

## Linking teacher training to effective delivery of curriculum reform:

Why listening to teachers is key to achieving progress toward SDG 4 in Somaliland

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### ABSTRACT

Somaliland is a semi-autonomous quasi-state in the Horn of Africa, whose independence has yet to be recognized by the international community. Though there has been significant diaspora and returnee investment in private schools in Somaliland, state schools are severely underfunded, and teachers across both education systems are paid hourly, teaching in multiple schools at once to earn a full-time salary. The Ministry of Education and Higher Education lacks the capacity for effective monitoring of all schools in Somaliland. This has led to the importation of multiple rival curricula which exist in competition with the state curriculum. Teachers make difficult decisions in navigating these different curricula, but this means that the intended message of curriculum reform rarely makes it to the classroom. In light of this situation, rigorous teacher training is needed to help empower teachers to support their students effectively. Such training must be designed in consultation with teachers, so as not to add more pressure to their lives.

### KEYWORDS

Somaliland, Somalia, education, conflict, peacebuilding, teacher training, curriculum reform

## Introduction

Somaliland is a semi-autonomous quasi-state in the Horn of Africa, which declared independence from Somalia in 1991 following the collapse of Siad Barre's Government and the outbreak of the Somali Civil War. Its independence has yet to be recognized by the international community, due predominantly to concerns that such independence might lead to the break-up of the rest of Somalia and the compromising of regional security (but also, sometimes, due to fear for the stability of Somaliland's border territories) (Pijovic, 2014). Martha C. Johnson and Meg Smaker explain that this lack of recognition has had an impact on aid flowing into Somaliland, in that the delivery and distribution of this aid is frequently stalled as it is channelled through Somali institutions in South Central Somalia (2014). They argue that, in the quarter century that Somaliland has existed as a quasi-state in Somalia, it has not been entitled to the 'international protection, large-scale aid, and loans available to governments in other post-collapse contexts', leaving Somaliland to fend for itself in a state-building project that has largely been 'a bottom-up process, relying on clan elders and the financial support of business and diaspora communities' (Ibid). Yet such support has had significant impact (Lindley, 2007), turning present day Somaliland into somewhat of a development paradox. Driving through the streets of Hargeisa, foreign investment by businesses and private individuals is readily apparent in the growing number of high-rises, the expansion of new hotels, cafes and restaurants, the presence of generators to power independent shops, and the mushrooming of billboards advertising the latest fashions and gadgets. However, the streets that connect these attractions are linked by roads that are potholed at best, and simple dirt tracks at worst. Generators are needed everywhere because many buildings are either without central power or without access to reliable power. Water trucks are seen coming in daily to compensate for the absence of an effective water and plumbing system, and shops flood each time that it rains. Cloth

and corrugated iron shanty towns in the hills surrounding the city are what constitute its camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs). This is what a landscape looks like when investment in a city does not reach its institutions, when there is little to no capacity for a state to tax its citizens, and when incoming international assistance does not match the pace of internal development. This landscape offers a good metaphor for understanding what is happening in the Somaliland education sector, which is a hodgepodge of underfunded state schools and private schools of varying and questionable quality. 'Anyone can open a school in Somaliland', a teacher tells me in Hargeisa in 2018, 'and it's impossible to know what each one is doing'. The state monitoring capacity is not there, while high demands for new schools and universities make it politically risky for the state to stall the opening of new learning facilities, Ministry employees confirm to me.

The Somaliland Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE) also faces continuing external pressure to reform the education system, with much of its ongoing funding linked to foreign aid channelled through UNICEF and partner organisations working towards progress in achieving SDG 4, funded by the EU, DFID, USAID, DANIDA, the Norwegian Embassy, Turkey, the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), and the Government of the Netherlands (Ministry of Human Development and Public Services, Directorate of Education, 2013). This has prompted the MoEHE, with support from the African Educational Trust (AET) and the EU, to reform its curriculum, in particular to consolidate its learning resources and textbooks for peacebuilding purposes in order to ensure that all of the different schools across Somaliland are teaching a cohesive vision of a singular national identity rather than a divisive history of clan conflict (Lewis & Winn, 2018). This is important for several reasons. Firstly, SDG 4 upholds the principals of inclusive and equitable quality education, which means that the curriculum should be representative of all Somaliland clans, rather than discriminatory or exclusionary, especially in its narration of recent history. Secondly, graduates of the Somaliland

education system should receive a qualification that represents the completion of secondary school, and this document needs to have recognizable meaning for potential employers across the territory in order to allow for economic and social mobility (whereas currently unrecognised or uncredited qualifications bar such mobility). Thirdly, steering students towards the same exam may allow monitoring of education quality across different schools to ensure that students in rural areas, for instance, are not receiving an inferior quality of education, which might be detectable in their exam results.

