



# KENADID INSTITUTE FOR POLICY AND DEVELOPMENT

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## Strengthening Social Cohesion and Local Governance in Puntland: Opportunities for Peace, Stability, and Sustainable Development

*Policy Brief of the Kenadid Institute for Policy and Development (KIPD)*

### KEY MESSAGES

- Social cohesion and functional local governance are mutually reinforcing: districts with trusted, representative councils manage disputes earlier, deliver services more equitably, and recover from shocks faster.
- Puntland's phased transition to one-person, one-vote district council elections, piloted in Eyl, Ufeyn and Qardho in 2021 and extended statewide in May 2023, is a rare bottom-up democratization asset in the Somali context and must be consolidated, not left to stall.
- Decentralization on paper has outpaced decentralization in practice. Districts remain constrained by narrow revenue bases, unclear functional assignments and thin administrative capacity.
- Climate shocks, displacement, resource competition and youth exclusion are the principal stress points on cohesion; each is manageable through deliberate, locally anchored policy.
- Government, development partners and civil society should invest in standing dialogue platforms, conflict-sensitive and equitable development investment, community reconciliation, accountable and responsive local governance, the meaningful participation of women and youth, and evidence and early warning systems that identify rising tensions in time to act.

### Executive Summary

Puntland occupies a distinctive position in Somalia's political landscape. For more than a quarter of a century it has maintained functioning state institutions, avoided the worst of the country's conflict dynamics and, most recently, led the national transition toward direct, one-person, one-vote local elections. Yet these achievements rest on foundations that remain under strain. Recurrent drought and flooding, contested electoral timelines, competition over land and water, large-scale internal displacement, and the limited fiscal and administrative capacity of district authorities all test the social fabric that has underpinned Puntland's relative stability.

As an independent, non-partisan policy research institute headquartered in Garowe, KIPD is positioned to examine these dynamics from within Puntland itself. This Policy Brief examines the relationship between social cohesion and local governance in Puntland and asks a practical question: what would it take to convert Puntland's governance gains into durable peace, resilience and development outcomes? Drawing on published research, government policy documents, programme evaluations and KIPD's own engagement with communities and institutions across Puntland, the brief argues that social cohesion and local governance are two sides of the same coin. Where district councils are seen as representative and capable, communities resolve disputes earlier, participate more readily in public decision-making, and cooperate across clan and settlement lines. Where councils are absent, contested or under-resourced, grievances accumulate and are more easily politicized.

The brief identifies eight priority areas for action: strengthening inclusive governance and regular political dialogue; conflict-sensitive and equitable allocation of public resources and development investments; sustained support for community reconciliation and peacebuilding; more accountable and responsive local governance; action on the underlying drivers of tension, including political grievances, resource competition and climate stress; the meaningful participation of women and youth in decision-making; stronger coordination among government, civil society, traditional leaders and development partners; and investment in evidence, research and early warning. Each area is accompanied by actionable recommendations addressed to the Puntland Government, the Federal Government of Somalia, development partners, and civil society. None of these measures is beyond reach; most build on systems and practices that already exist in Puntland.

## 1. Introduction

Social cohesion, understood here as the quality of relationships within and between communities and between communities and the institutions that govern them, is increasingly recognized as a determinant of peace and development in fragile settings. In the Somali context, where formal state authority has historically been contested and public services have often been delivered through hybrid arrangements involving government, clan structures, religious leadership, the private sector and aid agencies, cohesion is not an abstract ideal. It is the practical glue that allows markets to function across clan territories, water points to be shared during drought, displaced families to be absorbed by host communities, and elections to be held without violence.

Local governance is the institutional expression of that cohesion. District councils, mayors and local administrations are the tier of the state closest to citizens; they are where most Somalis first encounter and judge government. The Puntland Constitution itself embeds this logic, dividing the state into regions and districts and stressing decentralized administration as a founding principle (PDRC, 2022). Getting local governance right is therefore not a technical afterthought to state-building. It is state-building.

This brief is addressed to policymakers in the Puntland Government and its line ministries, the Federal Government of Somalia, development and humanitarian partners including UN agencies, civil society organizations, researchers, and community leaders. It is deliberately practical in orientation. Section 2 sets out the context. Sections 3 and 4 assess the state of social cohesion and local governance respectively. Section 5 distils the principal challenges, Section 6 identifies emerging opportunities, and Section 7 presents recommendations.

