, capturing different types of feedback, and enabling proper checks and balances for confidential reporting and accountable social assistance. The channels meant to reinforce transparent information sharing, systematised feedback, and accountable

programming aim to form 'layers of accountability' that offer recipients different avenues for redress. If they face problems with the VRC, for example, they can approach the (international) agency; if their concern is with the agency, they can reach out to the MoLSA hotline (KII 11). However, making layers of accountability work in practice is very challenging.

A CDAC Network review of communication, community engagement, and accountability in the Horn of Africa found that there is plenty of feedback, but it is not used adequately to inform decision-making and information, and analysis is not necessarily shared with communities. Multiple uncoordinated complaints and feedback mechanisms create confusion among people in need (Nzimbi and Thurston 2023). Moreover, despite the vast amounts of data collected and analysed, there is 'little uptake and practical use of aid information, [which is] rarely shared with or consumed by other users' (Wasuge *et al.* 2021: 5). A UN report in 2022 noted that aid providers seek data on community feedback without meaningfully answering the 'so what' question: '[W]hat are we going to do differently as a result of all this data and information?' (Bhandira 2022: 21).

Table 5.1: What are people saying? Examples of feedback from people receiving social assistance (2023)

Source	Feedback
Talk to Loop (virtual: interactive voice response, hotline)	● People often call to report personal cases directly (as opposed to reporting rumours/general information, as seen in other contexts such as the Philippines). ● Women ask about cash and health, while men ask for information on agriculture and livelihoods support. ● Cash is a big element of what people ask about, reporting cases of aid diversion or corruption. Common questions include 'Why did I stop receiving [aid]? Did the programme end or am I no longer eligible? Why did I receive U$10 when last month it was U$20? Is it really mandatory to give 20–30% to the strongman?' (KII 9). ● Aid diversion and corruption go hand in hand: many people call to report the same levels of diversion to IDP camp landowners (30%) and corruption among programme staff (30%), almost as if it is 'legislated' (KII 12). ● Information campaigns are effective in raising awareness: after a UNICEF campaign about rights, Loop saw a spike in reporting about gender-based violence. ● There are currently no open pathways for communities to provide direct feedback to the government in Somalia. ● People report to Loop when the alternative channels are not accessible, not working, or not trusted. Giving people options gives them agency.
Ground Truth Solutions (Cash Barometer perception research)	● People still find it difficult to communicate with aid providers directly: *The organisations that come here to register… are always in a hurry, they don't use public speakers and there are many people – someone standing behind may not hear anything, and when you ask around, you may get different information.* (man, location B) ● People often feel powerless: *I think we don't have the power to raise our voices. We rely on aid… Camp leaders do not want people to complain a lot to the organisations [or] aid providers will identify that camp as a messy place with no law and order.* (woman, location A) ● Women are excluded, and social assistance exacerbates this: *Men dominate decision-making. We don't have any influence.* (woman, location A)
Somalia Community Engagement and AAP Working Groups	● People are unclear about entitlements and basic programme information. ● Community members fear 'reprisal, organisations pulling out, and withdrawal of benefits should they report any concerns' (Nzimbi and Thurston 2023). ● People are unsure where to raise their issues and how they will be handled; referrals are still lacking, and there need to be clearer pathways to channel feedback for action within the international cluster system.

Source: Authors' own. Information sources cited.

BASIC Research findings largely confirmed gaps in communication and broad inaction once recipients provided feedback. Power dynamics, gatekeeping, and inequitable access to assistance influence the feedback people give, and how they consent to its use, according to community representatives and aid providers. People often do not give their consent to share their contact details or names with providers or anyone who would be able to deal with the issue for fear of retribution (KII 12). Call centres can identify recipients by their phone numbers, so they fear retribution for 'complaining' – a 'strongman' (a camp landowner or local leader) could kick them out of the camp; they could be removed from the recipient list, and even face physical or gender-based violence (KII 9).

