

Education and Conflict Review



Education, Peace and Development in Somali Society

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Higher education partnerships for peace and development

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In recent years, education has been recognised as a contentious subject in fragile contexts (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000). While education can become a victim of war, it can also play a complicit role in the production of violent conflict by exacerbating socioeconomic divisions, denying educational access to disadvantaged social groups and promoting manipulative historical narratives. Furthermore, it can be a powerful tool for political indoctrination and extremism. However, on the positive side, it can act as a catalyst for peacebuilding by addressing the drivers of conflict. For example, education can promote inclusive democracy by empowering disenfranchised groups, ethnic minorities and women and reduce inequalities by providing relevant education and employment to marginalised youth.

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While peace is crucial for quality education, conflict sensitive education can be a driver for social transformation and sustainable peace. In protracted crises such as in Somalia, where almost 90 percent of all schools were destroyed during the civil war and merely 42 percent of primary school-aged Somali children are enrolled in school, rebuilding society through educational development is crucial. Peace and development can only be realised by strengthening the higher education sector at the policy, institutional and community level and by integrating peacebuilding and conflict transformation into educational policies and practices. This requires developing the capacity of Somali institutions to promote peace and conflict transformation practices. This need is pertinent in the context of Somaliland (which enjoys political stability), as well as in Puntland and in South Central Somalia, which continues to suffer from violence and instability.

International partnerships in higher education can be instrumental in facilitating knowledge exchanges, developing research ideas and promoting innovations in addressing economic, political and social challenges in the era of globalization. In societies that have suffered from the debilitating impact of armed conflict, rupturing of social fabrics and ethnic or clan-based tensions that maintain state fragility, higher education can produce knowledge and skills not only to revive economic development and physical rebuilding but also in reinstating collapsed governance and democratic polity. Increased access to higher education in

post-war context can reduce the likelihood of the restart of a civil war (Ishiyama and Breuning, 2012). Higher education is perceived to be a stabilizing or securitizing factor by providing a positive alternative to youth, and therefore it contributes to peacebuilding through transformative disciplines such as peace and conflict studies and addressing horizontal inequalities (Milton and Barakat, 2016). In the Somali region, higher education can play a significant role in promoting regional dialogue for political stability, statebuilding and economic and social development through academic partnerships between universities in the Horn of Africa.

North-South partnerships in higher education can also play a supportive role in facilitating academic collaboration, improving curriculum development, and capacity building in research and teaching. In order to enhance such capacity building, UCL Institute of Education is collaborating with the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies of the University of Hargeisa to develop a new inter-disciplinary course on Education, conflict and peacebuilding. The course has a specific focus on understanding the role of education in the production and prevention of socio-political tensions and in the development of skills for conflict resolution and peacebuilding in the Somali region. It aims to provide a critical understanding of the interactions between education and conflict in Somali society and to promote conflict sensitive approaches to learning.

We employed a research-based participatory approach to develop the course, involving academics, graduate students, and NGO practitioners who support education and peace programmes in Somaliland. We drew upon a global overview of education and conflict and contextualized these through some specific issues relating to the Somali region. A review of current academic programmes in the region also shows that there is lack of focus on educational debates in peace and conflict studies. We hope that our new course will fill this gap in the current academic provision in the Horn of Africa by promoting a multidisciplinary approach to teaching conflict resolution and peacebuilding, in which higher education