In 2018, I travelled to Hargeisa for three weeks on a small grant from the London International Development Centre to investigate the degree to which the reformed curriculum and textbooks were accepted by local teachers as representative of their vision of Somaliland's national identity. Building on past research experience that I had gained through regular travel to the territory since 2013, I found that the textbooks were held in high regard by Ministry employees, and that the textbook authors had put significant effort into making the work representative. However, I also found that teachers and teacher trainers had largely dismissed the arrival of the new books without serious examination of their contents. In particular, most of those teachers whom I interviewed had received the new textbooks some months previously, but only a few had opened them. Some working in private schools had been instructed to disregard the books entirely. Of those who had read them, many had made changes, ripping out chapters that they thought were 'not relevant' to their students because these were not specifically about the districts in which they lived (though the overarching history presented by the books was not entirely out of keeping with their own versions of events). This is not unusual in Somaliland, where teachers are paid hourly per taught lesson and moonlight in multiple schools with insufficient time to learn each curriculum that they teach. It is also not uncommon for a country prone to importing external curricula that are often not relevant for local needs, leading to frequent reforms and resulting in reform

fatigue on the part of teachers, as will be detailed in later sections. In the past, teachers have had to learn to think quickly in adapting curricula to the needs of their students, and often assume that a curriculum is flawed before they receive it: they come to each new textbook ready to make their own changes to the content. Added to this are challenges relating to a lack of widespread teacher training, poor retention of qualified teachers, and problems related to teaching low-income students in a foreign language, with secondary schools mostly being taught in English, and sometimes in Arabic. In this paper, I unpack these challenges further, in order to analyze some of the major obstacles to achieving SDG 4, as they relate to the barriers for delivering quality education provision as explained to me by teachers and education practitioners in Somaliland.

My work is speculative, based on 42 interviews with Ministry employees, teachers, teacher-trainers, UNICEF and Save the Children education specialists, journalists, and students in Hargeisa. Participants were selected for their past experience in Somaliland in having; established schools; authored policy reforms on education; contributed to curriculum reform or textbook authorship; trained teachers; written teacher training programmes; taught in primary or secondary schools; or, fully completed the national primary and secondary school programme. Initial participants were identified in consultation with the University of Hargeisa, where I had a previously established working relationship with Mr Nasir M Ali, Director of the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, and then snowballing was used to identify additional participants. I also worked in collaboration with Dr Idil Osman, a colleague at SOAS, who was researching media literacy and whose work had direct bearing on mine, as it was important to establishing the wider context in which learning about national identity took place for teachers and students alike. Due to my focus on teacher experiences and perspectives, as well as my time limitations, I did not seek to interview or observe children in Somaliland classes, though this

would likely be my next logical step. Nevertheless, my findings indicate that significant investment is likely to be needed in teacher training over curriculum reform in order to ensure that quality education is delivered equitably. This view was in part echoed by interviewees from the MoEHE, who are also pushing for increasing the level of basic training required to work in Somaliland's schools. However, such training must be implemented carefully, with great sensitivity to the context of Somaliland, in which the significant economic pressures that teachers face in their daily lives have resulted in entrenched suspicion of training initiatives, which are sometimes perceived as a threat to their job security.

## **Reconciling SDG 4 with Challenges Faced by Teachers in Hargeisa**

The UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) famously pushed towards universal access to primary education as did the Education for All goals. However, not all of the EFA goals were met by the framework's deadline of 2015 (Sayed & Ahmed, 2015). This is not to say that the implementation of both frameworks did not lead to a significant push in enrollment of students in schools. On the contrary, in Somalia and Somaliland, it resulted in an increase from 18.8% net enrolment in 2004 (Transitional Federal Government, 2010) to 32% in 2017, in large part due to increased funding made available through donor support to the MDGs (UNICEF, 2017). However, upon reflection, the MDGs were criticized for promoting access over quality, as well as enrollment over retention, and for being too slow in the progress they generated (Unterhalter, 2014). Hence, the UN SDGs have been advanced as a new global agenda for 2030, with SDG4 advocating for inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning. To achieve better results in Somaliland in this regard, each of these terms—inclusivity, equity, and equitable quality—need to be carefully redefined and contextualized, taking into

account the current context of education as well as the interplay of education with wider socio-political challenges related to post-conflict recovery.