Despite the plethora of feedback mechanisms, consultations suggested that most recipients cannot distinguish between the different social assistance programmes; programme turnover and short timeframes make it difficult to understand who provides what and for what purpose. Several key informants were not surprised: 'To be honest, why should they?' (KII 7). Communities may not know the difference between humanitarian cash and social assistance; sometimes only the duration of a programme would reveal which one they were part of (KII 6).

People therefore use independent mechanisms because they want to be referred for assistance without direct risk to themselves or their families (KII 12). However, people's reluctance to provide contact details due to fear of retribution makes it difficult for independent actors to resolve specific claims and, more broadly, reinforce accountability pathways between social assistance recipients and specific providers, even when people say they want an intermediary to represent them and witness their problems. Feedback provided to decision makers is based on trends, which makes it easier for providers not to take responsibility for problems. Some local civil society organisations have provided support and referrals to other types of assistance, which offers promising results, but results are under-documented and solutions difficult to scale across districts (*ibid.*).

People within Somali communities interviewed for this research felt that communication on social assistance programming is fragmented:

> *There are many social assistance programmes in the Baidoa district, but these programmes don't communicate, share information, and learn from each [other]. Each implementing agency comes to the local authority to explain what they want to do without explaining the details of the projects.*
> (Int. 12, minority group representative, Baidoa)

Community members and leaders interviewed also felt that face-to-face interaction with different social assistance providers was limited to specific programme activities or on agencies' terms:

> *They listen to our opinion if they are available; it is not possible to get in touch with them unless they have visited the camps. There are government offices designed for the community to report complaints and give feedback, most of the time [they are] either closed or no one is there to be contacted. So due to those problems it is not easy to complain to them; so they visit the sites once in a while. That's when we tell [them] our concerns and they record it.*
> (Int. 29, assistant community leader man, Dolow)

> *[Organisations] only work with the committees they set [up] in the villages. They don't talk to community leaders; they are accountable to the communities, and they don't ask us for feedback. To whom do we complain? The same people we complain about. We don't see [who] to complain to and I don't think if we send information to the higher managers of the NGOs they will respond to us.*
> (Int. 25, community leader, Dolow)

Social assistance providers are aware that the average recipient is more interested in face-to-face interaction to register complaints or participate in information-sharing sessions than using an app or call centre (Ground Truth Solutions 2023). This motivates efforts to expand the physical presence of aid organisations beyond the capital and urban hubs, because distance and proximity to centres may lead to exclusion (KII 5). At the same time, some are cognizant that certain individuals or groups (subclans) are extremely disenfranchised and will not approach the centres at all, so international actors seek to reinforce strong communication and citizen engagement campaigns.

Emerging social assistance programmes, such as the Child Sensitive Social Protection scheme launched in 2023, aim to leverage existing mechanisms and structures rather than create new, programme-specific channels. Consultations revealed a continued preference for face-to-face interaction, and using community centres where people feel comfortable, particularly among women's groups (KII 11; KII 13). Community representation focal points such as VRCs are reportedly problematic in terms of influencing location and recipient selection, potentially excluding certain groups (such as marginalised clans), but are a key community entry point. New social assistance schemes seek to improve the neutrality and inclusion of these representation structures; for example, by stipulating that women should make up 40 per cent of each committee, and that committees' membership must include people from marginalised/minority or IDP groups (KII 11).

Virtual channels such as hotlines are confusing; when they malfunction or do not meet people's information needs, however briefly, rumours circulate that these channels are not worth the effort:

> *There are different ways in which we communicate, including through calling numbers; they visit the IDP and there are also CFM [complaints and feedback mechanism] teams which collect community feedback and complaints with whom we communicate to and pass our information. There are issues with communication, because the short code number of the organisation doesn't get answered, and if we complain to them about our needs and worries, they do not act on the issue and we are unable to understand why collect information if not to solve the problem.*
> (Int. 27, woman receiving social assistance, Dolow)

Box 5.10: Views on communication and feedback options

> *There are toll-free numbers and people are asked to call in case there are issues they want to let us know [about]. Unfortunately, the IDPs don't understand it; they [would] rather talk to the camp leaders, who also call us, and such scenarios are not good or healthy feedback systems. It might not be ideal, but we use telephones and WhatsApp groups to communicate with camp leaders and [it] works well. Because there is no well-documented feedback system, I am not sure which approach is better than the other.*
> (Int. 11, international agency frontliner, Baidoa)

