YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN GOVERNANCE

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In fragile and conflict-affected contexts, the exclusion of youth from governance is not a peripheral issue. It can be a direct risk to stability, or conversely a source of positive governance dividends if youth are meaningfully engaged. Evidence of instability driven by youth grievances has been seen in recent years across several countries in Africa and Asia. With better access to information through social media platforms, youth groups are increasingly claiming space to have a say in local governance and finding ways to organise.

In Somalia, most estimates indicate up to 70% of the population are under the age of 35. Young people also make up a large share of the displaced and outward migrant population. In 2021, 160,432 people left Somalia, with 33% of that number being young people between the ages of 18 and 29[1]. Yet youth are often viewed primarily as agitators of violence and instability, rather than as political actors with the potential to contribute to more stable societies. The absence of legitimate civic pathways for youth deepens grievance, weakens trust between citizens and the state, and increases vulnerability to mobilisation by armed groups. These circumstances are not unique to Somalia. Sierra Leone's civil war was in part sustained by militia groups in which disillusioned and aggrieved youth constituted a steady stream of recruits[2].

The Somalia Stability Fund III (SSF III) has treated youth engagement as a strategic governance and stability instrument, rather than a standalone thematic intervention. In SSF II and SSF III, youth programming moved beyond encouraging participation in local governance towards formally including young people within local government structures. This shift was guided by political economy analysis, risk assessment, and lessons from earlier programming. SSF III reflects this change clearly. Its approach focuses on placing youth within district-level governance processes, connecting youth actors across tiers, and testing where and how youth inclusion alters local power dynamics in ways that contribute to stability.

[1] https://environmentalmigration.iom.int/blogs/youth-move-somalia-perspectives-vulnerabilities-and-horizons

[2] https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/INVISIBLECHAP4.PDF

Youth Engagement in Governance in SSF III

SSF III programming has prioritised youth engagement where it intersects directly with governance, legitimacy, and social cohesion. Rather than treating youth as beneficiaries or representatives of a social group, the programme has focused on youth as active governance actors. Youth groups have been engaged through diverse pathways to move beyond a general sense of inclusion. SSF III has supported youth engagement as part of building a social contract based on trust, dialogue, accountability, and stability, engaging youth as active partners through direct training and dialogue activities in districts across Banadir Regional Administration (BRA), Jubaland, Southwest State, and in six recently elected district councils in Puntland.

The Youth Peace Club in BRA organised a beach clean at Lido beach in Mogadishu.

In Puntland, SSF III supported the establishment and training of youth caucuses and supported civic forums. More than 900 youth, including elected youth councillors, took part in structured engagement processes with elders and local authorities in year two, with these efforts strengthened through additional processes in SSF III year three implementation. These forums responded to a clear demand from youth to be recognised as legitimate stakeholders rather than treated as disruptive actors. In response, elders and local authorities accepted the youth participation through formal mechanisms, marking a shift from ad hoc consultation to structured inclusion. Youth caucus working groups were trained within the Inclusive Social Accountability (ISA) framework, institutionalising youth inclusion as a key element of the local social contract.

In Southwest State, in year two, SSF III supported the consolidation of loose youth networks into a structured working group backed by community elders. This process led to the signing of a one-year Memorandum of Understanding between the Afgoye District Youth Caucus and

the Afgoye District Council. The agreement formally recognised youth representatives and integrated them into governance structures, with roles articulated around civic education and mobilisation in support of district development initiatives, alongside indicators to assess contributions and recalibrate where necessary. District councils also assigned oversight and fact-finding duties to the caucus and committed to supporting youth-led initiatives. By accommodating youth caucuses within development plan consultations, public forums, and review meetings, this initiative marked a clear transition from informal mobilisation towards institutionalised participation, anchoring youth engagement within recognised decision-making bodies rather than parallel platforms.

SSF III also supported youth-led environmental stewardship initiatives in Abudwaq and Warsheikh as part of youth civic duties in year two, serving as an entry point for hands-on civic responsibility. These initiatives focused on practical actions such as waste management and tree planting, while building youth understanding of local governance structures, rights, and responsibilities.

Youth in Abudwaq receive intensive training on governance, civic rights, environmental responsibility, and climate change.

