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Navigating Violence and Negotiating Order in the Somalia–Kenya Borderlands

**Patta Scott-Villiers, Alastair Scott-Villiers and the team
from Action for Social and Economic Progress, Somalia
March 2025**

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Summary

This working paper examines how communities along the Somalia–Kenya border navigate a landscape of war. Over decades of conflict – including civil war, insurgency, and counterinsurgency – local people have relied on their own means of governance and mutual support to repair the damage and maintain life and livelihood. The study draws on people’s reflections on their ‘middle way’, a system rooted in tradition by which they both govern themselves and do their best to avoid the dangers of the war. The informal order blends customary institutions, negotiated agreements, and far-reaching social networks to provide basic public goods and maintain the common good.

Keywords

Informal order; violence and insecurity, local self-governance, insurgency and counterinsurgency, mutual support networks, participatory methods.

Authors

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Action for Social and Economic Progress comprises Somali women and men who are committed to working for Somalia, strengthening local initiative and community voice. The organisation has a range of projects, all of which are designed with communities rather than only for them.

Executive summary

This working paper draws on community-led reflection to explore how communities along the Somalia–Kenya border navigate pervasive violence and negotiate order in an environment marked by decades of conflict, state neglect, and shifting power dynamics. It documents how ordinary citizens – fending for themselves amid continuous insecurity – use a ‘middle way’ that blends customary governance, community self-reliance to deliver essential public goods, and negotiation with both state and insurgent forces to navigate the dangers of the civil war.

The study employs a community-led reflection method, using storytelling sessions where diverse groups of community members share, analyse, and ‘thicken’ their personal and collective experiences. Through narrative examples, the study reveals how violence in the borderlands is multifaceted and continuous, involving counterinsurgency operations, inter-clan conflicts, and insurgent tactics that affect civilians directly. We hear how communities pragmatically deal with armed forces to distance themselves as far as possible from the dangers they pose. They mobilise mutual aid networks and leverage social media platforms to share information and coordinate responses.

The paper also highlights how customary institutions, elders, and social support networks operate as the backbone of local self-governance. These mechanisms – rooted in Somali traditions of Xeer (customary law) and Islamic principles – enable community members to repair the damage of the civil war and insecurity, manage disputes, and maintain continuity in public services like education and water supply, despite the absence of the state.

The findings suggest that repairing relations between the state and its citizens in rural contested areas is vital to future solutions for Somalia and north-eastern Kenya. Instead of viewing community self-governance as a residual system, the paper argues for its recognition as a viable partner in service delivery and state-building. It calls for policies that empower local networks and encourage collaborative approaches between governments, international agencies, and community institutions.

In summary, the paper sheds light on the resilience and ingenuity of borderland communities as they live through years of chronic instability. By adopting a ‘middle way’ that integrates customary norms, mutual support, and tactical negotiation with authorities, these communities not only survive but actively shape the order in their contested territories.

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We are grateful to the 50 community members whose reflections we present here for their enthusiasm for the initiative we are working on together to improve relations and expand all our understanding. We are also grateful to the members of our Reference Group who have helped connect the analysis on the ground to policy realities in East Africa and the Horn. We would like to thank all those who have been backing up the work with finance, administration, and logistics. We are also deeply grateful to our peer reviewers who helped us to sharpen up the paper.

Acronyms

ASEP	Action for Social and Economic Progress
ATMIS	African Union Transition Mission in Somalia
IDP	internally displaced person
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
IED	improvised explosive device
KDF	Kenya Defence Forces
MP	Member of Parliament
NGO	non-governmental organisation
OCS	Officer in Charge of Security
SNA	Somali National Army

1. Introduction

In June 2023, a group of Somali and UK colleagues met to discuss finding a new approach to working for and with communities in the Somalia–Kenya borderlands. After 30 years of war and insecurity in Somalia and its neighbouring Somali-language regions, citizens feel abandoned and unheard. As one community member put it, ‘the government officials and aid agencies act as if they are in a completely different world.’ The six colleagues represented community, government, and civil society leaders who have been working on these issues for several decades. The community reflection approach we arrived at was to be rigorous, trustworthy, and fitting to local ways of thinking and acting. It would help not only communities in their navigation and negotiation, but also responsible bodies in government and international agencies to find new approaches in support of citizens and their communities.

The territory that spans the border between Somalia and Kenya is vast, sparsely populated, and profoundly insecure. Three decades of war have left deep scars on society and infrastructure and hollowed out services. Camps of internally displaced persons (IDPs) spread around the main towns; some have been there for decades. Towns on both sides of the border are host to humanitarian agencies whose staff can only move a limited distance before the security risks become too great. The humanitarian operation has been ongoing since the Somali civil war started in 1991 and there is a feeling of repetition in aid agency staff’s continuous efforts to counteract the damage of the war and their restricted relations with local people and understanding of local perspectives. While state forces carry out violent counterinsurgency operations, donor-funded programmes deliver humanitarian and stabilisation activities that have become part of the war economy (Cassanelli 2019).

Only a few kilometres of the borderland’s 1,000km length are fenced. Across this invisible political line tread pastoralists with their camels and goats, traders carrying food and household goods, trucks carrying electronics, charcoal, livestock and much else, licit and illicit. Women, children, and men cross on foot, donkeys, motorbikes, and pickups to visit relatives, markets, and business associates from one community to another. As this paper will show, the settlements they move between are poorly serviced, but the residents are active and organised. Pastoralists move large herds between grazing lands in Kenya and Somalia, women run shops and kiosks selling food, tea, and household goods, and elders sit in conclave to deliberate on local affairs. Also moving across the territory are actors contesting control of the space with armaments and armoured vehicles, some uniformed, others in civilian clothes with masked faces. Local people face lethal threats every day from war, insurgency, and counterinsurgency.

How do citizens manage their lives individually and collectively in these conditions and with what outcomes? In this paper, we catch a citizen's-eye view on what the trouble looks like, how people avoid it, and how they respond individually, in groups, and through their institutions. We then address a bigger question about access to public goods: goods or services available to everyone in a society without reduction in their availability to others. Community members show us that **community governance** offers an answer to the question. They describe community governance, in both its institutional and everyday aspects, as the '**middle way**'. The term refers to how community members repair their order and supply a surprising number of public goods – doing it themselves and pressing officials and others to provide. It also relates to the path they weave between the forces that are targeting them.

One of the difficulties in writing this paper has been to act as a channel for the participating community members' own descriptions and analyses without too much distortion according to our own theories. This is in line with our commitment to a purpose of listening and amplifying, rather than imposing or extracting. Empirically, the paper depicts and analyses citizen initiative and its role in local governance in the rural borderlands of Somalia–Kenya. The community storytelling method involves diverse members of connected communities, defined as people with commonalities of place, belonging, and way of life (Bell and Newby 1975) telling stories **to each other** about aspects of their lives that they care about. Theoretically, we examine how people's everyday decisions and actions contribute to order, political formations, and public goods, exploring how neighbours and neighbouring communities cooperate in ways that transcend the boundaries of clan, community, state, and the lines of the war. Drawing on what we learned about how this works in the everyday life of a violent borderland, we bring in concepts of the informal order and social navigation. Practically, the paper suggests how to improve collaboration on local governance.

In Section 2 we turn to theories of informal order and navigation, followed in Section 3 by a short sketch of relevant aspects of the borderland political economy. Section 4 explains the methodology. Section 5 highlights community members' perspectives on the damage they suffer and the '**middle way**' they construct to repair life, stability, and a sense of community. Section 6 develops an analysis of people's mode of self-governance leading to the conclusion in Section 7, in which we discuss implications for beneficial intervention in these and similar territories.

2. The informal order

In the Somalia–Kenya borderland, the volatile and opaque nature of violent actors generates social responses which are as resilient as the forces are unpredictable. People's stories in this research tease out their practical interactions and reasons – what happened, what they and others did, and why. We learn that life keeps going, whether it is government or insurgents in control or contesting for control, by virtue of an informal order that guides people's navigation of danger and opportunity and their organisation of repair and advancement.