> *We inform our community leader, who also informs the programme focal points; and if it is something that they can solve right away they tend to solve [it], and if not, they explain that there is nothing they can do about it.*
> (Int. 27, woman receiving social assistance, Dolow)

> *To the programme staff, yes, they solve [a problem] when the problem is easy and requires [little] effort to solve, like a correction of [a] number, a beneficiary who wants to understand a certain thing from the programme.*
> (Int. 28, IDP woman, Dolow)

Source: Authors' own. Information sources cited.

Another research participant reflected on potential information biases arising from preferred face-to-face channels that rely on word-of-mouth information from camp leaders, who may have their own agenda.

The people tasked to follow up issues are often not decision makers themselves and often not involved in designing programmes. One international donor noted that even basic 'information sharing is relegated to communication departments, who are understaffed or have different profiles' from what is needed to adapt social assistance based on feedback (KII 17). As a result, communities are not aware of decisions being made or actions taken on the basis of their feedback or participation in research initiatives (KII 14). Social assistance providers attempt to close the feedback loop using mass messaging via mechanisms already in place, and linking with social behaviour change initiatives such as U-Report, WhatsApp, SMS, and radio broadcast channels; but often the aim is to disseminate feedback to 'programme beneficiaries' rather than the wider community (KII 11).

Whether feedback on social assistance in Somalia comes from the government, community representatives, or recipients themselves, it is largely about programme implementation rather than design. Turning feedback into action tends to focus on problem solving and trouble-shooting technical issues in implementation and cash delivery. Because feedback data is not usually public, it is difficult to promote collective analysis while assigning specific responsibilities to social assistance providers, particularly the MoLSA. Reports publish recommendations and feedback from Somali people, but there are few on how this information has been used to inform aid programmes. There continues to be a sense that accountability, especially humanitarian AAP, is about 'extractive' questions that are never answered or acted on by those providing cash assistance (KII 14).

Social assistance providers also highlighted tensions between their programmes and specific mandates, and broader feedback that they are not sure how to manage. They often visit programme locations and speak directly to people to understand how they perceive the programme, and these visits usually result in requests to continue the assistance – particularly because most recipients agree that US$20 per month is not sufficient to meet their needs (KII 2).

Community members and recipients frequently raise concerns that extend beyond the remit of a social assistance programme, forcing providers to confront broader socioeconomic concerns; for example, when young people appreciate the cash and training they receive, but outline the difficulties in getting a job in Somalia if they do not belong to the 'right' clan, especially because IDPs are seen as outsiders (KII 2; KII 12). Programme staff, especially frontline teams, are unsure how to respond beyond recording feedback and integrating it into their reporting. The perceived inability to act on community feedback is partly a coordination issue, highlighting the need for referral pathways and links to actors that provide complementary services, and partly a gap in government oversight – the absence of linkages to duty bearers that could connect concerns as part of broader accountability efforts. However, referrals are generally opaque, even between aid providers, and it can be difficult to track progress and resolution.

One interviewee noted that this cycle of inaction seems to be by design, given that standard messaging and proactive communication on social assistance programme design (entitlements and processes) – a foundational good practice for the accountability of any programme – are still not systematically in place after years of assistance. Moreover, the incentive to 'protect the brand' of an organisation or programme in a tense environment of renewed focus on aid diversion and corruption means information is 'aggregated and extracted, so [they] are never directly accountable or responsible for communicating back to communities' (KII 12). As many people providing feedback do not want to be identified and most of the data is not public, it is difficult for communities or third parties to hold providers to account.

Use of media and technology

There have been calls to use more diversified methods for social accountability that include media, in particular radio, for at least a decade (Hedlund *et al*. 2013; Harmer and Majid 2016). Across stakeholder groups, there is a keen understanding of how to leverage technology to improve accountability and transparency. Other promising practices are outlined in Box 5.11.