Compared to its southern neighbours of South West State and Puntland, Somaliland is relatively peaceful and stable. Nevertheless, it is a post-conflict quasi-state with unresolved disputes between clans that periodically turn violent, particularly during times of elections and political change. State education and education policy set by the MoEHE in the form of an official Somaliland curriculum is therefore a sensitive issue, as this determines the official narrative of Somaliland's history and independence, as taught to the children who live there. In 2000, Bush and Saltarelli's ground-breaking review of *The Two Faces of Education in Ethnic Conflict* established that the design of education in conflict-affected societies can have either a peace-promoting or conflict-promoting role, depending on key factors pertaining to its distribution, content, and representativeness. Their work has been taken further by Novelli, Cardozo and Smith, who have adapted this concept into a '4Rs framework' for peacebuilding education' (2017). Crucially for us, Novelli et al argued that to be peace-promoting, education must be representative of inputs from all the different stakeholders living in a society, and that it must recognize the identities of those stakeholders as legitimate (Ibid). It must also be redistributed fairly, to ensure that people living in a society have access regardless of identity (Ibid). To ensure that education interventions in Somaliland are not harmful to the stability of the peace, these factors should be considered in their post-conflict setting as measures of the inclusivity promoted by SDG 4. All Somaliland stakeholders should be consulted in education reform and should have equitable access to education opportunities. 'Equitable access' here goes beyond mere availability of places in schools to consider the barriers to completion of education faced by children of different backgrounds. In short, as Tomasevski (2001) asserts, education

must meet the criteria of availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability, taking into account poverty, safety, distance and relevance as potential factors inhibiting child engagement in schools.

The latest curriculum reform in Somaliland has been underpinned by a significant consultation process, spearheaded by the Africa Educational Trust and the Hargeisa Cultural Centre, to ensure that representative textbooks of Somaliland's history have been produced and distributed through interviews with representatives from all the major clans and sub-clans. The textbooks are not perfect, but they are careful in their presentation of events. Unfortunately, as has been alluded in the introduction, this inclusive message is not necessarily reaching classrooms, where teachers have significant control in determining what message students receive. Clan identities are carefully avoided in the new textbooks, but some of those teachers I spoke to listed this as a problem, stating that their students understand history in clan terms, and that they have therefore compensated for the shortfall by adding their own interpretations to their lesson plans, replacing official textbook chapters with local news stories, cut out of newspapers. One teacher moonlighting in public and private schools explained to me that clan elders will themselves also take on this responsibility on occasion, stating:

[schools] are owned, sustained and maintained by the clan, and they are clan dominated. So [a clan] might recommend strongly that the school teaches the history of that clan. If a clan has an influence on the school, they will have an influence on the identity of the students. Members of the diaspora might also come to the school and visit and tell them about the clan, or an elder can come in and talk about it, and the school can be linked to clan identity.

These teacher, news- and community or clan-generated narratives are not monitored, but they enter into the classroom and may be a significant bar to promoting inclusivity, particularly if children of rival clans do not want to learn together, or if the history presented by their teachers is hostile or intimidating.

Students I interviewed also mentioned learning different narratives in different classrooms within the same school as a challenge that they faced, stating that children in different year groups might be learning different versions of history, depending on their teachers. Appropriate teacher training is needed to resolve confusion around these issues, but the sensitivity of clan politics means that clannism is a topic generally shied away from in teacher training programmes (again, with exceptions that are determined largely by the personalities of individual teacher trainers, rather than by training programmes themselves).

Moving on to the issue of equity and equitable quality, there are further challenges unique to the Somaliland case. Based on my interviews, schools across Somaliland fail to retain qualified staff. All teachers seem to begin their teaching careers by teaching in primary schools, whether or not they are trained to do so. Those who do well are promoted firstly into secondary school, and later into positions at ministries, INGOs, or universities, becoming lecturers. Therefore, those working in primary education are the least experienced teachers—this is written into the very tapestry of the education system. There is also a reluctance in Hargeisa to teach in conflict-affected territories, in rural areas, or in areas dominated by rival clans, while teacher training colleges are mainly found in Somaliland's big cities, and teachers from neglected parts of Somaliland cannot attend them easily. This results in a discrepancy in the quality of education delivery in state schools, though the discrepancy may be slight, as staff at the Department of Education in the University of Hargeisa noted to me that their teacher training programmes are routinely undersubscribed. A bigger factor is the role of returnees, who open private academies in urban centres, some of which are better funded and supplied than state institutions, adding another layer of potential inequality to the education sector: some of these private schools are staffed by qualified teachers, others are entirely unaccredited.

When I visited the MoEHE in 2018, my interviewees noted that there was a push by the Ministry for mandatory teacher

training to be implemented across all private and public schools, prohibiting teaching by untrained staff. It is difficult to see how this policy could be effectively implemented without creating teacher shortages in state schools, and it might be impossible to implement in private schools altogether, given that they operate on their own incomes, independently of the Ministry. While I was there in the summer of 2018, the proposed mandatory training led to significant teacher protests in Hargeisa: many teachers found the idea that they needed to be completely retrained to do their jobs to be insulting, while others were afraid that they would lose their positions if they could not pass the entry exams. These findings indicate that teacher training is likely to be crucial to meeting SDG 4 in Somaliland, but that training itself is potentially an explosive issue.