The term **informal order** has often been loosely used (Polese 2023), and we may be doing something of the same thing to suggest a social and political order that is non-state, with customary roots, recognised and adhered to by a cultural-political community and having both organisational and social components. It encompasses customary organisations, such as councils of elders, which have their own formality on the one hand, and, on the other, the everyday norms and beliefs that guide social relations. Beliefs range from those learned through religion to shared understandings of good and bad ways of behaving learned in living together with others. The organisational and normative aspects of the informal order are continuously contested. Individuals may contend with and influence change within customary institutions, and new generations and marginalised groups may question and change the norms by which society cooperates. In the conversations that make up the empirical material for this paper, we learn how mutual assistance and community networks work alongside traditional leadership to help resolve disputes and organise public goods.

Our attention to the informal order has been stimulated from a variety of sources. The first comes from the people themselves. Their stories and analyses explain how citizens on both sides of the border have repeatedly rebuilt coexistence over the decades of war. By listening to non-elite women, men, and young people in rural areas, we learn that the informal order is a supra-clan capability that does much to counteract violence and facilitate community-to-community cooperation. While the stories on which this work is based are hyper-local to the borderland, they also illustrate a broader reality that suffuses Somali-speaking society, binds people together, and offers a structural basis for order (Menkhaus 2014b).

The second stimulus takes us outward from Somalia, across pastoralist societies of East Africa, where community-led research has repeatedly shown the importance of customary institutions and the informal order in underpinning people's efforts towards a good life in the presence of state neglect (Scott-Villiers *et al.* 2011; Karamoja-Turkana Research Team 2023, 2024; Wilson 2009).

The third stimulus comes from the literature on the function of the informal order in conditions where state governance is weak, absent, or predatory. It has been defined as ‘self-governance’ and ‘self-governing organisations’ which bring vital public goods to people (Murtazashvili 2016). In the literature, the informal order can also be understood more broadly as ‘communal social institutions’, non-state arrangements, obligations, and systems that provide for the common good alongside the state, or because of state failure (Ostrom 2000; Lust and Rakner 2018).

Informal orders take on a particular importance where communities have ‘fled the projects of the organized state societies that surround them – slavery, conscription, taxes, *corvée labor*, epidemics, and warfare’ (Scott 2010). The informal order consists in part of ordered behaviours, grounded in custom and customary institutions, and in part of an infinite number of everyday acts whose accumulated effect is the informal order. In the examples we bring from the Somali borderlands we find people working cooperatively and complicitly below the radar of formal state politics, in ways that affect political change, ‘embodying mutuality without hierarchy’ (Scott 2012: x), and we find them making use of the ‘art of bypassing the state’ (Polese 2023). We also learn that informality is not just a residual way of governing, something that will disappear as soon as the state ceases to be a predator or an ineffective actor in local affairs. The evidence shows informality blossoming where it is better placed than the state in its support and regulation of business and production.

The informal order in the Somalia–Kenya borderland is built on existing and popular systems. It is instructive that a study of popular sentiment in relation to traditional authority in 19 African countries showed a surprising ‘intensity of support’ and strong popular legitimacy for customary institutions (Logan 2013). Logan’s study revealed that it was traditional authority’s accessibility, capacity for dispute resolution, and its symbolic embodiment of history, identity, and culture that made it legitimate in people’s eyes.¹ Logan quotes Williams’ (2010) work on chieftaincy in South Africa; Williams concluded that the moral legitimacy of customary authority enables ‘discipline, dignity and respect’ and helps bind society together. Logan also noted widespread complaints about traditional leaders’ inability or unwillingness to listen. Asking how, in the face of problems of accessibility and fairness, traditional authorities sustain so high a level of popularity, Logan finds that they have a capacity for evolution by which they can address their own shortcomings (*ibid*). It is in this light that we can understand the persistence of customary orders among the Somali-speaking peoples. The traditional mode of governing makes ‘a claim to an alternative modernity’ (de Sousa Santos 2006). As one community member in north-eastern Kenya put it:

¹ Logan’s study of popular sentiment about traditional authority in Africa used data from **Afrobarometer**, ‘a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, the economy, and society’.

‘Outsiders talk about strengthening the traditional system, but things are already strengthened in their own way’.

The informal order is structured through both institutions, procedures that structure social and political interaction (Helmke and Levitsky 2004: 727; North 1990), and unwritten rules that are upheld and developed in everyday interactions, where the everyday connections within and between communities are the foundation for community organisation (Granovetter 1973). Through its rootedness in ordinary ways of surviving in a dangerous world, the informal order fosters both resistance and creativity, giving people strength to tolerate but also to act on the issues that beset them (Roy 2005). One way of looking at this mode of resistant creativity is through the lens of **‘social navigation’**, which helps clarify how individuals and their social institutions deal with violence or war in the everyday (Vigh 2009). The theory suggests paying attention to how people **move within an uncertain and moving environment** (*ibid.*: 428). The word ‘navigation’ originates in crossing the sea, and it contrasts with how people might manage in a more solid environment, where at least the ground is relatively predictable. Social navigation is a particularly useful lens when thinking about how people live in situations which are volatile and opaque, where borders and boundaries offer uncertain opportunity, and where violence threatens to come from places of authority. They need especially acute skills of negotiating relations between one person and another, and between people and institutions. Virtues of wariness, readiness, and courage are at the forefront. The concept of social navigation helps us see not only how people are making decisions in an unpredictable environment, but also how their own practices, interactions, and institutions are playing a part in the fluidity or stabilisation of the situation (*ibid.*). The interaction of multiple mobilities creates the ever-moving social reality in a process by which people build, maintain, and repair the informal order that itself must be agile and strong to counteract the trouble.

3. Actors in the Somalia–Kenya borderland

The Somali and Kenyan states are countering Al-Shabaab's² challenge in the borderland, as well as in other parts of their respective territories, though each is under a different degree of existential threat (Bacon 2022). Most of the rural areas of South–Central Somalia are either controlled by Al-Shabaab, or under 'mixed, unclear and/or local control' in which Al-Shabaab had a significant presence.³ State armed forces in Somalia come in several guises, including the Somali National Army, subnational forces, and clan militia. In Jubaland Federal Member State this includes the Jubaland State forces operating out of the state capital at Kismayo. In north-eastern Kenya, where the state is in combat with the Al-Shabaab insurgency, armed security forces include the Kenya Defence Forces, Special Operations Group, police, and national police reservists. Violence against civilians has a different face depending on not only which country a person is living or moving in, or border they are crossing, but also which forces are operating in that part of the geography.

It has been argued that the main forces contending in a civil war trigger other violent actors whose contentions often have different purposes from those of the core dispute but are essential to conflict dynamics (Kalyvas 2006). The military, political, and ideological conflict is enmeshed with subcontracted, privatised violence refracted into a multiplicity of forces including informers, criminals, vengeful civilians and police reservists, clan militia absorbed into the Somali National Army, and clan militias operating independently. Literature covering over 30 years of war in Somalia and the borderland of Kenya attests to a litany of men, women, and children displaced, injured, carjacked, kidnapped, or killed without justice (Alio 2012; Zeid and Cochran 2014; Keating and Waldman 2019).

There has been a great deal of analysis of the narratives, practices, and initiatives of the armed actors, elites, and agencies that hold power within this warscape (Menkhaus 2006, 2014a, 2016; Ahmad 2014; Keating and Waldman 2019; Skjelderup and Ainashe 2023) but comparatively little about the people's own systems, and how these support people's efforts to not only survive but re-establish order amidst the disorder. While scholars and thinktanks have done much to shed light on the logic of warlords, insurgents, politicians, diplomats, administrators, business leaders, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as they counter each other in a struggle for power and operational space, we

2 Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen, known as Al-Shabaab ('the youth'), has been an insurgent group in Somalia for nearly 20 years.

3 See [Somalia Control Map and Timeline – December 2021](#).

have seen less of the ordinary people and their contribution. Focus on ordinary people has most often been about their victimhood; explaining their suffering, losses, and desperate migrations, and accepting the confinement of an estimated 3.8 million vulnerable people into camps for internally displaced people in Somalia (Keating and Waldman 2019; IDMC 2024; Zeid and Cochran 2014).