Technology has changed how recipients communicate with social assistance providers:

> *[It] plays a critical factor in accountability. Implementing agencies can use mobile phones for social assistance transfers, data collection, and beneficiary verifications among others. Social media plays a very important role in accountability because people post any wrongdoing they see.*
> (Int. 1, MoLSA, Mogadishu)

SMS and interactive voice response are used extensively, and communications are adapted to reflect local preferences. For example, some communities told providers they preferred to receive voice messages in their dialect later in the day (after work) when it came to general information, while they preferred to have written confirmation [in their own dialect] of their specific entitlements, despite literacy barriers, as a way to guarantee assistance (KII 7).

Box 5.11: Promising practices: using technology to strengthen accountability and participation

In Somalia, interactive radio programmes with SMS messaging aim to build public awareness, and spaces for debate among citizens, and with national and international decision makers. Africa's Voices Foundation and partner organisations have led radio campaigns on themes of preventing and countering extreme violence (Africa's Voices Foundation 2022a), elections (Africa's Voices Foundation 2022b), durable solutions to displacement (Moman and Mohammed 2019), education (Mohamed 2021), and changing behaviour during the Covid-19 pandemic (Africa's Voices Foundation 2020):

- Published reports on these programmes detail recommendations that participating citizens identified, but there is little documentation on whether or how aid decision makers took up and used this feedback to inform aid programme design and implementation.
- Moman and Mohammed (2019) found that the citizen-led discussions on displacement and durable solutions in Mogadishu successfully built a large-scale inclusive dialogue between host communities, displaced people, and key decision makers in the sector that was largely inclusive of vulnerable people (displaced people, women). Participants overwhelmingly valued the discussion, seeing it as a safe space in which communities could exchange and hear each other's ideas, and for decision makers to respond to them.
- Lessons that were learned from the behaviour change campaign during the pandemic, which aimed to reach the most vulnerable women, IDPs, young people, and minorities, included: the importance of pre-existing, trusted communications platforms; adapting activities to on-the-ground realities; timely analysis of SMS messages to ensure information flow; case management through a one-to-one platform to address individual cases and respond to safeguarding issues; and pre-mapping of health services and other referral partners to escalate urgent concerns (Africa's Voices Foundation 2020).
- The Camp Coordination and Camp Management Cluster led the creation of a common community engagement and accountability platform in IDP sites, combining radio (independent media), hotlines, and face-to-face consultations (help desks and community meetings) to 'ensure widespread access to free-flowing information about the response', mitigating information and feedback gatekeeping that previously prevented IDPs from engaging directly with aid providers (Bhandira 2022: 11).

Source: Authors' own. Information source cited.

Stakeholders, however, particularly those representing marginalised groups, feel the potential for technology to strengthen accountability pathways is limited because it is agency centric. 'Technology plays an important role, but implementing agencies use only what facilitates and makes their job easy, such as mobile money transfer. They could use technology for accountability, but they don't' (Int. 12, minority group representative, Baidoa). Community leaders and aid providers often mentioned they used mobile phones to communicate with representatives (Int. 29, assistant community leader man, Dolow), which could further bridge gaps in information sharing and face-to-face interaction, for example: 'Either [through] use of technology on mobile phones or through public meetings at the IDP site, the community can be gathered or informed what the programme is all about and its details before the kind of assistance is decided' (Int. 41, IDP woman, Baidoa).

5.6 The question of capacity

Capacity was cited as both a driver and blocker of accountability. Aid providers emphasised soft skills as key capacities needed for greater accountability in social assistance, such as community engagement skills, and a 'positive attitude' when listening and responding to feedback (KII 2). Others wanted to see diversification of capacities to deliver social assistance to other types of providers such as community organisations or local leadership: 'Frontline staff and community actors such as VRCs need more training to deliver social assistance. Civil society organisations can be whistle-blowers in case they see issues that need attention' (Int. 5, independent consultant, Mogadishu).

