



Rift Valley Institute  
Taasisi ya Bonde Kuu  
معهد الأخذود العظيم  
Machadka Dooxada Rift  
የሰምቶ ሸለቆ የጥናት ተቋም  
Instituto do Vale do Rift  
东非大裂谷研究院  
Institut de la Vallée du Rift



# Understanding research and knowledge systems in the Somali regions

Report of a roundtable convened by INASP  
and the Rift Valley Institute

As part of the Rift Valley Forum for Research,  
Policy and Local Knowledge

*15<sup>th</sup> March 2016, BIEA, Nairobi*



## Background

The roundtable brought together members of the Somali research and development community, representatives from the Kenyan research community, and representatives from research funding and supporting organizations. Participants included representatives of research institutes, universities, NGOs, and associated networks.

The roundtable aimed to improve understandings of research and knowledge systems in the Somali context, and sought to address a series of related questions:

- Where does capacity for research already exist in the region?
- What constraints are there to doing, communicating and using research in the region?
- Which organizations are active in which parts of the region, and on what issues or themes?
- How could research and knowledge better support Somalia needs in aspects of both policy and practice?

This report draws out some of the key themes and ideas which emerged during the discussions. They are unattributed, and do not necessarily represent a consensus view.

A further profile of the research and knowledge system in the Somali regions, commissioned by INASP prior to this event and written by Faduma Abukar Mursal, Abdullahi Odowa and Jason Mosley is available at: [www.inasp.info/en/publications/details/220/](http://www.inasp.info/en/publications/details/220/)

## The demand for research in Somalia

### Interest in research

- Participants agreed that there was a need for more research in the Somali regions to inform and drive state-building, decision-making, change and development. This includes a need to understand the political economy of the regions, and issues relating to their social and economic development.
- However, there is little local demand for research in the Somali regions, and the majority of research is driven (initiated and funded) by the international community, including the UN agencies and international NGOs. While this provides a source of funding for research, it also negatively impacts the development of the Somali research system.
- Despite low demand, there are diverse potential users of research, and contributors to it. In addition to academic, civil society, and government contributors and users, participation in the research and knowledge system is important for the people of the Somali regions, who need a platform to air their views, and opportunities to participate in the debates which shape the development of Somali. The international community also has a need for good research evidence, to be able to identify priority areas where it can usefully intervene.
- One example of where research could play a particular role in evaluating the state-building process is the Somaliland house of elders (Guti); this is assumed to be significant in Somaliland governance and stability, but is relatively under-researched.

### Research agendas

- There are currently no national or sub-regional visions or research agendas to frame Somali research needs. Some organizations or individual ministries have a research agenda, and conduct research (one example being the Statistics Department of the Ministry of Planning), but access to this data, which is considered to be confidential by the Ministry, is often difficult.
- Research is largely driven by international development agendas. There is very little Somali involvement in the initiation or design of research.
- The agendas of the international agencies, in terms of research activities, tend to be scattered and uncoordinated. This means there is little opportunity for Somali researchers to build expertise in particular areas, or to develop deeper academic work.



- The dominance of international agencies also tends to skew research towards investigation of negative issues, particularly with regard to research on women which tends to portray them as victims (for example, FGM issues) rather than as agents of change.

### The practice of research

- Researchers and research institutes are hired as consultants, which leads to competition between the institutions to win funds.
- The majority of research is conducted by foreign academics and researchers and written in English and there is little Somali ownership.
- The majority of research reports are produced by non-Somalians, and much research activity is routine monitoring and evaluation, the results of which are kept internally by institutions or given to donors. Much of the research conducted in Somalia ends up in Nairobi, rather than Mogadishu or Hargeisa.
- Research is project based, so staff ebb and flow. This means that a good team is lost at the end of a project, and it is hard to get a team together for the next piece

### Collecting knowledge

- There are no national archives or repositories where data and research outputs can be kept, so the results of prior studies or projects can only be accessed from the individuals or organizations who conducted them.

### Ways forward

- Open dialogue with donors to try and ensure that research institutions are able to work more collaboratively and to drive the research agenda.
- A national research institute that can develop a research strategy for the Somali regions and coordinate all research efforts to ensure that research is used to educate and influence policy.
- Establish repositories so that research reports can be easily accessible to Somali researchers and students.