Our focus here is Gedo in the northern part of Jubaland State and the contiguous areas of Mandera and Wajir Counties in north-eastern Kenya. This borderland is an interesting place as the fractures of war are further fissured by frontier. It is a place where forces clash, people navigate and negotiate with the different regimes, profits are made, and intensive interaction between official, unofficial, and illicit arrangements unfold (Goodhand 2012). The Somalia–Kenya border lies a long distance from the capitals of the two states, promoting an image of backwardness and threat in the metropole which justifies a discourse of securitisation and covert counterterrorism operations (Mwangi and Mwangi 2024; Baele and Jalea 2023). Jubaland is a region of Somalia which is in contention with Mogadishu and in which the Kenyan state is a powerful actor. Mandera and Wajir are counties in Kenya across which Al-Shabaab has significant presence and power. The two sides of the border offer contrast and connections in politics, administration, and use of violence on the one hand, and in ways of surviving and thriving on the other.

4. Methodology: the community reflection approach

Recent experience using a community-led reflection approach in the East African borderlands of north-western Kenya/north-eastern Uganda demonstrated that the method could throw new light on an intractable situation of insecurity and animate local propensities to drive change (Karamoja-Turkana Research Team 2023, 2024; Wilson 2009; Scott-Villiers *et al.* 2011). The same approach has been successful in a range of other contexts where citizen victimisation and insecurity have led to distrust of outsiders, including researchers (Neufeldt and Janzen 2021; Allen and Friedman 2021; Larrea 2021; Lundy and McGovern 2006).

Community-led reflection is a method of systematic inquiry that facilitates ordinary people as storytellers, analysts, and informed actors (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood and Maguire 2003; Greenwood and Levin 2007; Kindon *et al.* 2022). It entails diverse community members looking at their own experiences and connecting them to broader levels of politics, economy, and geography. The results show how the approach can produce insight into a complex situation from a uniquely embedded perspective, shifting power from outsider to insider explanations, and strengthening collective voice and action.

In January 2024, Action for Social and Economic Progress (ASEP) identified three staff members from the Somalia–Kenya borderlands to learn how to facilitate community reflection in an area where they had been providing humanitarian services for several years. ASEP and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) discussed and refined how a community-led inquiry could work in their borderland. ASEP took responsibility for community facilitation, while IDS provided guidance on the methodology. IDS also led the monthly analysis sessions held with the facilitators in Nairobi. The first thing ASEP and IDS agreed was to call it **reflection, not research**. In part this was due to the poor reputation that research has in this part of the world, where people have experienced so much unaccountable intervention. Reflection is also an appropriate name for what they were doing: the inquiry was framed from local perspectives, the data they critically analysed and interpreted came from their own experience, and the purpose was that they might make improvements in the here and now as well as influencing others with their analysis.

The three facilitators, two men and one woman, travelled to five villages on the Kenya side of the border with Somalia. Here they began a careful process of inviting 50 community members from ten villages (five in Kenya, five in Somalia) to join cross-community and cross-border reflection groups, each of which met

four times over five months for three days each time. Selection of the invitees was based on criteria of social diversity (clan, gender, age, and mode of livelihood were the primary divisions) and interest to join a conversation. The facilitators began a dialogue with community members they already knew and considered together who would fit the criteria and how to create a balanced group. Community members who joined the story groups were a mix of men and women, young and old, of different clans and livelihoods. With five members from a community on one side of the border paired into a group with five members on the other side, the groups of ten did not represent every kind of identity and position, but their age, gender, clan, and livelihood differences were varied enough to stimulate discussion of and bridging between different social points of view. The moment of invitation was an essential moment in the process, due to differentials of power and knowledge, and the teams took care to ensure sufficient stratification for achieving diversity.

Over four sessions held in a safe space, often hosted by a local group member in their compound, the group members told each other stories of their lives, from recent times and from further back. Permission for crossing the border for those from the Somalia side was requested by the members themselves and given by local authorities. The facilitators did not influence their choices, the group members chose stories that were important to explaining and exploring the situation that they found themselves in today. They selected some of the stories for ‘thickening’; telling and retelling them, connecting one to another, filling in gaps, analysing meanings, suggesting connections to political and other processes that they were aware of, making interpretations and sometimes deciding on actions which then became part of the running story at the next meeting. The facilitators’ task was to encourage the storytellers to give each other space, to hear each other’s perspectives even when there was disagreement, and for everyone to deepen and thicken their selected stories so they ‘had legs’, as one participant put it. Having legs means that the story is relevant and worth deeper analysis, because understanding it better would be useful to the community. It also means that it is true and detailed enough to offer insight. The facilitators took notes after each community meeting had concluded and brought these notes to the monthly analysis sessions with ASEP and IDS in Nairobi.

The thickened stories had two functions. They gave the groups material that they could share with others in their networks, whether family, friends, or people they wished to influence in customary, administrative, or political institutions. For the facilitators and the research team, the thickened stories provided evidence and analysis for making arguments to those that the community groups felt might be useful in deciding on change: primarily politicians, people in the executive of both countries, and international donors providing finance to and NGOs working in the borderland.

Storytelling is a form of communication and inquiry that is familiar in Somali culture. Children are brought up to memorise verbatim what they have been told, from whom, and when, and to be able to provide an accurate account when asked by someone whom they trust. It is a mode of communication particularly important in pastoralist cultures (Scott-Villiers *et al.* 2011). As an art, being able to speak clearly is highly valued in Somalia's own pastoralist culture, which prizes the ability of truth to travel across vast distances and across multiple groups whose political relations are in continuous negotiation. Somali poetry is still widely appreciated, even in an age of mobile phones and social media. It often has an alliterative function that helps an utterance to travel from one person to another across time and space and to impart a message that keeps its form despite the distance it may have travelled (Ahmed n.d.). The messages involve 'a grammar of values' that are reiterated in keeping the culture alive and relevant to changing circumstances (Lindfors 1978: 50–1). Ways of exchanging perspectives and analyses have both retained the old ways of the Somali oral culture and moved with the times to energetically embrace social media. The storytelling sessions included discussion of what people were learning and sharing on social media. Frequently, people's stories included references to what they had seen online.

At the end of six months, we asked the community groups to suggest which of their stories could be made into a series of five animated video shorts (one to three minutes long) that they could use for furthering their discussions and sharing more widely if they wished to expand their engagement on the issues. The animations were made by Somali digital artists in Nairobi and shared with the group members. Each member then uploaded and sent them to their own personal WhatsApp group contacts. One person sent them to her MP (and reported that she got no reply). Another shared them with connections in Nairobi, who in turn uploaded them to TikTok, a platform that is widely used among Somalis. As part of a second phase of this reflection activity, the community members, along with us, are now watching how the videos travel and what insight and action they stimulate, both as a way of improving method and of continuing to understand information flows and influence within the informal order.

Asking permission of the community members to share some of their stories, while keeping the tellers anonymous for their safety, we promised to respect their voices as far as possible through the layers of transmission from one person to another, one language to another, and the variations in assumptions that we all bring together. We used five validity criteria to guide facilitation and communication: relational praxis, usefulness, relevance, trustworthiness, and enduring consequence (Bradbury and Reason 2001). The first required emphasis on improving relations among those who are affected by the issues being researched. The second supported insight that is useful for those involved

in the short and medium term. The third required focus on the topics that matter most to them, including helping them iron out internal differences about what matters. The fourth involved facilitating a rigorous method to ensure results would be trustworthy to the community members and those they chose to communicate with. The fifth required that we all, community and facilitators, are endeavouring to leave behind an enduring capacity to continue to ask and answer questions to build the common good.

The reflection entailed the formation of an informal Reference Group comprising two men and one woman, each of whom offered connections in the borderland and at high levels of the Somalia and Kenya governments. They gave us their time for two purposes: (i) they helped convey community members' perspectives to people in government on both sides of the border, and (ii) they helped anchor the analysis in a wider context, giving the facilitators responses to the stories about ways that policy and politics were playing out, which the facilitators could then offer to the community members. The Reference Group would meet the facilitators in Nairobi to hear the stories from the communities. They went on to use the learning to inform their own efforts to bring political and administrative change. In turn, they offered the facilitators and, through them, the 50 community members, insight into the otherwise obscure workings of the political, policy, and administrative system that forms the context to experience in this borderland. This helps to strengthen the community-level analysis to understand the broader political environment in which events are unfolding.

We now turn to the debates within the community groups, giving a flavour of the exchanges in both words and screenshots from the five animated videos.



Source: © Action for Social and Economic Progress, Somalia; reproduced with permission.
Screenshot from the animated video, *The Brave Pastoralist*.