Capacity was also seen as the ability to put community suggestions into action, such as proactive communication and engagement in programme design. According to some donors and providers, these community priorities are extremely difficult to operationalise early enough for people to feel adequately informed and involved. But the capacity to do so is contingent upon having staff on the ground; often, this is constrained by lengthy or delayed processes to agreeing contracts (KII 13).

Interviewees also had a sense that social assistance donors and decision makers emphasised technical capacity to design and deliver programmes above local knowledge, thereby favouring 'tried and true' international partners rather than government entities as duty bearers: 'Yes, we lack the capacity. It does not mean we don't know what we need for our people. Capacity… must start from somewhere and they should start working with the government and capacity will come' (Int. 1, MoLSA representative, Mogadishu).

6. Opportunities to improve accountability

Given the decades-long history of limited accountability of social assistance in Somalia, and the challenges of continuing conflict, limited access, and divided governance, there are no quick fixes to improve and address deeply embedded systemic challenges that need fundamental changes to how aid is delivered. Nonetheless, this research suggests that there are opportunities to improve accountability in existing approaches. In this section we outline opportunities that research participants proposed, compare them with prospects in existing evidence, and offer recommendations for accountability of social assistance.

Community members, leaders, and organisations, whether they received social assistance directly or not, suggested three broad areas of improvement for accountability in the design and delivery of social assistance in Somalia: using more system-wide (rather than programme-specific) approaches to proactively share public information and decision-making; improving how existing mechanisms function; and expanding the concept of representation.

Minority rights groups and community-based organisations commended the progress made on reaching greater numbers of marginalised people. This was achieved through both overcoming language barriers and increasing attention to diverse recruitment in aid organisations. Generally, community members and representatives wanted to be informed about social assistance priorities before they were implemented, so they could be more involved in the design (Int. 13; Int. 25; Int. 28). Social assistance providers often ask about their needs, but rarely share information on how they design and prioritise aid programmes.

Similarly, much of the face-to-face interaction with social assistance providers is for assessments or monitoring, which focus on recipients (rather than the broader community) and extracting information. Communities would like to see connections between individual assistance and infrastructure support, especially programmes linked to income, livelihoods, and employment. Interviewees wanted to see a real appetite to address corruption and diversion that goes beyond community-level investigations and zero tolerance approaches. They also called for a bigger role for the government at local and federal levels in designing social assistance programmes and actioning community feedback.

People from different regions and of different genders are likely to prefer different ways of participating, but they generally agreed that public forums where people can decide 'what is best for the community' make the most sense for communities in central Somalia. This issue is explored in Box 6.1. Public forums, a key channel suggested by communities and local authorities to strengthen information sharing, accountability, and participation in social assistance, do not feature prominently in the accountability pathways for social assistance in Somalia. Promisingly, several key informants noted that public meetings did not pose particular security risks and were being planned within their programmes, although they had not been implemented across the major social assistance programmes (KII 8; KII 11; KII 13). Similarly, there was growing recognition that national social assistance programmes should leverage formal and informal community networks, such as women's and youth groups, as key allies/community mobilisers (KII 11). These forums and engagements have not been formalised or rolled out systematically.

Box 6.1: The case for public forums: research findings and existing evidence

Across locations, clans, and stakeholder groups, research participants highlighted a preference for public meetings or forums where social assistance providers could proactively and openly share programme information and discuss priorities with a wider group of people than community representatives and direct recipients:

The system of them visiting the site is useful and should be more frequent, and whenever they receive any information that interests the community, they should do something about it.
(Int. 43, woman receiving social assistance, Baidoa)

The communities have representatives who act on their behalf, but there are some things which… should be addressed directly. Public meetings should be held.
(Int. 33, IDP woman and community leader, Dolow)

Any method in which the whole community are able to know what is being done at the site and who is providing what, where no one is in the dark about what is going on, be it public meeting, through community members, through phone calls – any best one can do.
(Int. 28, IDP woman, Dolow)

We want NGOs to tell us – even if in a public meeting – what they want to do, which village they want to target, why they selected those villages, the number of people to be targeted or registered, what [is] the entitlement and how long. That will be enough for us.
(Int. 15, community leader/elder, Baidoa)