Through this work, youth groups identified the absence of clear mechanisms to engage local authorities on budget allocation and decision-making. Recommendations from youth groups have consistently centred on the need for liaison committees or formal mechanisms to engage with local authorities on budget and planning processes. These activities were not framed as standalone climate or inclusion initiatives. Instead, they served as entry points for visible cooperation between youth groups and local authorities, reinforcing shared responsibility and municipal responsiveness, and anchoring inclusion as a core tenet of stability. SSF III has tasked its research partner to conduct a study to assess the impact of youth in local governance, and through evidence-based monitoring will provide recommendations to inform future interventions that builds on and supports more meaningful outcomes.

Across locations in Luuq and Dhobley, SSF III supported youth leadership training, policy advocacy, and civic education for 398 young people, deliberately bridging clan and political divides and creating pathways for youth to organise, advocate, and contribute to district-level governance. In Puntland and Southwest State, youth leaders rejected being viewed as weaponised or destabilising actors and instead positioned themselves as contributors to local problem-solving. Baidoa's Mayor hailed the Southwest State Peace Week as a critical endeavour, particularly for youth and women, to learn the importance of peace and to play a role, given that they are among the most misrepresented and weaponised groups. By organising across identity lines through caucuses and councils, youth platforms can be used to reduce the dominance of factional politics within local civic spaces and agitate for practical channels for cooperation in highly fragmented contexts. State and district governments have increasingly recognised and supported the role of youth in governance. For instance, the Puntland Ministry of Interior and Development donated land for a Youth Centre, while the BRA allotted a building for youth Peace Clubs to operate from.

Lessons from SSF II - How SSF III has Adapted

Experience from SSF II demonstrated that youth engagement is central to stability outcomes when it goes beyond visibility and participation. SSF II showed that involving young people in governance dialogue and community initiatives reduced vulnerability to recruitment by armed groups, strengthened trust between citizens and local authorities, and improved the perceived legitimacy of local institutions[3]. These outcomes proved more durable than top-down stabilisation efforts that bypassed youth as political actors.

An example from Garowe, Puntland illustrates this approach. SSF II combined vocational training in trades such as carpentry, tailoring, and mechanics with structured civic engagement to improve employability and financial prospects for youth. The intention was simple: to decrease the likelihood of youth engaging in criminal or violent activities by creating alternative pathways.

In Southwest State, SSF's technical and vocational education and training (TVET) activities reached over 14,000 young Somalis and created 2,438 jobs, targeting vulnerable individuals within this cohort. Youth participants received small grants to establish micro-enterprises while also participating in community forums and local governance dialogues. This approach addressed immediate economic vulnerability while creating pathways into civic life.

The effects were visible. Young women and men who had previously been idle and excluded began to see themselves as contributors to their community's future. With skills, income, and recognised civic roles, armed groups lost credibility as alternative sources of opportunity and status. At the same time, regular interaction with local authorities helped rebuild trust and

[3] https://stabilityfund.so/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Learning-Paper-DIGITAL-SPREAD.pdf, page 52

reinforced shared responsibility for peace[4]. In Galkayo, community members noted the significant role youth played in enforcing and maintaining the peace agreement by engaging elders directly and are still working alongside the peace networks as key stakeholders to ongoing conflict resolution programming

SSF III built on these lessons by moving earlier and more deliberately towards formalisation. Youth engagement was embedded within governance systems from the outset rather than treated as a complementary or late-stage activity.

Conclusion: Why Youth Engagement in Governance Matters for Stability

SSF's experience demonstrates that youth engagement in governance is not a soft or peripheral investment. It is a strategic intervention that can shape incentives, legitimacy, and local political settlements. Where youth are recognised as governance actors rather than beneficiaries, stability gains are more likely to last beyond project cycles.

The evidence from SSF II and III points to three core lessons for donor-supported efforts to promote stability:

- Youth engagement delivers results when it is institutionalised, not symbolic. Economic inclusion is most stabilising when paired with civic voice and inclusion in formal structures.
- Local legitimacy is strengthened when youth are embedded in decision-making, not mobilised through parallel structures.
- Investing in youth governance is therefore not about managing risk or preventing disruption. It is about building the political foundations for peace in one of the world's most fragile contexts.

[4] https://stabilityfund.so/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Learning-Paper-DIGITAL-SPREAD.pdf, page 46