5. Navigating and repairing: the empirical evidence

The stories that community members told were serious ones. They often began with violent events that changed people's lives and the situation of their communities. They detailed what happened, what they and others did, and what lessons they drew from the events they described. The stories were long, many, and detailed. Some of the stories were very sensitive, so instead of reproducing any in full here, we have selected and arranged excerpts in a way that reflects the back-and-forth dialogue that went on between community members speaking to each other. It gives us insight into how the different parts of society navigate, together and individually, the violence they encounter. For reasons of risk and ethics, the composite conversation is told under pseudonyms that weave together the experiences of different people. The conversation is followed by an analysis of the mechanisms of violence that shape people's lives in the borderlands.

5.1 Story 1 – Targeted civilians

*I am an old man. My name is **Abaar**.⁴ I live here on the Somalia side of the border. Before the Kenyan Defence Forces (KDF) came into Somalia in 2012 chasing Al-Shabaab, the villages on the Somalia side were occupied by Al-Shabaab. Then KDF drove them out of our village and many civilians died. Then the KDF General gathered the people. He said 'We have removed the terrorists from this village, and anyone who had a relationship with them should follow them to where they are, because we will not allow their sympathisers to be here.' He did not know that in that meeting members of this Al-Shabaab were present. When the General and his force crossed back to the Kenya side, they were attacked. They lost several soldiers. And then KDF came back here, and they were shooting at us civilians.*

*My name is **Geesi**, I'm a trader living on the Somalia side. We are still a target in the war. In 2023 Al-Shabaab attacked the Kenyan army base near our village and the KDF started shelling our village. They were shelling every night, so we had to get out. A group of our elders went to them and asked them to stop the shelling. The*

⁴ Names have been changed for confidentiality.

commander told us: 'If you want us to stop shelling your village, you also need to stop Al-Shabaab attacking the KDF camp.' 'We can't stop them', we told him. He thinks that we have that control over Al-Shabaab.

I am Nimo, a mother of seven children. I'm living on the Somalia side now, but I was originally in Kenya. I have land there and a house. Geesi is right. A lot of the danger we face comes from being suspected as Al-Shabaab sympathisers. It happened to my family. It was 2017 and two sheikhs, religious leaders, were doing business in sugar from our village on the Kenya side. Some local people informed on them to the special operations unit, saying they were Al-Shabaab. Masked men came at night and burned their shops. One of the sheikhs died in the fire. Then Al-Shabaab came to our village where the shops had been burned, put up a flag, and preached in the mosque. They said, 'We are the government here.' They investigated the sheikh's death, asking questions of everyone. Then they arrested three local men. They executed one of them, saying he was the one who profiled the sheikhs. They left the village with the other two men. One morning, not long after, I was at home. My husband, who is from a clan on the Somalia side, was preparing to go out to sell miraa [khat, a stimulant plant]. Four of my children had left for school and the others were at home. A group of soldiers, wearing masks over their faces, came to the house while I was preparing breakfast. They handcuffed my husband and threw him into a vehicle. They were Kenyan Special Operations Group, and they suspected him of being Al-Shabaab. Four pastoralists who crossed the border from Somalia were also abducted by the same group that day. After a while, I went to the police and the army and reported that he had disappeared. But nobody could give me any information about where he had been taken or why. The family decided that I should get away from my village and come to the Somalia side where I have relatives. They said that those who abducted my husband might have come for my children. I moved to the other side. My children lacked school, but at least they were safe. I opened a kiosk selling tea. Some months later, the elders of the two communities approached Al-Shabaab requesting they release the two Kenyans they had arrested. Al-Shabaab let them go and they returned to Kenya. Later these two men became police reservists in my home village. They carry gun given by the government. It is now seven years later. I never saw my husband again and I never came back to my village in Kenya until this day. The reservists still believe

that my children may take revenge on them for the loss of their father.

*My name is **Hassan**. I have a young family. It is not only from the Kenyan counterinsurgency people that we face dangers. When the Kenyan ATMIS [African Union Transition Mission in Somalia] troops withdrew from our town on the Somalia side in 2024, the Somali National Army (SNA) soldiers came. They seemed to have been informed that everyone here is either Al-Shabaab or a sympathiser and they didn't trust anyone. They went round the town looting shops and demanding food from houses, and they killed people at random. There have been daily attacks from Al-Shabaab. We demonstrated by marching in the street protesting the behaviour of the government soldiers.*

*I am **Rooble**, an elder here. Al-Shabaab attacks lead to reprisals and also stop us getting the services we are entitled to. Here's an example. Al-Shabaab came to the hospital in May. It was night. They forced the watchman to open the gates. They tried to take a car that belonged to the County Government that was parked in the compound. But they could not move the car, so they set it on fire and left. In the morning security officers came and beat the three watchmen. They took one of them away. His relatives tried to raise the issue with the authorities. The MP inquired on their behalf. He told them that the security people had no information on any watchman in their custody. A few days later the watchman was found unconscious on a road outside the town. Then the soldiers came and cordoned the hospital. Every night, the hospital becomes a military camp. Doctors don't stay in the hospital. The security people say that Al-Shabaab was trying to steal medicine, and the watchmen were helping them. They do not consider how the hospital is a place for women to give birth safely.*

*My name is **Aamina**. I live in a town on the Kenya side. I was taking my sister to the hospital a few nights ago – she was in labour. We were stopped by the security officers at the hospital gate. We were told to kneel, and they searched us. They asked why are you coming to the hospital at night? I said, my sister is in labour. After a few minutes they allowed us in. But I didn't see any doctor or any nurse around. The hospital compound was full of soldiers wearing masks. I took my sister back home. You know, of late the hospital has been occupied by the special operations forces.*

*I'm an active person in my community. My name is **Barre**. When we talk about how the governments are making the situation worse, I think of an incident in January 2024. A donkey cart crossing the border from Somalia into Kenya exploded and a police officer died. It was all over X and WhatsApp that it was an Al-Shabaab IED [improvised explosive device] on the back of a donkey cart. The North-Eastern Regional Commissioner (Kenya) confirmed the IED story, and even international organisations reported about Al-Shabaab's new tactic. We saw that officials and border police used it to justify stationing more police at the border crossing. We asked around and every local person was saying it was just a local trader with his donkey cart loaded with a barrel of petrol and it caught light due to a cigarette. Why are the officials giving a picture that it is an IED when it is not? Security officials want to keep on reaping money from people who are crossing the border with their small goods. They don't want to have proper border control systems. Every time, when there is a talk of border opening there is an incident to prove it should be kept closed. Officials reap a lot of money because they say these are contraband goods and people crossing illegally. They want it known that the area is insecure. It means that crossing the border is dangerous for us, and we must pay bribes to get across.*



Source: © Action for Social and Economic Progress, Somalia; reproduced with permission.
Screenshot from the animated video, *Hospital Incident*

*I am **Ikram**. It is not all about government forces. The clans fight each other. Even the clans inside the SNA fight one another and we get caught in the crossfire. There are clan militia that have been added to the government payroll, but the government doesn't control them. Now, in one town there is a lot of killing. SNA soldiers who are from one clan are fighting SNA soldiers from two other clans over who controls the IDP camps and the other resources that come in. The first clan is being supported by militia from a neighbouring*

federal member state. The customary system couldn't resolve a death that triggered the dispute. One clan refused to take part in the mediation. Many people have been killed, and thousands of families are running for safety inside Al-Shabaab territory and from one town to another. The government can't control soldiers on their payroll and the elders haven't found a way to manage it either.