We prefer [a] community gathering, and all project information, including caseload and entitlement, made public. Why do they hide such information and tell the committees they set up if there are no issues? For accountability purposes, they should make it public. If they use technology such as Facebook it is ok, but they should put the caseload per village, targeting or selection criteria, and entitlements.
(Int. 25, community leader/elder, Dolow)

Research participants' suggestions echo recommendations by Transparency International in 2016, which emphasised transparency and face-to-face dialogue:

The establishment of **open and transparent joint meetings** between agencies, authorities, camp leaders and local populations, as well as the use of other mediums (such as call centres) should be considered (recognising that facilitating such meetings is an extreme challenge given the power dynamics involved). Face-to-face dialogue… is more likely to capture concerns regarding corruption (Steets *et al*. 2016). Integrity networks, such as those developed on the development portfolio of donor activity, might be usefully shared with humanitarian counterparts to develop similar approaches.
Harmer and Majid (2016).

Source: Authors' own. Information sources cited.

A women's group leader recognised it was not possible to involve everyone, but that at least community representatives could attend meetings at the design stage to identify priorities that aid actors could select from a list – as opposed to the other way around, as is currently the case (Int. 13, representative of a woman-led community-based organisation, Baidoa):

Many organisations, and aid recipients themselves,[6] call for increased attention to the representation, participation, and decision-making role of aid recipients as camp managers, in oversight committees and feedback mechanisms, particularly for marginalised and minority groups.
Hailey *et al*. (2023)

Clan affiliation could also be leveraged to bridge the local-to-federal gap: 'Every social group in this town has leaders and representatives' (Int. 29, male community representative, Dolow). Leveraging local networks, coupled with a renewed focus on minority and marginalised groups, could further improve the inclusivity of

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[6] Ground Truth Solutions (2023).

social assistance and strengthen accountability pathways for a wider range of vulnerable groups. More inclusive processes could also start to address community concerns over the coverage vs the adequacy of social assistance in Somalia, as well as prevailing perceptions that 'people don't think the aid they receive allows them to make long-term plans' (Ground Truth Solutions 2023: 6).

Community members and key informants mentioned examples of international providers that committed to co-designing social assistance with communities. They were organisations with a longer-term presence in relatively limited geographic areas, sometimes with a strong protection angle, which had invested in understanding community dynamics, including the organisation's role in/perception of them, as well as the institutional flexibility to adapt systems and programming in-country (KII 4). As with clan dynamics, there appears to be an inverse relationship between the scale of presence and understanding of community dynamics, as well as participatory processes: 'Swelling operations make it harder to have the granular level of analysis' (*ibid.*). The aid system continues to struggle to answer the question: how can accountability pathways be strengthened at scale?

Interviewees wanted to see greater predictability of feedback mechanisms that go beyond programme-specific communication channels, and transparent communication about the availability (or lack) of resources. This means functioning hotlines, ideally with built-in referral pathways, and greater availability of area-based focal points closer to communities, whether local authorities or programme representatives (Int. 15; Int. 19; KII 12):

> *We suggest for the complaint and feedback mechanism number to be assigned to someone specific whose work is to receive calls made to only that number and our views and complaints to be listened to and implemented during implementation. And also, the phone receiver to be accountable and talk to anyone who calls and record their worries.*
> (Int. 27, woman receiving social assistance, Dolow)

Finally, communities involved in the research recommend expanding representation beyond direct participants and a few leaders, by better leveraging a broader range of civil society organisations. This could be achieved through public forums, as well as specific facilitation or consultation roles for groups not targeted for social assistance, such as young people, people with disabilities, and women's groups. Wider representation could open avenues for dialogue-based discussions and shift away from extractive, one-way communication:

> *I suggest for all the representatives of community groups like women, youth, disabled to be involved for trust purpose and better implementation of the programme.*
> (Int. 29, assistant community leader man, Dolow)

> *As a youth leader, I have never seen any youth-specific inclusion in any programme; the youth in my area have been ignored. Therefore, there is no relationship between the programme team and the youth. We sometimes tend to invite ourselves [to] the community-level programme [meetings].*
> (Int. 34, male youth chair, Baidoa)

> *I think we as elders should be accountable to our clans or communities, the local authorities, VRCs/gatekeepers, and NGO staff should be accountable to us, the community.*
> (Int. 15, community leader/elder, Baidoa)

Opinions were mixed on whether the local government could be involved in designing social assistance and 'decide for the community', and whether it would truly represent the interests of all groups; however, there was a general sense that including them in decision-making about aid was a starting point, as they are more accessible than other government representatives.

