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Police Advisory Committees in Somalia

This learning paper presents the work of the Police Advisory Committees (PACs) – voluntary groups set up as part of Saferworld’s ‘Restoring Stable Communities in Somalia’ project, who work to strengthen police–community relations and improve detainee conditions. It covers a brief history of how the groups came into being and how they have evolved. The paper also captures their achievements, limitations, and recommendations for how to support their work.

A brief history of the Police Advisory Committee (PAC)

In 2007, at the peak of armed conflict in Somalia between armed groups and Transitional Federal Government (TFG) troops backed by Ethiopian forces, the relationship between police authorities and the community was poor. Conditions in detention centres were harsh, with significant and widespread human rights violations. Mass detention, prolonged detention and torture were also reported.

In response, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) established PACs in Somalia. The timely formation of the PACs played a crucial role in supporting and releasing vulnerable detainees, and improving the relationship between the police and community members through vital trust-building exercises and regular interactions. The PACs also monitored internally displaced person (IDP) sites to identify and resolve issues involving the security and safety of vulnerable IDPs. The PACs received informal appreciation from community members and government, as well as at the international level from international non-governmental organisations (INGOs). However, the PACs were suspended during the transition period from the TFG to the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) in 2012. Unofficial sources cite limited funding as the reason for suspension.

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More recently in 2018, through Saferworld’s ‘Restoring Stable Communities in Somalia’ programme, in partnership with the Somali Women Development Centre (SWDC) in Mogadishu, the Somali Women Solidarity Organization (SWSO) in Kismayo, and Isha Human Rights Organization (IHRO) in Baidoa, the PACs have been revived.

Saferworld-supported Police Advisory Committees (PACs)

The PACs are volunteer groups made up of retired police officials, government officials, community and religious leaders, human rights activists and lawyers, and women and youth volunteers, who meet twice a month to identify and address community security issues. Saferworld and partners support three groups of 12 members – one group in each project location. They work with the community and police to build trust and improve service provision, and monitor the conditions of detention centres and prisons to ensure detainee rights.

The programme aims to strengthen the skills and capacity of Somali civil society and communities to identify and address community security concerns, and facilitate dialogue across clan and state divides. The formation and ongoing support of the PACs has been a central part of this project, bringing about tangible change to the daily lives of communities in Somalia.

The PACs’ responsibilities include:

Improving community–police relations and the provision of services

- Meet with their local communities to discuss and prioritise security concerns, and establish work plans to address them.
- Share feedback with police on issues identified by the community.
- Advise police officers and their superiors on the changes requested by the community; for example, more women police officers.
- Promote communication between the community and the police by playing a coordinating role and setting up quarterly meetings that bring them together.
- Deliver trainings and review police regulations from a human rights- and gender-sensitive perspective, to improve service delivery.
- Promote and support police awareness-raising programmes in communities.
- Review practices on women’s access to policing services and protection.

Monitoring conditions for detainees

- Conduct regular monitoring visits to detention centres, including prisons, police stations, sub-police stations, and Criminal Investigation Department (CID) sites.
- Document data from these visits to track progress on current conditions and ensure changes are upheld.
- Advocate improved access to rights for detainees, including rights to healthcare, nutrition and legal assistance.
- Advocate and facilitate the release of prisoners detained illegally.

PAC achievements

Building trust between communities and the police

During initial assessments carried out in 2017, police officers said they were afraid of civilians because they could not determine who might belong to a violent group.

The PACs have made large strides in improving police-community relations. In all programme locations, they organise quarterly community and police meetings to share grievances and create action plans. These meetings are supported by local community structures, such as Community Action Forums (CAFs) – also set-up by Saferworld and partners – that work to identify and address broader concerns in the community, such as unsafe roads and COVID-19 prevention. These meetings have fostered trust and cooperation between communities and the police.

Training police officers

When the PACs visited police stations and detention centres, they witnessed poor conditions and substandard treatment of detainees. At the authorities’ request and supported by Saferworld and partners, the PACs have provided training to police and custodial personnel on police accountability and civil oversight mechanisms, emphasising gender and conflict sensitivity and human rights. The aim is to ensure that the police follow rights-based approaches when arresting and detaining civilians, in line with the Provisional Somali Federal Constitution and with international standards on the protection of rights in law enforcement.

Supporting vulnerable detainees

Since 2018, the PACs have visited and monitored 39 detention centres across Mogadishu, Kismayo and Baidoa. Data from their visits show that prison cells are overcrowded beyond their maximum accommodation capacity, there are shortages of basic supplies and provisions (such as bedding and food), and there is sharing of cells, toilets and/or communal spaces between juveniles and adults. The PACs have successfully supported more than 8,000 detainees in the three regions to access medical and legal assistance, and referral to other services, including educational support. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the PACs also provided personal protective equipment (PPE) and hygiene supplies.