*I'm **Hodan**, a mother. In February 2024, there was a social media exchange in our community. It began with a post from one clan blaming the other clan for an incident in 2022, when a borehole drilling rig belonging to the first clan was destroyed. Some people were killed, and the owner of the drill lost a lot of money. Now in 2024, on the social media the accused clan refused the claim that they were responsible. The media posts became more and more bitter between the two clans. It seemed that it might come to violence between us. Then Al-Shabaab posted a video on its channels that showed that they were responsible for the original attack. People believed them and it cooled the tension between the two clans.*



Source: © Action for Social and Economic Progress, Somalia; reproduced with permission.
Screenshot from the animated video, *The Brave Pastoralist*

5.1.1 Analysis: the mechanisms of violence by government actors and Al-Shabaab

As community members exchanged these experiences, they began to sharpen the points they wanted to make about the violence that was so normal in their lives. They explained how violence works as a tool of military and counterterrorist

purposes as well as playing a part in money-making, rivalry on the border. Reflecting on this, the community members pointed out that they were being victimised. They admitted that they had stopped talking about how it can be stopped and only talk about how it can be avoided. Yet civilian victimisation is a direct, intentional, or negligent avoidable harm that is often passed off as unintentional collateral damage (Besaw, Ritter and Tezcür 2023). Even though it is generally accepted that attacks on civilian targets are almost always politically counterproductive among that population (Abrahms and Lula 2012; Wood and Kathman 2014), both the Kenyan and the Somali states have targeted civilians and neglected their protection for many years. There is trauma from experiences of insurgency and counterinsurgency alike – Hodan begins with an Al-Shabaab attack on a borehole drilling rig, and Hassan tells of killings by the SNA defending a town against Al-Shabaab. Al-Shabaab has attacked civilians, officials, and people who have dealings with the Government of Somalia over many years (Hansen 2013; Maruf and Joseph 2018; Bacon 2022). However, the participant believes it has not targeted civilians over recent years, except in dispensing justice in a characteristically harsh manner, as illustrated by Nimo's story about the arsonists.

Random violence against civilians appears to be tempered by a need to keep local people onside. It has often been noted that when rebel groups achieve a level of success, they tend to reduce violence against civilians, and commonly help solve peripheral violence resulting from feuds, revenge, and predation (Kalyvas 2006). Broadly, insurgencies may be divided into those that require support from the local population, as benefits resulting from an ideologically based struggle are often slow or non-existent, and those in which insurgents gain benefits from marauding (Weinstein 2006). Al-Shabaab falls into the first category. As such, people on both sides of the border speak of Al-Shabaab violence as easier to predict and navigate, at least at present. They depict Somali forces as predatory and disorganised, the Kenyan army as ordered and blunt, and Kenyan Special Operations Group as indiscriminate and terrifying. Overall, citizens feel that they are victims of disproportionate force. They feel too, that their essential services have been sacrificed to the counterterrorist exigency. Violence has created jagged boundaries between people, played out in cycles of revenge, extortion, and victimhood. But it has also cemented people's determination to resist it.

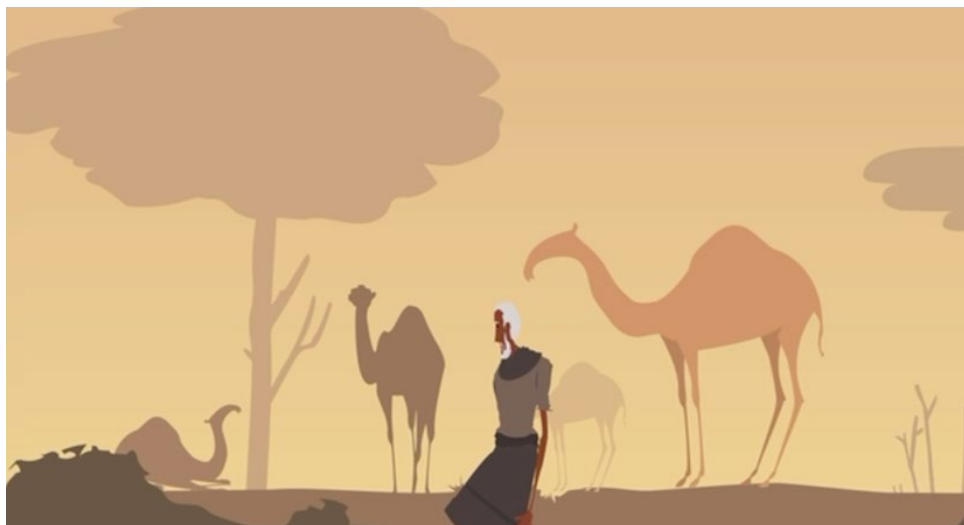
While the discussion above showed the workings of victimisation, the narratives do not end there. The group members laid out for themselves, and for the facilitators, how the disappearances, shootings, shelling, and beatings are followed by repairs.

5.2 Story 2 – Civilians negotiate and repair through the ‘middle way’

In the conversation presented in this section, we see how community members evade, negotiate with the forces, dismantle roadblocks, protest, solve disputes, rebuild relations, organise services, and more. Much of the repair work makes use of local institutions: customary leaders negotiate protection from insecurity or extortion, religious leaders provide justice, and businesspeople offer guarantees that rely on customary law. For personal needs, people draw on norms of reciprocity, mutual aid, and everyday coexistence. Here we begin to understand repairing as integral to the order by which communal life works (Das 2020).

*My name is **Burhaan**. I’m a pastoralist. It is the zakat⁵ season. There is a lot of push from Al-Shabaab around the villages collecting the tax. You know this zakat has stayed for some time now, and we know what it is. I used to pay to my relatives who are poor, but now I pay to Al-Shabaab. The first time they took the tax, a few years ago, I was herding on the Kenya side and Al-Shabaab came to collect the zakat. They have people who do the counting for them. They know how many are in each herd. They tied two camels of mine. I went to the local police boss, the Officer in Charge of Security (OCS), and told him – my camels are taken by Al-Shabaab. The OCS asked me: ‘How many camels did you have, 30? And then they tied how many, two?’ Then he asked, what will they do next? I said, they will go with them and then they will come back after one year. And then the OCS asked: ‘Between now and then, what will happen to you?’ Nothing will happen to me, I replied. If I have paid my tax, my camels can graze anywhere. I’m not faced by any threat from them. That is when the OCS said: ‘If my unit goes after Al-Shabaab, I may lose soldiers. If two camels can guarantee your safety and the security for a year, it is a good deal!’ I went straight to those who took away my camels and negotiated – these animals are not all mine, I said. This is a herd that is pooled together by many people. Then they told me: ‘If you have issues to raise, you can go to a place called Busar and lodge a complaint. We have mechanisms for addressing grievances.’ I pleaded with them: ‘I don’t know that place, I’ve never been there, I’m from this Kenya side of the border.’ And then they released one camel back to me. It was a waiver. And then after from that day I have complied with paying zakat to Al-Shabaab.*

⁵ Charitable contributions that are one of the five pillars of Islam.



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Screenshot from the animated video, *The Brave Pastoralist*

*I am **Mohamed**. I'm also a pastoralist and I can add to what you are saying about how we deal with the two sides. Last month someone called me while I was in the village that Al-Shabaab are here and want to collect the zakat. I hurried to where the camels were grazing and met them there. They told me to pay a goat. I came back to the village, collected some cash, took it to them, and then they gave me a paper and left. The next morning KDF came. The commander asked me why I paid tax to Al-Shabaab. I said: 'I had no choice. If you don't want us to pay, they are not far from here, why don't you fight them?' 'We don't have orders to do that', he said. The next morning Al-Shabaab came and asked me what the Kenya soldiers were saying. I said nothing. It's like they are foot on the foot of each other. None of these forces is doing us good. But we must live with it. When Al-Shabaab is here, we follow their orders, and when the KDF is here, we follow their orders. We follow our own way.*

*I am **Abaayo**, a mother. I agree, we follow our own way, and we will negotiate our safety and our life. We are not leaving our settlements. When ATMIS forces withdrew from our village in Somalia last year, Al-Shabaab took over immediately. Then Jubaland Forces came to fight them, and Al-Shabaab won. People were killed in the crossfire. Afterwards, the community appointed our best elders to talk to the Al-Shabaab commanders. The elders said: 'Whoever takes over in control of this village, we will not leave. This is where we were born and where we know. We will negotiate with whoever is here to allow us to live our own life. This is a village that's close to the border. It is a strategic business location. It is prone to air raids. If you are here in the village, the village will be shelled, and we will not be able to live*

here. Why not leave the village to us? You can still come and collect your zakat and business tax, as you did even when the Jubaland forces were here. Allow us to run our own affairs.’ And they accepted and went away from the village. Those of us who fled were able to come back.