In their review of the EU-funded Shock-responsive Cash Transfer Pilot, Mclean *et al.* found 'positive' involvement of government local authorities, but recommended 'far deeper and empowering' engagement:

> At the moment, local authorities are mainly involved in deciding whether to trigger a payment, but this can create incentives to respond positively to receiving additional support. Rather than convening to decide whether people are 'deserving' of cash, perhaps the emphasis should be on developing an objective and systematic safety net where people (particularly communities and local authorities) are

involved in the design, they discuss how best to allocate an agreed amount of resources, they can analyse the effectiveness and raise concerns where needed.
Mclean *et al.* (2020: 5)

The review also identified the need to overcome language barriers. Recommendations included conducting data collection, analysis, and meetings in Somali (with reports translated into English for global audiences), and investing in professional translation services to ensure that all Somali and English speakers can fully engage in meetings.

Other literature suggests collective, structured reporting procedures, overseen by third parties, which could standardise information from communities and how aid providers act upon feedback, making pathways more transparent and predictable (LaGuardia *et al.* 2020). This could include citizen oversight approaches to service delivery, such as social audits, which are not often found in crisis-affected locations (Pande 2022). Mechanisms such as social audits would leverage community support for a public process to discuss social assistance through open forums, convened by an independent third-party organisation, and endorsed by the government at local and national levels to ensure audits result in concrete actions by duty bearers beyond specific programmes. Box 6.3 explores how citizen oversight for social assistance could link with broader governance processes in Somalia.

Box 6.2: Reflections from duty bearers

Don't run away from the government – whether it has the capacity or not it is the government of Somalia. Engage meaningfully, from the design to implementation and monitoring. Community feedback is more than putting an unfunctional hotline in place, to educate the beneficiary communities about the project and the feedback system.
(Int. 4, MoLSA representative, Mogadishu)

*Although it is slow, Somalia is coming back to its feet. Implementing agencies should assist the coming back of Somalia rather than seeing it as a threat. If the capacity is low, assist them with goodwill rather than branding them as if they wish Somalia should not come back. I advise them to **give the government room for social assistance design, implementation, and monitoring and accept to be accountable to the Somali government and people and not only the donors.***
(Int. 3, MoLSA representative, Mogadishu)

For implementing agencies to be accountable they should do the following:
● *Engage the government at different levels during the design, implementation, and monitoring, even if it comes with some cost.*
● *Create community awareness about their interventions so that communities are aware of the program – share the projected caseload to avoid diversion and/or corruption.*
● *Improve community feedback systems and by using technology, create awareness, especially among the poorest people, i.e., minorities, and marginalised communities who don't know what is happening.*
● *Investigate, follow up, and address issues of exclusion and corruption.*
(Int. 2, MoLSA representative, Mogadishu)

Source: Authors' own. Information sources cited.

Box 6.3: The long game: social assistance and linkages to governance processes in Somalia

Regardless of whether social assistance falls under humanitarian or development programming, for many communities it is the interface between social protection and broader governance reforms in Somalia. Strengthening accountability of social protection should therefore link to wider debates on decision-making and governance, which could serve as important blueprints for collective mechanisms. The Somali Dialogue Platform and Somali Public Agenda recently outlined:

> Avenues for citizens to engage political leaders and influence political decision-making:
> - The growing use of social media as an open forum for discussion of contentious political topics.
> - Several examples of public outcry and demonstration leading to a clear policy change on the part of the government.
> - Moments of interaction between citizens and political leaders around elections.
> - The use of public consultation by political leaders as leverage in political negotiations; and the organic process of clan consultation that occurs around political processes.
>
> Rift Valley Institute (2023).