### 1.1 Approach and sources

This brief is based on a structured desk review of published research, government policy and legal documents, programme documentation and election-related reporting on Puntland, complemented by KIPD's ongoing engagement with government institutions, communities and development partners across the state. Published sources were triangulated against one another and against KIPD's field-level observation, and all works consulted are listed in the References. The brief does not present new primary data; its findings and recommendations should be read as an evidence-informed synthesis intended to support policy dialogue.

## 2. Background and Context

Puntland was established in 1998 through a consultative, clan-brokered process that deliberately anchored the new administration in community consensus. This origin has shaped its governance trajectory ever since: authority in Puntland has tended to be negotiated rather than imposed, and stability has depended on the continuous management of expectations among clans, regions and political elites. The state's founding vision of resource and power sharing within a federal Somalia, with services brought closer to citizens through decentralized governance, remains formally in place (PDRC, 2022).

The legal and policy architecture for local governance developed steadily over two decades. The Law on Local Governments was adopted in 2003, and between 2005 and 2008 the Ministry of Interior established local councils in twenty-five districts, initially through clan-based nomination of councillors (UNCDF, 2014; PDRC, 2022). In July 2014, the Puntland Cabinet approved a comprehensive Decentralization Policy covering political, administrative and fiscal dimensions, with the stated ambition of a fully decentralized system in which districts and sector ministries operate against clearly defined functional assignments (UNCDF, 2014). Successive phases of the UN Joint Programme on Local Governance and Decentralized

Service Delivery (JPLG), implemented by ILO, UNCDF, UNDP, UN-Habitat and UNICEF, supported this agenda through district planning, public financial management systems, performance-based fiscal transfers, and the development of District Development Frameworks in nine districts by 2018 (UNICEF, 2018; UN JPLG, 2012).

The most consequential recent development has been electoral. In October 2021, Eyl, Ufeyn and Qardho held Puntland's first direct, one-person, one-vote municipal elections in more than five decades, with over 28,000 votes cast and 87 councillors elected, 23 of them women (Interpeace, 2021). On 25 May 2023, the exercise was extended statewide: thirty districts held peaceful direct elections in which more than 186,000 valid votes were cast and women secured roughly 17 per cent of council seats, an outcome hailed by Somalia's international partners as historic and as a potential model for democratic expansion across the country (VOA, 2023; Africanews, 2023). At the same time, the process was contested. Elements of the opposition boycotted the vote, disputes over district demarcation and electoral timelines delayed voter registration, and the interaction between local elections and Puntland's parliamentary and presidential cycles generated significant political friction (PDRC and Somali Dialogue Platform, 2023; ACLED, 2023). Electoral reform remains live: as of mid-2026, the Puntland Parliament is considering amendments to local government legislation, including a substantial reduction in council sizes intended to improve efficiency and accountability.

This trajectory has unfolded against a demanding backdrop. Puntland hosts large populations displaced by drought, flooding and conflict elsewhere in Somalia; its pastoral economy is acutely exposed to climate variability; unemployment among a predominantly young population is high; and security threats persist in parts of the Bari region and along contested boundary areas. Each of these pressures ultimately lands on district authorities and community institutions, which is precisely why their strength matters. In early 2026, Puntland launched its Fourth Five-Year Development Plan (2026–2030), which articulates a vision of a prosperous and self-sufficient Puntland built on five pillars: inclusive governance; justice and security reform; economic development; social and human capital development; and climate action and environmental sustainability (Puntland State of Somalia, 2026; UNDP, 2026). The prominence given to inclusive governance and resilience in the new plan makes it a natural anchor for the agenda set out in this brief.

### **3. Social Cohesion in Puntland: State of Play**

#### **3.1 Sources of resilience**

Puntland's social fabric retains significant strengths. Customary institutions, including traditional elders (isimo), religious leaders and community committees, continue to mediate disputes over land, water, grazing and compensation, often faster and at lower cost than formal courts. The consultative culture that produced the Puntland state in 1998 persists in practices such as community consultation on district development priorities: the District Development Frameworks launched in 2018 were built through consultations reaching more than 180 villages and communities (UNICEF, 2018). Remittance networks, cross-clan commerce and a vigorous private sector further bind communities together through shared economic interest.