*My name is **Bilan**. It’s true that even as we fear them, we can reason with Al-Shabaab and they are more straightforward to negotiate with than the government. There’s a businessman from the diaspora who came here to Somalia. He had come last year as he had the idea to install an electricity generator and make a business from supplying domestic electricity. But a Jubaland official expected him to pay a large amount of money, so he gave up and went away. When the village was taken over by Al-Shabaab, the district government from the Jubaland administration fled to the Kenya side. They continued to try to take money from people and organisations wanting to provide resources to the village. They said: ‘We are still the legitimate authority here.’ We refused them. Now the businessman has come back. He saw that the village is under our own administration. We are leading our own lives using our own tradition. He was encouraged. He brought a big generator from Mogadishu, and he has connected everyone to the supply. He gave us three months free and now he charges a fee, and we are paying. The elders are ready to help if there are any disputes about the service.*



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Screenshot from the animated video, *From Conflict to Community-driven Rebirth*

*I am **Jama**, an elder. I have another example of how we have negotiated. Near our village there is a big dam that was built by foreigners. Livestock herders and families pay money for the water, and we elders manage it. There was a lot of water this last season, and many herds came. Al-Shabaab came and said that they were going to take over the management of the dam and collect the fees.*

But we said: ‘We have been managing our water for all these years, and we know how to do it. We can’t allow you to take over. These are the services we do for the community.’ And Al-Shabaab was convinced and left us to do it.

*I’m **Faduma**, a businesswoman. When issues and disputes come up, it is the clan elders who connect us. They negotiate with the authorities, and they also settle inter-clan conflicts and land conflicts. The customary system is working well for us.*

*I’m **Ahmed**, I’m a businessman on the Kenya side. It’s true that customary law and the elders play a big role in sorting out problems. We rely on it for business. There was one route across the border that had been closed for a long time, because years ago there was an IED that had targeted a water tanker that belonged to the people. Two people died. It used to be a busy route that carried sugar and other goods from Kismayo Port to all the villages along the border and into Kenya. At the time the road closed, there was 1.7 million Kenya shillings⁶ that was not paid by some Kenyan businessmen to those on the Somalia side. The issue ran for quite some time with clans on one side claiming the debt and the others avoiding it. In 2019, elders on both sides organised a negotiation and then the money was agreed and paid to the businessmen in Somalia. We use the customary system. Who else would help us? It’s a system that connects people. No one can stay in isolation. It’s a formal setup. It’s insurance.*

*My name is **Liban**, I’m active in my community. We should remember that it is not only our customary system that helps keep life going, but also the way people take initiatives every day. Our community is bold. There were some Somali women traders who wanted to cross over the border to Kenya, and they were stopped by the KDF who confiscated their papers. And then the police stopped them at the next roadblock. We went to the government administrator (the Chief). We convinced him that taking away ID cards and stopping our neighbours crossing is unacceptable, and together with him, we removed the roadblock with our own hands. We are making some movement! The government administrators are in a difficult situation. We were with two of them when the District Commissioner called them, telling them: ‘You should be in uniform!’ And they said: ‘We cannot wear our uniforms here because we will be targeted by Al-Shabaab.’ They are part of the Kenya government,*

⁶ Approximately US\$13,200.

but the government doesn't protect them. They are frustrated with the special operations people and the police. The police reservists don't respect them even though they are supposed to be under them. Chiefs don't want to allow people to take the law into their hands, because they will face disciplinary action for allowing such things. The Chief could not remove the roadblock himself alone, as he might collide with the Officer in Charge. But when he got support from us in the community, he got the courage. The authorities need the people, and the authorities should help the people.



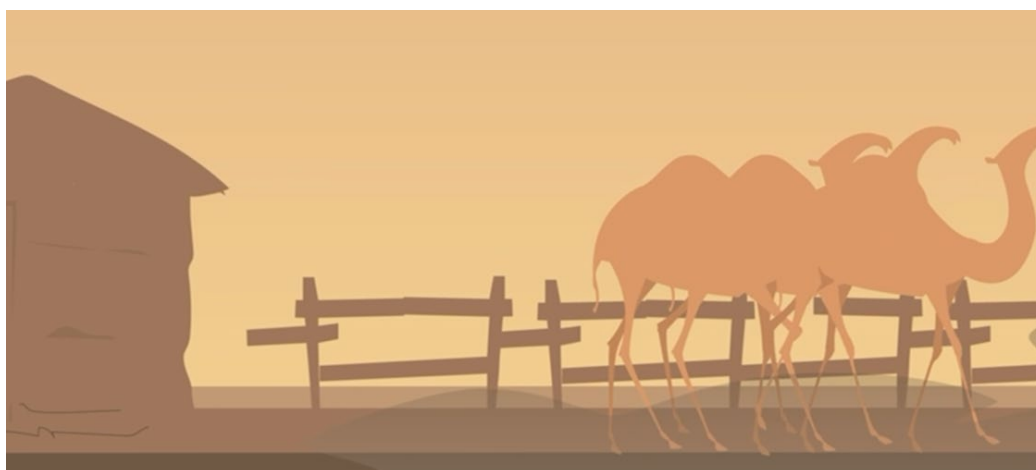
Source: © Action for Social and Economic Progress, Somalia; reproduced with permission. Screenshot from the animated video, *From Conflict to Community-driven Rebirth*

Harithe: *They should help, but it does not always work. You remember the story of the woman whose husband was abducted? When we realised that she was living just across the border in a village on the Somalia side, we said she should come back to her home on the Kenya side. Her land is still here, her house is still here. We have been trying to get the government to solve the issue. We are different clans working together to help her. We went to the Chief to get his permission, and he agreed, but the police reservists refused us. I think they fear that her children would take revenge on them, as they were the ones who profiled their father seven years ago. It is not always so easy to get things solved when there is so much pain and suffering. But we will keep on trying.*

My name is Geeseeya, I'm a mother. We are getting stronger. We have a WhatsApp group between our communities on either side of the border. It's useful because we share daily updates on the

situation, anything that comes up in our localities. We get the information on every story and every issue that happens. People even put pictures of livestock that are lost, and people looking for the owners.

*I am **Khalif**, I used to be a herder, but I lost most of my livestock. I want to add to what Geeseeya is saying about taking initiative. I think we should do the same as her in my village! I was moving from place to place looking for somewhere my family could settle. I came to a village on the Kenya side, but it had no permanent water. There was an NGO that was doing water trucking, but the programme finished. I went to the Somalia side and did some observation on how the people there are living in a place where there is no permanent water. The two villages are just a few kilometres apart, but they are different. There, every household has a water reservoir in which they collect water during the rainy season and use during the dry season. Everyone has water at their house. In Kenya the women are still carrying 20-litre jerrycans. The Somali side is more organised. We should learn from them.*



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Screenshot from the animated video, *It's a Good Deal*

*I am **Hamza**, I have a water cart. You are right, we need to be more organised. When one of the Somali villages fell to Al-Shabaab and people fled to the Kenya side, they found us asleep! On this side, there are few schools or health facilities. On that side, they even run their own schools with no help from government. They pay the teachers themselves. Now the market is full of new shops. It isn't easy in Kenya though. If that person who brought the power generator from Mogadishu tried to do the same in a village on the Kenya side, the next day the Government might forbid him, or it*

might bring power to connect that village and then his business would collapse. It's more of a risk.

*I am **Gamas**, an elder. Our villages are stronger than they look. We have a customary system that works. We call it the 'middle way'. The real problem here is that neither of the governments, nor the NGOs work with communities properly. They just take money or tell us what to do. That's our difficulty. That's what we're trying to say here.*



Source: © Action for Social and Economic Progress, Somalia; reproduced with permission.
Screenshot from the animated video, *It's a Good Deal*

Here we become aware of the workings of an informal order that is providing essential public goods organised by the people. Within and between every community are cross-clan, cross-community relations, and efforts to keep them in order, as illustrated by Liban, Harithe, and Geeseeya's contributions. People form community groups, mobilise funds for schools, set up WhatsApp groups, give mutual support, and make representations to authorities. Elders mediate and arbitrate disputes.

Nimo suggests that people find it easier to come to arrangements with the insurgents. Al-Shabaab is often mentioned as a more predictable actor, creating better security for communities and allowing them space to make their repairs. Businesspeople also emphasise the importance of predictability and note how Al-Shabaab's commitment to Islamic law provides them with a framework for preventing or solving disputes (Ahmad 2014). It helps explain Al-Shabaab's success with powerful elites, as well as with people running small-scale businesses, from trading to livestock management, through its ability to reduce the physical and financial costs of security. Despite this sense of security, the community members who contributed to the conversations still fear Al-Shabaab.