Source: Authors' own. Information sources cited.

7. Conclusions

Establishing and maintaining robust and adaptive accountability pathways for social assistance is difficult anywhere in the world and especially challenging in Somalia. Progress towards tackling marginalisation and exclusion is promising, but the basics of accountability – people knowing what they are entitled to receive, their ability to participate in its design and delivery, and provide feedback or complain about issues – are still not consistently in place. Diversion and corruption are systemically entrenched in Somalia's aid ecosystem.

Given these dynamics, new and collective approaches to accountability are needed. There is real appetite from communities, local authorities, the federal government, and aid providers to invest in participation so that it is meaningful, with real discussions and inputs beyond remote call centres and hotlines designed for trouble-shooting aid delivery issues. Table 7.1 outlines some of the key drivers and blockers of accountable social assistance in Somalia that should be addressed.

Table 7.1: Drivers and blockers of accountable social assistance in Somalia

Drivers/accelerators of accountability	Blockers of/barriers to accountability
● *Programme accountability means **involving the beneficiary community in the programme, from design through implementation to monitoring and evaluation.** Giving them the space to say they want this or don't want this, or report what they see as incorrect, and correction is provided. We might not do all these, but we are trying, the context is also not favourable for us too.* (Int. 16, local NGO, Baidoa) ● *An accountable social assistance programme is when we have **good security** and **stakeholders can directly interact with the communities** and beneficiaries.* (Int. 22, INGO frontline provider, Dolow) ● **Transparency and proactive information sharing on social assistance are built into programme design.** ● **Capacities of frontline teams are prioritised and reinforced** (generally soft skills): community engagement, participatory decision-making, gender-sensitive consultations. ● **Referral systems are valued and resourced:** frontline teams are informed about other types of support available to vulnerable populations, and are empowered to connect people with other services and types of assistance. ● **Investments in systemic and collective accountability** that go beyond programme-specific mechanisms, to reinforce rights-based assistance and community-led processes.	● **Lost in translation:** recipients and providers have different perceptions of what works and may not even speak the same language. ● **People are consulted too late** in the programme process: social assistance has already been designed. ● **No action is taken in response to feedback**, and priority needs do not always match programme design. ● **Targeting does not align with who is perceived to be in need** by the community. ● **Gatekeeping of accountability:** independent monitoring focuses on humanitarian actors, bypassing direct contact or engagement with government representatives and local authorities (sidelining duty bearers). ● **Humanitarian architecture undermines government ownership:** AAP engagement and commitments are largely channelled through the cluster system – the government of Somalia 'may not be in the best position to guide [AAP]' because it is not regularly involved in international coordination efforts such as communication, community engagement, and accountability meetings. (KII 14). ● Issues preventing accountable assistance are about political will, but not necessarily from within the government. **Barriers are mandate driven and sectoral**, which is 'unhelpful'. (KII 4).

Source: Authors' own. Information sources cited.

The Government of Somalia could be much more involved, at local, regional, and federal levels, and play key roles in designing social assistance programmes, ensuring their coherence with Somalia's Social Protection Policy, providing consistent information on social assistance, and engaging with communities to build stronger accountability pathways in the longer term. Opportunities exist to consider citizen oversight approaches to service delivery that link to broader governance processes already underway (Pande 2022). There is a need to support non-programme-specific accountability systems and outcomes, and to continue these initiatives across project contracts and short timelines.

There is often an inverse relationship between the large scale required of programmes, based on widespread needs, and providers' understanding of community dynamics and investment in participatory processes. This creates an acute need to manage tensions, real or perceived, between scaling social assistance and ensuring effective community engagement. Gatekeeping and aid diversion proliferate if these tensions are mismanaged or unaddressed. At the very least, social assistance programmes in Somalia must prioritise proactive dialogue and transparent decision-making to overcome the multitude of challenges that local accountability pathways face.

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