Creating advocacy committees

The PACs have conducted sustained advocacy with various stakeholders and influential bodies. In 2019, they established advocacy groups made up of government officials and PAC members, to jointly make relevant changes in policy.

In Baidoa, they created a correctional committee consisting of PAC members, government and civil society to advocate for the needs of the detainees in Baidoa Central Prison. They succeeded in mobilising international organisations operating in Baidoa, the business community and government agencies to contribute funding and resources.

As a result of their efforts, the Ministry of Health assigned a nurse and made provisions for medical supplies in Baidoa Central Prison. The main gate of the prison was also moved due to safety concerns raised by detainees. Additionally, through local fundraising within the community, the PAC was able to purchase an ambulance for the prison.

Challenges faced by PACs

Lack of recognition and legal framework

Initial lack of recognition of the PACs by government and authorities made it difficult to start work. This was addressed in all project locations by providing identification documents to all PAC members. However, the lack of legal framework to guide and legitimise the work of the PACs has caused delays and resistance from authorities and government.

Police turnover

Much of the success of PACs' work and advocacy lies in individual relationship building. The turnover of police officers at certain facilities has been a crucial challenge for PACs, with new police officers – unfamiliar with their work – often rejecting requests for monitoring. Projects in the pipeline may also be temporarily suspended or halted entirely. The work of relationship building, therefore, never stops.

Funding

PACs have access only to a limited amount of funding. Since 2018, the PACs have relied on fundraising initiatives and donations from business owners to carry out their work. While this has created community ownership and increased local support, it is often unreliable.

Recommendations to support PACs sustainability

- **Recognise and support PACs' work**, including legal and policy recognition, institutional access to detention facilities, funding, and other relevant support.
- **Promote and improve the exercise of community-based policing (CBP)**. Post-conflict countries like Somalia are in dire need of trust building. CBP is one option for improving the relationship between the community and police, despite challenges from armed groups and other spoilers. The CBP model should be formalised and broadened across the country's main cities. This can help better address local security needs and priorities, while also reducing crime at the local level.
- **Improve coordination between and among PAC members in the three regions**. Meetings should be organised to share experiences and mutual learning. Minutes from such meetings should be shared widely and accessibly.
- **Provide ongoing training support** to PAC members in international human rights, prisoners' rights and conflict and gender sensitivity, and build their research skills to improve data collection and therefore measure the success of their work.
- **Increase sustainable funding opportunities**, while also maintaining community ownership and local business buy-in.
- **Continue to support women to join community initiatives** and committees to work with police and ensure the perspectives of women in the community, and of women detainees, are heard.

General Yousef Mohamed Farah

Head of Community Policing and Public Relations for the Somali Police Force

"I work to promote the collaboration between the police and the Somali community. I was appointed as Head of Community Policing when the government was formed in 2008 and I have started working with the PAC [in Mogadishu] from the time it was formed [in 2018].

Our main challenge is insufficient funds. When the community calls us to report security incident, we have challenges of getting fuel for our vehicles, making it difficult for us to attend to all reported incidents. We also don't have equipment such as cameras – that will help us capture the incident immediately. Generally, we have inadequacy in technology. Our teams need training, up to the federal and regional level. With appropriate training, we will get good teams that are at the international level, that can do the work well.

[The PAC] advise the police, the police take and use the advice – the police are normally advice takers. If the PAC notices something that is not right with the police, they make them aware and the police stop the wrong things they were doing, like not allowing relatives of offenders to visit them or call them, and labelling suspects as criminals before they are found guilty by a court of law, and many other things that violate the human rights of suspects. The PAC have helped the police to stop these and many mistakes they used to make in the past.



Honestly, it is the most successful programme Saferworld has established and we have much appreciation in the Somali government. This is how we wanted things to be done in the past and Saferworld have now pioneered [this approach]. They are responsible for human rights and humanitarian on one side, and ensuring of security and stability on the other side. So the programme is very good, but needs to be scaled up as it is covering small area for now."



About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe in a world where everyone can lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from fear and insecurity. We are a not-for-profit organisation working in 12 countries and territories across Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

Cover photo – Baidoa PAC, supported by IHRO, organised a community dialogue event with the Police and District Administration in Baidoa on 14 December 2020 to discuss community safety and security issues.

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SAFERWORLD

Saferworld
Brick Yard, 28 Charles Square
London N1 6HT, UK

Phone: +44 (0)20 7324 4646

Email: general@saferworld.org.uk

Web: www.saferworld.org.uk

 www.facebook.com/Saferworld

 [@Saferworld](https://twitter.com/Saferworld)

 [Saferworld](https://www.linkedin.com/company/saferworld)

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