

Contested education: A case study of Somalia

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ABSTRACT

Education is a fundamental human right crucial for individual growth and societal progress. In Somalia, modern education started during the colonial era with a focus on producing clerical workers for the colonial administration. Western Christian missionaries arrived to establish "modern schools," but suspicions of Westernization and proselytization led to their expulsion. This case study delves into the history of Somali education, highlighting persistent conflicts over objectives, management, and outcomes. Disagreements persist over language of instruction, curriculum unification, resource sharing, and mandates, hindering effective education implementation. The study adopts a qualitative case study approach, collecting data through interviews to shed light on the complex issues plaguing Somalia's education system. It emphasizes that the system remains rudimentary and reliant on external support due to insufficient local investment and ownership. Notably, the research reveals that parents and guardians invest more in their children's education than the government, challenging the belief that donor organizations heavily fund education in Somalia. The study proposes key recommendations. First, it calls for prioritizing education to meet the needs of all school-age children, including the millions out of school. Second, it suggests increasing the education budget to 20% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), aligning with neighboring countries' norms. Third, it advocates for clarifying constitutional mandates, roles, responsibilities, and resource sharing at all government levels. In summary, education's pivotal role in human development and societal advancement is underscored in Somalia's context. The study's findings illuminate the historical struggles and current challenges facing the education system, emphasizing the need for increased investment, clear mandates, and resource allocation to ensure quality education for all Somali children and youth.

Keywords: History of Somali education, modern education, literacy campaign, post-conflict education, education in fragile states.

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INTRODUCTION

Modern education was imported to Somalia by Western colonial administrators with unspecified aims and outcomes and has been questioned and contested since its inception. It remains to this day a socio-political battleground for the hearts and minds of young children. Early on, the contestations were triggered by a lack of clarity on modern education's aim, purpose, and delivery. During colonial rule (1884-1960), when formal schools were introduced to the country, religious clerics and community elders argued that there were ulterior motives behind "Western education", also known as modern education. They felt unease about the nature of the schools and the absence of local input on the purpose of modern schools and that the curriculum, language of

instruction, teachers and church organizations managing schools were all foreign (Ali, 2021).

Before the advent of modern schools, Somalis were content with non-formal and informal education programs offered to youth and adults which has been the practice since time immemorial. In the informal setting, students learn and acquire knowledge through life experiences where new skills and information are passed on from one generation to the next. These were often through apprenticeships learning from the master or through organized one-on-one or group training. Moreover, Quranic schools which were the first formalized learning system introduced to the region included a system of teaching and learning with a physical structure known as

the “Dugsi or Malcamad” where teaching and learning take place and are fully equipped with a structured curriculum, learning supplies such as board-panels for writing and reciting lessons, black ink for writing, guided by knowledgeable tutors or teachers of the learning process (Cassanelli and Abdikadir, 2008). The famed Somali scholar and cleric Sheikh Yusuf Al-Kowneyn realizing the challenges faced by learners who didn't speak Arabic as a first language developed a Somali-zed version of the Arabic grammar to make it easy for students to learn the Arabic phraseology and grammatical sentence structure. This method known as “Alif-la kordhabay, alif la hoos dhabay, alif laa goday (Alpha-increased, alpha-underrated, alpha-mined)” is used in Quranic schools to this day throughout Somalia and Djibouti as well as Somali inhabited regions of Kenya and Ethiopia (Awale, 2004). The Quranic school was the most common mode of formal learning known to the region before the advent of modern schools where youth learned literacy in the Arabic language, recitation, and memorization of the Qur'an. Both the informal and non-formal education programs were either homegrown or their aim, purpose and outcome were explicable to the parents and community (Anzar, 2003).

However, as modern schools were established in many parts of the country, many people questioned their aim and the secrecy behind their programs. This was so because the curriculum taught in the schools and the language of instruction were both foreign, not to mention, Christian churches were the main if not the only institutions that were chosen to manage modern schools (Awale, 2004). These perceptions became widespread and conflicts arising from them continued to muddy the image and redefined modern schools. Moreover, Somalia's socio-political instability and the failure of the state hugely impacted the quality and delivery of education. Large segments of Somali society are currently unable to access education contributing to declining literacy rates. Consequently, education in Somalia remains fragmented, rudimentary, and emergency-based (Herrera, 2004).

The article draws primarily from the lived experiences and academic journey of the author who was a product of the Somali education system, serving as a school teacher and later as Minister of Education.

Methodology and significance of the study

The qualitative case study approach was used as a research methodology in gathering data, conducting interviews, and analyzing results to explore phenomena through various data sources. This study is significant as it documents what was otherwise orally known but never thoroughly documented and narrates the tumultuous history of the growth and development of the Somali education system through the lens of an educator. It also

describes the complex issues that continue to keep it rudimentary and dependent on the support of others in the absence of commitment, sufficient local investment, and ownership.