## Who produces research?

- Research capacity does exist, but it is often outside of universities and sits with individuals who work as consultants.
- There is a general lack of understanding about the importance of research and how it can contribute to the country, and so this leads to a lack of interest in teaching and promoting research.

### Existing capacity

- The institutes and organizations represented at the roundtable were good examples of where there is existing capacity to conduct research within the Somali regions. These included The Heritage Institute for Policy Studies, the Observatory of Conflict and Violence Prevention (OCVP) and The Somali Institute for Development and research Analysis (SIDRA).
- There are also other well-established Somali research institutes, for example the Academy for Peace and Development in Somaliland and the Puntland Development Research Centre, established in the late 1990s.

### Universities

- There are many universities in the Somalia regions, but the majority have been established as businesses, seeking to generate income and with little to offer in terms of research, and placing little value on research.
- Many of the academic institutions in the Somali region offer post-graduate studies but have no research facilities.
- One participant suggested that there are really only 6 credible universities in the Somali regions. Some of these universities are starting to do research. The University of Hargeisa,



for example, is one of the largest universities in Somaliland and it is currently working to revive its centre for research and development.

### Collaborating or competing?

- Research institutes tend to lack funding and there is little scope for fundraising within the country. The current monopoly of donor funding tends to encourage competition rather than collaboration. Participants from OCVF and HIPS were able to give an example of having collaborated on a piece of research, but generally it was felt that this was a rare occurrence.
- Generally the participants noted that there were limited resources available for research, a lack of understanding about the benefits of research and a lack of coordination between the institutions doing research.

### Skills to do research

- There is little capacity building within the research sector and local researchers tend to be hired on a project basis, mainly for data collection, particularly quantitative data collection. As a result Somali graduates and researchers are not developing the skills to design and analyse research.
- Some participants felt that the capacity of Somali researchers was not taken seriously by Western researchers and academics. Somali researchers are typically not included in the full research design and analysis process, and are used primarily as data collectors.

### Visibility

- A big challenge for Somali researchers who were writing is how to break through and be visible as there are increasing numbers of research studies and reports globally.

### Under-representation of women

- There is an under-representation of women in the system and research is still very male dominated.
- It is difficult for Somali women to study and to combine a career with family and social and cultural expectations.
- The Minister of Education is establishing a gender unit to consider how to increase the number of girls and women in education.

### Ways forward

- Donors should be encouraged to provide longer term funding to Somali research institutes to encourage them to work collaboratively
- Grants could play an important role to encourage and incentivize researchers to publish
- There could be potential for Somali businesses to invest in research and knowledge production, and for-profit universities could also be encouraged to invest in research.
- The private sector and NGOs are producing a lot of research, and universities could to collaborate more with these sectors in order to improve their ability to do research.
- Creating a forum which enables Somali researchers to come together to discuss these issues and so be in a better position to solve them.
- Ensuring that research capacity building is an essential part of every research funding opportunity, and ensuring that Somali researchers are involved in the design, implementation and analysis.

## The Somali context

Participants discussed the broader political, social and cultural environment in the Somali regions and how this enabled or constrained the production of research. There is considerable potential within the country, amongst emerging Somali scholars and also in the diaspora. However, it was also recognized that there are some fundamental challenges.



### Cultural dimensions

- Somali culture is traditionally nomadic, based on oral traditions. There remains high illiteracy, an absence of a reading culture, a preference for oral traditions and the ability to read and write English is poor.
- There is a tendency for Somalis to adopt entrenched and subjective positions, rather than more objective stances. This is often reflected by political commentaries on social media.
- One participant noted that conducting research can be difficult as even carrying a pen and paper can make people uncomfortable and wary and reluctant to talk.
- Participants were divided on the issue of the clan system and its impact on research. Some participants felt that the issue of clans was no longer a problem, some argued that clan-based research systems which represent particular interests and views constrain the development of a unified research agenda. Others felt that with improved education it would become less of an issue.