They tread with extreme care, as illustrated in Burhaan and Mohamed's stories about paying *zakaat* to the group. They see Al-Shabaab as an imposed authority over whose rules they have no influence. Norm- and rule-bound insurgent and terrorist groups in different parts of the world have been known to make sharp turns in the way they perpetrate violence, and the participating community members are aware of this possibility (Ahmad 2019)

6. Analysis: the ‘middle way’

Gamas describes his community’s ability to fend for itself as the ‘middle way’. This term means more than the way people navigate the uncertain terrain created by the conflict of the warring parties and the factional politics of those seeking power and money. It is also a way of governing that invokes organisation, beliefs, norms, customs, relationships, networks, communal laws, and arrangements. Together, these can be categorised as the informal order, as touched on by Jama, Faduma, and Ahmed in relation to the role of elders, and Liban, Harithe, Geeseeya, and Hamza in relation to the people’s own mutuality. Their analysis proposes three aspects of this community self-governance: negotiation with external powers and authorities; enactment of customary protocols and laws; and continuous fashioning and strengthening of support networks orally, practically, and by digital means. Together, these are the warp, weft, and pattern of a fabric of self-governance without which life in these dangerous borderlands would be unliveable. We will consider each briefly in turn.

6.1 Negotiation

People living in the Somalia–Kenya borderland work around the dangers posed by the forces fighting the war to create enough stability to live and run their affairs. In the conversation above, we heard community members engaging, with varying degrees of success, with Kenya administration chiefs, the KDF, Somali local officials, the SNA, and Al-Shabaab. In such conditions, predictability comes at a premium. Negotiating with a relatively more predictable actor allows citizens to express their desires and anticipate a rational response. Counter intuitively, as illustrated in pastoralist Burhaan’s and Nimo’s stories about tax, insurgent violence is experienced as more predictable than that of state actors in this borderland. Pastoralists graze and water animals in areas where Al-Shabaab is dominant, and they know how much tax they must pay and for what period it gives them right of access. Abaayo’s description of successfully getting Al-Shabaab to remove its physical presence from the village also illustrates how the group is somehow approachable and even responsive. From a local perspective, willingness to concede a space for the community’s self-governance is useful; it even allowed them to bring in one of the needed services, as illustrated by Bilan.

Conversely, where unpredictability dominates, people’s initiative can be paralysed, as Hamza suggests in reflecting on the obstacles placed by Kenyan state actors on private enterprise. Kenyan state actors cite the need for formal structures for service delivery yet offer little in the way of actual delivery of public goods in these insecure areas. Waiting for government to act, an investor will not install a generator, neither will a community group organise a water system. The

conversations also show the difficulty of engaging with governments that put security mandates before the basic needs of the local population, as is the case with the nightly occupation of the hospital by military forces or the misrepresentation of the donkey cart incident. People feel both exploited and neglected. Getting permissions to travel or trade across the border limits the scope for legal trade, as we see in the case of the roadblock and the administrator described by Liban.

6.2 The customary order

Faduma, Ahmed, and Gamas each touch on the direct role of elders in resolving disputes and managing common resources. Much of the discussion refers to the role of respected men and women in making repairs to community relations and guiding moral behaviour. As in other polities guided by Sharia (Islamic law) and *adat* (customary law), Somali customary institutions derive their fundamental principles from Islam and from Somali custom. Xeer is the Somali name for the norms and principles that protect individual rights and articulate social obligations to family, clan, and society (Abdile 2012; Mohamed 2007; Brosius 2021). Its organisational principles promote separation of powers and negotiation. Elders deal with political affairs while religious leaders (*wadaad* and *ulema*) give spiritual guidance and dispense justice (Schlee 2013; Lewis 1961). Elders' councils organise welfare through the system of *qaaraan* by which communities collect and redistribute wealth from their members, and religious leaders organise *zakat* (Abshir, Abdirahman and Stogdon 2020).

There is an argument on which the introduction of a new system of governance to Somalia is based, that the customary system is at the root of Somalia's troubles, as clans and sub-clans compete for the spoils of war and reconstruction (Elmi 2012). There are also cogent arguments and that it needs considerable reform if it is to be given respect as a legal system which fulfils international norms and the demands of a modernising young Somali population (Mohammed 2024; Peterson and Zaki 2023). The case for the weakening of customary authority when coerced and coopted by powerful states and colonial powers has long been argued (Mamdani 1996). The early stages of the civil war certainly saw the emergence of an unprecedented form of annihilatory clan-against-clan violence that exploded out of 30 years of a centralised authoritarian regime (Kapteijns 2013). Fifteen years later, the rise of Al-Shabaab is understood to have been facilitated by its emphasis on minimising the divisive power of clan identity and its championing of minorities.

Yet there is more to the customary order than clan. It is an 'alternative modernity' according to de Sousa Santos (2006). The capacity of customary law to provide a base for formal governance of Somalia has been argued over between the sceptics, enthusiasts, and idealists, but less so the informal order's capable

management of the everyday and its provision of public goods (Abdile 2012; Schlee 2013; Van Notten 2005; Peterson and Zaki 2023). Not since Lewis (1961) looked at customary institutions 60 years ago has a full political, legal, social, and religious analysis of Xeer as a system of governance been attempted in the literature. The intricate counterbalancing of relations, restitution, peace, and redistribution that make up Xeer and its broader culture are arguably what has been lacking in the debate about the future. When it is working well, allegiance to lineage provides security and insurance, and provides for coexistence across society. It still provides the foundation of everyday order for most Somalis today: its tradition updated with new forms of communality, modes of networking, and ways of negotiating current realities.

Most importantly, it is the ways in which people have been served by the Xeer system and Sharia over the many years of state neglect and war that is our focus here. Flawed though the system may be in relation to current circumstances and aspirations, community members across the rural borderlands feel that, on balance, it is a vital element in their lives. Its capacities not only to provide justice, but also insurance should also not be underestimated. Where else, people ask, do we have any assurances for carrying out business?

6.3 Community networks

While the customary order provides structure and legitimacy to the informal processes of self-governance, the conversation (Story 2, Section 5.2) suggests that the ‘middle way’ also hinges on community support networks that allow citizens of every age, ability, gender, and clan to mobilise for their community. Take the story shared by Harithe, who spoke of how the reflection group (formed for this community reflection) took the initiative to bring Nimo, the mother who fled to Somalia, back to her land in Kenya. Knowing that an injustice had occurred within their community, and that formal governance structures would not act upon the injustice, the group acted. They engaged their networks of friends, relatives, and traditional leaders on both sides of the border to raise the issue through formal and informal structures. The interlocutors explain how mutual support networks help them act on their priorities rather than waiting for government or aid agencies. These networks help citizens feel a sense of agency to govern themselves and to hold customary and formal institutions accountable. Liban’s story of how a local support network rallied around the Chief to embolden him into action, highlights the effectiveness of one such network. The listener can hear the sense of pride that he and his group felt in their role.

The community groups emphasised how they used the Somali tradition of storytelling and passing information, from neighbour to neighbour, community to community, and generation to generation. Through word of mouth and online,

citizens were sharing problems, coalescing around local narratives/truths, mobilising responses, and circulating lessons on what was and was not working. Barre's retelling of the donkey cart story demonstrates how people attempt to establish truth and draw lessons from it. While social media was overrun by stories of Al-Shabaab's new bombing tactics, community members initiated their own investigation, sharing facts, finding sources, and verifying them. This community network was able to block out the noise coming from the parts of social media dominated by national and international narratives about improvised explosive devices and coalesce around the version of events that resonated with local experience. While oral traditions of storytelling and information sharing will continue to be important in a Somali context, increasingly support networks are relying on WhatsApp and other social media platforms to pass information locally, raise needs and issues, and mobilise responses, as Geeseeya explained. It remains an important area for further reflection in the future.

7. Implications of the ‘middle way’

Somalis living in contested borderland areas have borne the brunt of decades of civilian victimisation. Their governments have concentrated on the imperative of destroying the Al-Shabaab insurgency. It is a politico-military rather than a citizenship model. Under this mandate, security forces are empowered to act with little restraint, administrations cannot provide services safely, and people grow resourceful and sometimes resentful. After each destabilising event, the community repairs, and then stability is destroyed again, over and over.