The early one-person, one-vote elections also demonstrated latent civic energy. In the 2021 pilots, women constituted over half of registered voters and youth accounted for more than half of votes cast in all three districts; internally displaced persons were able to vote and stand for office, with an IDP candidate elected to the Qardho council (Interpeace, 2021). These are meaningful indicators of a society prepared to participate in public life when credible channels exist.

#### **3.2 Stress points**

Against these strengths sit real and intensifying pressures, and the political environment remains complex and contested. Disputes surrounding the presidential electoral process of 2023 and 2024 generated significant political tensions between the Puntland administration, opposition groups and some local communities, at times resulting in episodes of political violence, including clashes in Garowe linked to divisions within the security forces (ACLED, 2023). The effects of those divisions have not stayed local: they continue to shape political dynamics, inter-clan relations and social cohesion in regions well beyond the areas where the disputes originated.

Layered onto this, recent years have seen recurring inter-clan conflicts in parts of Mudug and Sanaag, causing loss of life and displacement and requiring extensive reconciliation efforts. These conflicts reflect

persistent tensions over resources, representation, territorial claims and political influence. They intersect, in turn, with unresolved disagreements between the Puntland administration and the Federal Government of Somalia over constitutional reform, federalism, power-sharing and political representation, producing an increasingly complex governance environment in which local grievances and state-level politics feed one another.

Three further pressures compound the picture. Prolonged drought, climate variability and competition over scarce land, water and pasture act as accelerants, converting livelihood stress into social and political friction, particularly in drought years. Exclusion remains a live grievance: women's representation, while improving, remains far below parity; minority groups and displaced communities frequently face contested claims to residency and representation; and many young people perceive few pathways into economic or civic life, patterns consistently documented in district-level research (PDRC, 2022). Finally, the proliferation of districts (Puntland nearly doubled its district count after 1991) has produced administrative units that exist largely on paper, with dysfunctional structures, limited finance and low inclusivity (UN JPLG, 2012; PDRC, 2022). Where the state is nominally present but practically absent, informal authority fills the gap, and cohesion rests on arrangements that can prove fragile under stress. Together, these overlapping dynamics underscore the urgency of investing in social cohesion, inclusive governance, conflict resolution and sustained political dialogue.

## **4. Local Governance and Decentralization: Progress and Constraints**

### **4.1 What has been achieved**

Puntland's local governance record compares favourably within Somalia. Districts operate against an established legal framework (Law No. 7 on Local Governments), a cabinet-approved Decentralization Policy, and a set of public expenditure management procedures emphasizing accountability, participation and transparency (UNCDF, 2014; UN JPLG, 2012). Performance-based fiscal transfers through the Local Development Fund introduced an incentive logic into intergovernmental finance as early as 2011, with central government transferring investment funds to Garowe, Gardo and Bossaso and districts contributing own-source revenue to local projects (UN in Somalia, 2012). Automated accounting and billing systems were rolled out in major municipalities to strengthen revenue collection and financial transparency, and district planning has been progressively formalized through five-year District Development Frameworks (UNICEF, 2018).

The democratization of council formation is the capstone of this progress. Replacing clan nomination with direct election changes the accountability relationship at the heart of local governance: councillors elected by citizens answer, at least in principle, to citizens rather than solely to the clan leaders who nominated them. PDRC's comparative research on the early-election districts found the shift to be a genuine, if incomplete, improvement in legitimacy and responsiveness (PDRC, 2022).

### **4.2 Where the constraints lie**

Four constraints recur across assessments. First, fiscal decentralization lags political decentralization. Most districts cannot fund meaningful services from their own revenue, and intergovernmental transfers remain modest and not always predictable, leaving councils with mandates they cannot finance. Second, functional assignments between sector ministries and districts remain incompletely defined in practice, producing duplication in some areas and neglect in others, despite the 2014 policy's ambition of clarity by 2020 (UNCDF, 2014). Third, administrative capacity is thin: many districts lack qualified planners, engineers, finance officers and land administrators, and staff turnover linked to political cycles undermines institutional memory. Fourth, the electoral process remains politically sensitive: the relationship between local, parliamentary and presidential electoral processes has repeatedly generated dispute (PDRC and Somali Dialogue Platform, 2023), and reforms now before Parliament, including the reduction of council sizes, will need careful, consultative implementation if they are to strengthen rather than unsettle local legitimacy.

## **5. Key Challenges**

Synthesizing the analysis above, five challenges stand out as the principal obstacles to a virtuous circle of cohesion, governance and development in Puntland.