## **Reform Fatigue and its Impact on Teaching Practice**

Education in Somaliland has a long history, with schools becoming politicized during the colonial period, when they were associated with imperialism and indoctrination (Lewis & Winn, 2018). From the 1990s onwards, due to the widescale destruction of schools in Somaliland, new textbooks and learning materials were imported from Kenya, Ethiopia, and more broadly from donor countries in the West and Middle East. Many schools still use these textbooks, ignoring reforms due to their frequency. Others are disillusioned by the reform process itself, which has not always been effective in generating original content, preferring to keep relying on the old books. This 'reform fatigue' has led some teachers to distrust the learning materials that they are given, and to make use of them only minimally (at least, based on my small sample of interviews).

Teachers complain that many of the textbooks they have been given in the past are confusing and inappropriate. Illustrations and songs used in imported language-teaching textbooks are frequently ill-chosen. For example a small girl may be shown playing with a



dog, which is not acceptable in a society where children in general are prohibited from doing so; a drawing of a house might have a Western style of construction, with resources and technologies that communities do not have access to, or a song about Old MacDonald and his farm may describe a farmer with multiple animals in a society where pastoralists will only ever own either camels or goats. A former Somaliland faculty member commented to me: 'The stories are not ours, the geography is not ours, the history is not ours, and the identity is not ours'. Thus, many old textbooks are unrepresentative of the local identity, and this delegitimises the education sector as a whole, contributing to societal division between those who continue to value the importance of liberal education and those who reject it as a neo-colonial institution. Perceptions of outside interference in curricula decisions are also pervasive, with another faculty member commenting:

Basically there are international organizations in the system, pushing for more reforms, even though there have already been reforms. When I look at the Somaliland curriculum, in a nutshell it's more like a cut-and-paste job. The curriculum that we have is simply a dictation from UNICEF and UNESCO.

The immediate solution to this challenge for the international community, who rightly feel the urgency of the need to strengthen the education system in Somaliland, is not apparent. As I have argued, recent work in curriculum reform has been far more rigorous, but it will take time for teachers to start trusting the learning resources that they are given.

Teachers also expressed to me a lack of confidence in their students' ability to do well as a motivator for adapting textbooks to their classroom needs. Some teachers stated in interview that they would remove chapters from textbooks if these were not going to be featured in exams, knowing that few students attended all of their lessons, and that they therefore needed to maximize the time they spent in class preparing children and young people for exams. If they felt unable to prepare students for exams adequately, they would also tear difficult questions out of state exam papers

and mark their classes on the remaining answers. Some of the teachers I spoke to had only a rudimentary grasp of the English language, but were preparing their students to pass all subject exams in English. Tearing out exam questions that their students could not answer seemed to them to be the only way around this challenge. Here, again, rigorous training is needed to give teachers the confidence to support their students all the way through the education system.

## Conclusion

Somaliland has failed to meet its 2015 MDG targets in education, and is in danger of failing to achieve the SDGs by 2030. Past failure stems in part from the persistent internal inequalities and development challenges facing Somaliland's children, and in part from a failure on the part of donors to channel sufficient resources for real change into the unrecognized state. Now that equitable quality is a focus of the next cycle of development interventions, greater attention will need to be given to the role of teachers in supporting students to overcome these challenges. Meeting SDG4 will require a revolution in quality, orchestrated by changes to the very structure of teacher recruitment, training and retention, supported by a significant commitment of resources and based on in depth consultations with teachers themselves. Teacher training is badly needed, but such training must be very carefully planned to support teachers, rather than to put further pressure on their capacities, which are already stretched dangerously thin. Given that training is an explosive and threatening issue for many teachers, it is important that in-service training is provided to teachers where they teach, and not simply in urban centres. It is also essential that such training not be disruptive: because teachers work in multiple schools simultaneously, it is difficult to discern their full schedules early in a term. Therefore, teachers should be offered a variety of different times in which to complete training and should be compensated for the exams that they pass as a further incentive

to learn. Finally, one risk in training teachers in Somaliland is that over-qualifying them empowers them to leave schools in pursuit of better work. To avoid this, salaries for trained teachers need to be competitive. Employing teachers full time, rather than hourly, would not only encourage them to remain loyal to their schools, but would also provide them with greater preparation time in which to absorb curriculum reforms. Importantly, the Somaliland MoEHE is aware of the challenges faced in teacher training and retention, but cannot achieve any of these reforms without a new influx of funding. Such funding needs to be regular and reliable, and needs to be allocated directly for Somaliland's teachers, but this remains difficult to achieve in a state whose independence from Somalia is not yet recognized.

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