The process of repair, though only sketched here, can already been seen to embrace the major elements of an informal order under tough conditions. Everyday actions and everyday connections are seen working hard to heal differences and organise improvements to the situation. The citizens are resisting victimisation and being creative in their solutions. They are navigating the shifting terrain of the war and keeping it as far as possible out of their lives. While they are relying to a large degree on the guidance and symbolism of Xeer, they are also being creative as each new problem confronts them. Using the ‘middle way’, we have seen the people and their institutions making demands on authorities, building supportive networks, and organising public services. While the 50 citizens who took part in this locally led cross-community and cross-border reflection told stories of suffering and fear and of how much energy they spend dealing with the fallout of violence, they also showed that they are not living in a dark ungoverned zone. They are themselves governing. Citizens in these borderland areas are operating less on the ‘demand’ side of the governance equation and more on the ‘supply’ side.

Can such self-governance help break the cycle of destruction and repair and propel a more lasting stability? How can civil society and international actors play a part? Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili’s (2016) study of the informal order in Afghanistan shows how leaders appointed by local people were not only active in person-to-person and community-to-community relations, but also facilitated relations with authorities. Interrelations of state and tradition went both ways: customary authority in Afghanistan began to govern poorly when the constitution fell apart. And when the customary authorities crumbled, the state found it almost impossible to govern. Officials and warlords operated unconstrained, a particular danger for a rentier state where public finance was raised from external sources. Where the people, their customary leadership, and state officials collaborated, they facilitated democratic advances (*ibid.*).

The Somali borderland conversations in Section 5 point to a similar dynamic. It is not a matter of choosing between the informal over formal order but of exploring and promoting dynamic relationships between imposed and indigenous

authority. This points us to a final question: how could citizens and their institutions make effective common cause with their governments or with national and international aid agencies (each of which represent part of what we would call the formal order), even in the presence of powerful insurgency and equally powerful counterinsurgency? Drawing on the elements of the ‘middle way’, we suggest that forging better relations with a community’s systems of repair and self-governance would go a long way to changing local perceptions that the state is only concerned with destroying Al-Shabaab, whatever the cost to citizens.

7.1 Better relations between the formal and informal orders

Until now, the ineffectiveness of the state in these borderland localities has been explained by the presence of Al-Shabaab preventing free movement. The dangers faced by government personnel are very real; officials are Al-Shabaab targets. And governments have been shown through these stories to be even more unpredictable and dangerous to civilians, and they do not need to be so. The formal order would do well to become more legible and rational to ordinary people and be ready to collaborate with citizens. By interacting with the norms and practices of the informal order, the formal order will gain support (Koinova *et al.* 2021). This requires a mindset shift – from service provider to service enabler. Realistically, the Somali and Kenyan governments will not be able to deliver all desirable services, at least not in the near term. But they can work with citizen support networks and customary institutions to facilitate, rather than block, the local governance mechanisms that are currently providing some basic services and humanitarian relief. For example, they could back the local work that goes on to regulate small-scale businesses, helping to increase rural production, smooth trade, and generate revenue (Pejovich 1999; Razo 2010). Government can also try to better understand the challenges that citizens face in avoiding danger and organising for public good. When understood through this lens, community negotiation with Al-Shabaab is evidence of how self-governance structures navigate challenges, not evidence of complicity or sympathy with a terrorist group.

International agencies can play a role in forging better relationships with community. Viewing the formal and informal as symbiotic structures can create a more realistic vision for humanitarian programmes helping with disasters, and development programmes supporting longer-term objectives. These programmes could support service delivery by improving understanding of and with community and strengthening more collaborative relations. Note how we are reversing the participation recommendation from what is normally done. In standard participatory processes, participants are invited into consultative processes created by formal organisations. But such ‘invited spaces’ seldom allow enough of a reversal of power relations to solve intractable problems

(Gaventa 2006). Here it would be necessary to treat the informal order as if it were as legitimate as the governmental order and engage accordingly.

Not without their own challenges, customary leaders and institutions continue to hold influence and play a key role in the ‘middle way’ at local level. But as Murtazashvili (2016) muses on the customary institutions in Afghanistan, these institutions exist not only to deal with local affairs, but also to communicate with, restrain, and support a larger political community. Where there is a political project that **includes the informal order**, the coherence of the polity can be improved. Customary leaders and institutions can and should be viewed as compatible with wider democratic goals, of rule of law, accountability, and inclusion. And they stand to enhance the wider political project of state building. Rather than making any assumptions that the informal order is either good or bad, or unchanging, it is worth looking at it with care and supporting its evolution. For outsiders to be curious and respectful about their evolving order is in line with the citizen’s wish for recognition. Citizens will, if they can, hold their customary order to account. They have more difficulty doing this with governments and international agencies.

7.2 Mutual support networks

Together with the customary order, mutual support networks should be viewed as key components of the self-governing system operating in these borderland areas to repair stability and provide basic public goods. Approaching these networks as active providers, as opposed to passive recipients, government actors and the international community will be better positioned to understand local needs and support organic responses.

The methodology pioneered in this study can support government, humanitarian, and development programmes to do just that (Greenwood and Levin 2007). The methodology, involving community-led initiative on whichever relevant social, political, or economic issue they chose to investigate and act on, is eminently suited to extending the capacity of the informal order in relation to the state and international programmes (Coghlan and Brannick 2005). In a pleasing ethical way, we have seen the method galvanising the community groups’ confidence in their own powers and an uptick in initiatives that they take to repair and innovate.

The first effect of the community-led reflection method we used in this research was to provide greater insight into ordinary community life, which shed light on the daily dangers faced by citizens in the borderlands, and on their daily processes for repairing destruction and carving out space for their own arrangements. The second effect of this method was to draw diverse people together. It facilitated and strengthened alliances and networks based on common needs (rather than on common identities), which in turn prompted citizens to take new initiatives to deliver more public goods. This process differs

from outsider-led community dialogue processes in how it views the participants. Outsider-led dialogues typically view citizens as the ‘demanders’, asking citizens to prioritise their needs, to be acted upon by the programme or government actors. This community reflection process instead values the ‘provider’ role that support networks can plan, asking the citizen members to reflect upon their own affairs, find commonality in their needs, and analyse how they do and can respond. The team leader of ASEP, which led the facilitation for this project, said that the organisation had become a better ally to community through the process. The connection they were then able to forge between the citizens and higher-level political and administrative actors further extended the networks of mutuality.

Such networks require constraints to keep them from exploiting unfairly any power they may develop, and stimulus to keep them learning. The reflection methodology involved diverse members of society sharing with each other. Echo chambers, whether among members of a single clan, a class, a gender, or within a social media algorithm, require active dismantling. Despite this danger, the clarity that community reflection can generate is likely to increase demand for better cooperation with government and aid agencies, building a bridge between state and society, and giving officials and civil society actors opportunities to try out new strategies of cooperation. Community groups like the ones that formed around the storytelling could invite service providers and administrators to spend more time witnessing and learning from their deliberations and those of the customary order. Stories from such groups could also be shared more widely, using social media, to open localised information ecosystems to a wider audience. In turn, government and the international community should seek to follow and take seriously these information ecosystems.

7.3 Can the ‘middle way’ work at scale?

Alignment with the ‘middle way’ could underpin a new political agenda, a new policy approach, and a new practical approach on the ground for governments and agencies. Resources and political capital and doctrine could be oriented to project positive recognition of citizens and their institutions. A clear political programme that gives a role to the informal order will have the support of many citizens (Sayigh 1997). Change could start with a shift in the language. An agenda to recognise and support the people and their institutions is more likely to gain popular support than the seemingly never-ending war. For a new policy approach, consideration would be given to how to share power more effectively with local institutions without crushing them with corruption or formalisation. They need to keep their independence, legitimacy, and community rootedness.

Better relations between citizens and higher levels of government and the international system could also improve the success of cooperative initiatives

between the two governments across the border. The focus would be on citizens rather than insurgents. From these progressive starting points, the people on both sides could begin to have a say on how they are governed, states and international agencies could become more predictable, and accessible, and the border could function as it should. People would then begin to take more of a part in how Somalia's entire public good is repaired and refashioned for the future.

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