**Electoral consolidation under political pressure.** The gains of 2021 and 2023 require continued institutional support and political consensus to be sustained. Boycotts, disputes over timelines and demarcation, the unresolved aftermath of the contested 2023–2024 presidential process, and the temptation to subordinate local electoral calendars to state-level political competition all place the credibility of the democratization process under strain (ACLED, 2023; PDRC and Somali Dialogue Platform, 2023).

**The unfunded mandate problem.** Councils that cannot visibly deliver risk discrediting the very idea of elected local government. Citizens judge democratization by whether garbage is collected, water flows and disputes are settled, not by the elegance of the legal framework.

**Climate-driven resource competition and displacement.** Drought and flood cycles are intensifying pressure on water, pasture, urban land and services, and are redrawing settlement patterns faster than administrative systems can adapt.

**Exclusion of women, youth, minorities and displaced communities.** Underrepresentation is both a fairness problem and a stability problem: groups without voice in formal institutions pursue their interests through other channels, not all of them peaceful.

**Weak citizen–state feedback loops.** Mechanisms through which citizens can obtain information, raise grievances and hold local authorities to account remain underdeveloped, leaving trust dependent on personality and clan intermediation rather than institutional performance. The same weakness runs in the other direction: information about emerging local tensions is fragmented across communities, agencies and informal networks, and rarely reaches decision-makers early enough or in a form that supports timely response.

## 6. Emerging Opportunities

The picture is far from static, and several openings can be seized in the near term.

First, Puntland's demonstrated electoral capability is itself an asset. Having conducted statewide direct district elections that international partners regard as a reference point for Somalia's wider democratization (VOA, 2023), Puntland possesses electoral institutions, voter registries and practical experience that can be consolidated at comparatively low cost. The ongoing legislative review of local government law offers a vehicle for locking in improvements: clearer council mandates, defined electoral calendars insulated from state-level political cycles, and strengthened provisions for inclusion.

Second, the district planning and public financial management systems built over fifteen years of JPLG support provide a ready platform for scaling. District Development Frameworks, performance-based transfers and automated revenue systems do not need to be invented; they need to be extended to more districts, updated, and financed (UNICEF, 2018; UN JPLG, 2012). The Fourth Five-Year Development Plan (2026–2030) provides the framework for doing so: its inclusive governance and climate action pillars, and its emphasis on stronger institutions and resilience, align directly with the priorities identified in this brief and give government and partners a shared reference point for investment (Puntland State of Somalia, 2026).

Third, the humanitarian-development-peace nexus agenda is redirecting partner attention and resources toward exactly the local institutions this brief is concerned with. Programmes in water, health, education and social protection increasingly work through district structures, creating opportunities to strengthen government systems rather than bypass them, provided partners deliberately choose alignment over parallel delivery.

Fourth, Puntland's young population is an opportunity as much as a risk. The 2021 and 2023 elections showed that young people will engage when credible avenues exist (Interpeace, 2021). Structured youth participation in district planning, civic education, and local economic development initiatives can convert demographic pressure into civic energy.

Fifth, customary and religious institutions remain widely trusted and can be partners in cohesion rather than rivals to formal governance. Hybrid dispute-resolution arrangements that link elders' mediation to district authorities and, where appropriate, to formal courts have a strong track record in the Somali context and can be systematized without displacing either sphere.

## 7. Policy Recommendations

The following recommendations are addressed to the Puntland Government, the Federal Government of Somalia, development partners and civil society. Together they set out a practical agenda for strengthening cohesion and governance, one that builds deliberately on institutions and practices Puntland already has rather than proposing structures that would need to be created from nothing.

**Recommendation 1: Strengthen inclusive governance and political dialogue.**

Government institutions at state and district level should establish regular, structured platforms for engagement that bring together government, traditional leaders, religious authorities, civil society organizations, women, youth and local communities. These platforms should meet on a predictable calendar rather than being convened only when crises erupt, and should have a defined channel through which their deliberations reach decision-makers. In the current political environment, sustained dialogue is the least expensive and most effective instrument available for lowering tension before it hardens.

**Recommendation 2: Promote conflict-sensitive development programming.**

Public resources and development investments should be allocated transparently, equitably and inclusively across districts and communities, with published criteria and accessible information about who receives what. Government and partners should screen major investments for their likely effect on inter-community relations, since perceived favouritism in the distribution of projects, jobs and contracts is itself a driver of grievance. Equity also has a fiscal dimension: districts cannot allocate fairly what they do not receive, so predictable, transparent intergovernmental transfers, with published formulas and disbursement schedules, are the foundation on which conflict-sensitive local investment rests. Equitable allocation is not only a matter of fairness; it is preventive peacebuilding.