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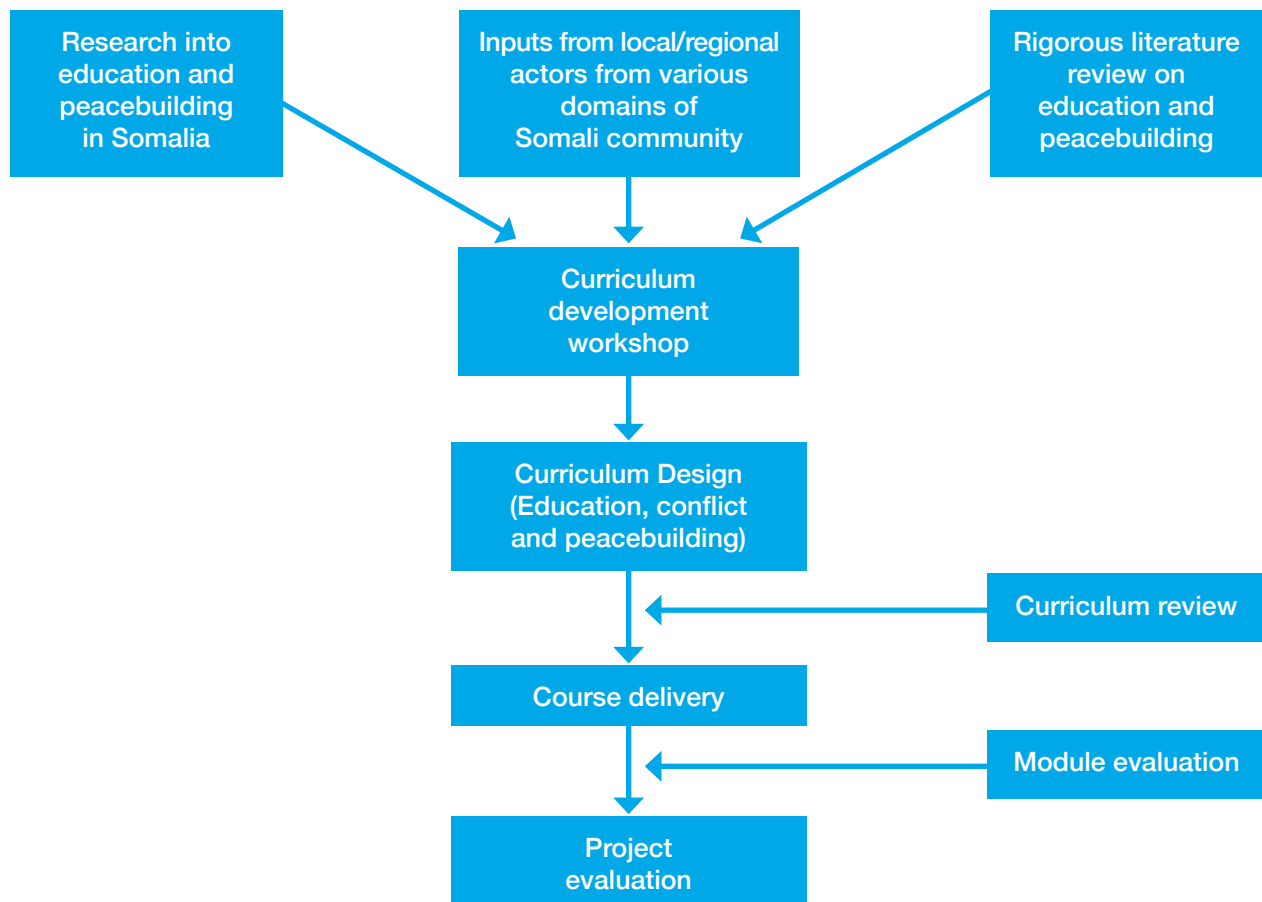


Figure 1 Methodology: curriculum conceptualisation

plays a significant role. Figure 1 shows the methodological process that we used to conceptualise the curriculum project.

A hybrid political system of local traditions and modern forms of democracy is argued to have contributed to peace and stability in Somaliland (the self-administering quasi-state located in the North of the region) in the last twenty-five years. A bottom-up approach to understanding historical narratives, local participation and incorporating indigenous perspectives and cultural values is key to the peace education curriculum. In this process, civic participation in developing the core principles of conflict resolution and peacebuilding is significant. Hence, through this course, we endeavor to build a pracademic (practice and academic) partnership through which students will engage in practicums to apply the theoretical knowledge that they have gained from the course and reflect on practical learning.

Working across different cultures is often challenging for several reasons. Conflict-affected and politically contested societies add another layer of difficulty in terms of managing educational partnerships, curriculum development and pedagogical approaches. Firstly, there are genuine concerns about North-South partnerships with regards to the potential domination of Western educational values in the process of capacity building. International academics are likely to experience cautiously friendly attitudes from partners as

there are a number of cultural disconnections, skepticism and different understandings of research. To mitigate this, it would require a commitment for a long-term engagement and collaboration from all partners. Secondly, academics from the West might subconsciously expect outcomes beyond the capacity of partner organisations in low income contexts. This may be reflected in terms of meeting deadlines, quality of outputs and the medium and levels of communication between partners during the project. Thirdly, international development organisations are likely to create a parallel segment of economically exclusive job market, which often drains out skilled and qualified workforce from public universities to the INGO sector. This situation makes public sector jobs including academic positions that can only afford to pay the national wages unattractive to most qualified people. Fourthly, there are always challenges around technologies, travel visas and security situations that affect project activities. For example, it is usually difficult to secure European or US visas for academics from low income or conflict-affected countries and the Western academics may be barred from or charged high insurance premiums for trips to conflict-affected regions. Finally, the political views of the partners and the way international academics express their ideas in their deliberations is likely to determine intimacy in and productivity of the partnership. Honesty and transparency on both sides of the debate are important in building trust, but so is diplomacy.

Somali society is beginning to serve the first pillar of higher education, which relates to teaching and learning. The other pillars, such as research and development, knowledge dissemination, and civic engagement, are significantly underdeveloped. Good quality international collaborations can be instrumental in reforming all of these domains. Collaborative curriculum development, teaching exchange and joint research programmes can enhance the quality of

higher education, which can produce necessary human capital for the Somali economy. Investment in higher education would reduce Tahriib – the pressures to seek opportunities abroad (Ali, 2016) – by creating opportunities for youth at home. Yet more importantly, it can support long-term peacebuilding by strengthening state institutions, promoting social dialogue and laying foundations for participatory democracy.

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Participants at curriculum development workshop: University of Hargeisa