### The impact of conflict

- The Somali regions have suffered long years of conflict and there are still severe structural and security problems. The civil war also resulted in a brain drain which is affecting the research and knowledge sector, for example, there are few mentors and role models for young researchers.
- Following the years of war, people are interested in making money and education tends to have become a commercial enterprise rather than for the generation of knowledge.
- There is a lot of political wrangling which constrains research. Policy makers are often not elected on merit, and the political culture is not to make decisions based on evidence.
- There are high levels of poverty in many regions and research and academic pursuits tend to be based in urban areas.

### New ways of communicating and engaging

- There are few platforms where people can air their views and contribute to discussions on their country.
- There is an international expectation that research has to be communicated in written form, but in an oral society there should be more creative ways to disseminate research that can contribute to knowledge sharing and promote the relevance and importance of research.
- InterPeace, for example, is using a film that is available online and can be taken out to the community by mobile cinema. It engages communities in discussion, which is also filmed, and creates a cycle of research.

## Connecting research to policy and practice

The final session looked at how research fits into the development discourse, including policy and practice.

### The purpose of research

- There is a need to strike a balance between research for policy and practice and research for the sake of knowledge. Many felt that research should not itself be the end goal, but that it should be transferred into action through an inclusive and participatory process. Often those who participate and contribute do not see the results.
- Research can also be used to influence the development agenda. For example, there is increasing focus from key donors on managing migration flows and countering extremism.

### Demand for research

- Research tends to be produced based on commission rather than on demand.



- Commissioning is costly and creates delays. For example, it can take 3-4 months to contract a partner.
- There is weak capacity in government departments for policy planning and research and that policy-making tends not to be made on the systematic review of evidence. It was noted that there is a lot of trial and error in state building.
- To increase uptake of research by policy makers there is a need for government and researchers to work together to try and create the demand for and an appetite for research.
- However, it is often difficult to access and engage with policy makers. Work needs to be done with policy makers and government research to build capacity on how to find research and how to use it.
- Timeliness and quality controls are often problems, however this can sometimes be used to generate competition which in itself can drive quality.
- The importance of having a national body to coordinate research activity was recognized, with the role to define national research policies and to work with policy makers to ensure the critical needs are addressed.
- It is often unclear who owns the research, and intellectual property rights are not defined.

## Concluding remarks

- The roundtable demonstrated the vibrancy within in the research and knowledge system in the Somali regions. There is also a lot of good work already being undertaken, and a lot of opportunity and appetite to do more.
- Many of the challenges faced by the Somali regions are not unique, and other countries are facing similar challenges and problems. Bringing people together can enable joint problem solving around these common challenges.
- While there was a diversity of participants at the forum, it was also notable that there were few female researchers (only one Somali woman), and Somali researchers who are currently studying overseas. Both speak to inequities in the global research and knowledge system that both exclude people and force people to leave their country to study.
- The discussions demonstrated clearly the fragility of a research system built on shifting donor funding, and the importance of engaging in open dialogue with donors and finding other sources of funding.
- The discussions also highlighted the need for safe spaces for free thinking, critical discussion and collaboration.

## Organizations represented

### Somali regions

- The Observatory for Conflict and Violence Prevention
- Heritage Institute for Policy Studies
- University of Hargeisa
- Puntland State University
- City University, Mogadishu

### Kenya/East Africa

- Kenya Library and Information Services Consortium
- British Institute in East Africa (BIEA)
- Interpeace
- Rift Valley Institute
- Somalia NGO Consortium
- SAHAN Research Ltd



Rift Valley Institute  
Taasisi ya Bonde Kuu  
معهد الأخدود العظيم  
Machadka Dooxada Rift  
የሰሜን ሸለቆ የጥናት ተቋም  
Instituto do Vale do Rift  
东非大裂谷研究院  
Institut de la Vallée du Rift



- Development Initiatives

#### International organizations

- DFID East Africa Research Hub
- Somalia Stability Fund
- INASP

## Contacts

### INASP

Jon Harle [jharle@inasp.info](mailto:jharle@inasp.info)

Ruth Bottomley [rbottomley@inasp.info](mailto:rbottomley@inasp.info)

### RVI

Yassmin Mohamed [yassmin.mohamed@riftvalley.net](mailto:yassmin.mohamed@riftvalley.net)