**Recommendation 3: Enhance social cohesion and peacebuilding initiatives.**

Community dialogue, reconciliation processes and locally led trust-building mechanisms, particularly in areas affected by recurrent inter-clan conflict in parts of Mudug and Sanaag, require sustained, multi-year support rather than short project cycles. Reconciliation agreements should be followed through with practical measures such as joint community projects, agreed restitution and independent monitoring, so that settlements hold and communities see a tangible dividend from peace.

**Recommendation 4: Improve government-community relations.**

Districts should strengthen the everyday accountability relationship with citizens: publication of budgets and council decisions in accessible formats, regular public sessions, and functioning complaint and feedback channels open to all residents, including displaced and minority communities. Responsive local governance is built through many small, visible acts of answerability, and each one adds to the stock of trust on which cohesion depends.

**Recommendation 5: Address the underlying drivers of social and political tension.**

Policy responses should reach beyond managing symptoms to the drivers themselves: unresolved political grievances, competition over land, water and pasture, historical disputes between communities, and the mounting impacts of climate variability and environmental stress. This means pairing dialogue with tangible measures, including fair and transparent land administration, investment in shared water infrastructure, and climate adaptation that reduces the resource pressures around which conflicts form.

**Recommendation 6: Increase the meaningful participation of women and youth.**

Women and youth should hold genuine decision-making roles in governance and peacebuilding at local and regional levels, not merely consultative seats. Building on the civic energy demonstrated in the 2021 and 2023 elections, this requires facilitated pathways into councils, committees and peace structures, civic education, leadership and candidate support, and protected, safe channels for participation.

**Recommendation 7: Strengthen collaboration for coordinated peacebuilding.**

Government institutions, civil society organizations, traditional leaders and development partners should operate within a shared framework for peacebuilding and social cohesion, aligned with the inclusive governance pillar of the Fourth Five-Year Development Plan (2026–2030), with a clear division of roles and joint review of progress. Fragmented and duplicative initiatives dilute impact, exhaust community goodwill and can inadvertently generate new grievances.

**Recommendation 8: Invest in evidence, research and early warning.**

Puntland needs systematic evidence on social tensions: regular independent research, citizen perception surveys and community-based early warning systems that identify emerging risks and trigger timely policy

responses. Government and partners should treat credible, locally generated data as core infrastructure for peace, and independent research institutions have a central role to play in producing it.

## 8. Conclusion

Puntland has repeatedly demonstrated that incremental, consultative, locally owned institution-building works in the Somali context. The consensus that created the state in 1998, the patient construction of local government law and systems through the 2000s and 2010s, and the landmark direct elections of 2021 and 2023 form a coherent trajectory that now stands at a genuinely consequential juncture. If the democratization of local governance is consolidated credibly, if districts are financed and staffed to deliver, and if participation is widened to those currently at the margins, Puntland can consolidate a model of bottom-up governance with relevance far beyond its borders. If, instead, these gains are allowed to erode under fiscal neglect and political contestation, the costs will be measured in weakened cohesion at precisely the moment climate and demographic pressures are intensifying.

The choice is not between ambitious reform and the status quo; it is between consolidating systems that already exist and watching them decay. Nor should social cohesion, inclusive governance, climate resilience and sustainable development be treated as parallel agendas: they form a single interlocking one. Cohesive communities sustain effective local institutions; effective institutions manage climate and resource stress before it hardens into conflict; and the stability that results is what allows development investment to take root and endure. The recommendations in this brief are deliberately modest in that sense. They ask government, partners and civil society to finish what Puntland has started. KIPD will continue to contribute to this agenda through independent research, policy dialogue and community engagement, and welcomes collaboration from all institutions committed to peace, stability and sustainable development in Puntland and Somalia.

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### **About KIPD**

The Kenadid Institute for Policy and Development (KIPD) is an independent, non-profit policy research institution headquartered in Garowe, Puntland State of Somalia, with a Somalia-wide mandate. KIPD conducts research and policy analysis on governance, social cohesion, peacebuilding, youth empowerment and economic development, translating evidence into practical policy with government, partners and communities.

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