Background

Conflict, nomadism, and periodical climatic shocks affect the lives of many people in Somalia. It is estimated that over 1.3 million internally displaced (IDPs) are leaving behind their livelihoods and way of life. As IDPs in their own country, many depend on humanitarian support with no foreseeable plans for integration into the host community or a sustainable return to their traditional livelihoods. Moreover, according to a recent report (ESA, 2022), 69 percent of the Somali population is living below the poverty requiring humanitarian assistance. Increasingly, the Somali population is majority young population with an average age of 33 years and nearly 100 percent demographic dependent which means that the nation lacks sufficient workforce to sustain the needs of this expanding younger population. Educational enrolment rates remain low, access is limited and the cost of education is unbearable for many families leaving many school-age children out of school. Primary school Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) remains low at 14.3 percent, well below the rates in neighboring countries (ESA, 2022).

Education is widely considered the key to freedom, progress, and human development. It is also known as “the great equalizer” which uplifts the masses and closes existing literacy and development gaps. It imparts knowledge, skills and values necessary to lay the foundation for a skilled labor force to build a better future with improved livelihoods for society. Developing an education system requires careful consideration, planning, design, and effective implementation guided by experts and technocrats on content, quality, delivery and expected outcomes. Critical considerations include the relevancy of education to the needs of society which prepares youth for a desired future. More importantly, strategies and means to pay for education are carefully considered. Hence, identifying and setting aside resources for education hinges upon the importance society holds on education and its level of commitment. Most importantly, societies decide whether education is a birthright for all citizens or a privilege for a few who can afford to pay for school fees.

In the case of Somalia, the General Education Act (GEA) adopted in 2021 makes it very clear that education is a right for every citizen and promises free primary education for all school-aged children. Federal or state authorities responsible for education must take ownership of education management and delivery or delegate local authorities in decentralized systems like Somalia. These entities, whether local or national, establish a framework

for education where vision, mission, process, and outcome are delineated. They assume ownership of the educational program, secure financial and other material resources, oversee program design, implementation and evaluate whether the outcome is aligned with the vision. Developing a quality education program requires an appreciation of its real value to society and creating the necessary drive to push forth its full implementation to achieve targeted national goals. It also means committing to educate all school-age children at a certain level which is clearly defined, such as basic education (up to 8th grade) or up to the 12th grade as is the case in many parts of the world.

Post-independence Somali governments proclaimed a strong commitment to education offering free primary and secondary education (Dawson, 1964). Concerns over foreign influence on education remained despite education becoming completely under the control of the newly independent Somali government (Awale, 2003; Sonna 2023). Thus, the aim of education moved from producing clerical workers for the colonial administration to one that not only enhances the literacy and numeracy skills of the youth but instills core national values of citizenship and public service. It is anticipated that the education system will produce nationals ready to join the government through the labor force thereby spurring the economy and enhancing the development of the country (Awale 2004; Hussein, 2005).

The military government that took the helm barely nine years after independence in 1969 undertook a serious commitment to education while securing critical investments to recruit and train qualified staff. It is generally posited with factual evidence that the period between 1970-1980 was a takeoff period for education and national development in Somalia with the establishment of rigorous education infrastructure and sufficient funding that guaranteed the success of the educational program. Unfortunately, Somalia's socio-political instability since the arrival of the Western colonial administrations, challenges under civilian and military Somali regimes to the contemporary post-civil-war era hugely disoriented and hampered education to reach and uplift the masses as anticipated and it remains today less organized, rudimentary, and not on a developmental but emergency basis.

In the past three decades of conflict and state failure, Somalia was unable to move beyond education for emergency humanitarian services and work towards taking tangible steps to establish accessible quality education for all (Mohamud, 2013; Mohamud, 2014). An education geared towards social development with the rigor, quality, and outcome to produce nationals with knowledge, skills, and patriotism. Education in Somalia today is mostly private, or donor-funded with very few publicly supported schools. Most private schools are administered through education umbrella organizations which support, manage, and run private primary and secondary schools in their network throughout the

country.

Recent educational reports by donor agencies working in Somalia indicate that Somalia's education suffers from poor quality curricula, insufficient qualified teachers, limited education resources and poor infrastructure. The educational deficit facing the country today is one of the most acute in the world (ESA, 2022). The national education conference held in March 2023 sponsored by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Higher Education (MoECHE) was a necessary gathering of educators and policymakers at this critical time in which Somalia is at war with Al-Shabab, a formidable local terror group with global affiliations. However, the absence of important regional educators is a cause for concern. The focus on national security by the government naturally puts education and other critical public services on the backseat, despite this government's desire to improve education and its recent recruitment of 3,000 new teachers (VOA, 2023). Moreover, Somali education also suffers from the consequences of prolonged political instability, and disagreements between the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) and the Federal Member States (FMSs) and is somewhat subject to the whims of powerful political actors. Incidentally, the Somali constitution remains provisional requiring additional clarification on education mandate and resource sharing while the country's fragile public institutions are unable to provide needed basic services due to insecurity, rampant corruption and a widening political gulf between the federal government and regional member states.

Related literature review

Since the encroachment of colonialism into Africa and the introduction of "modern education", education in Somalia has been contested and often used as a tool for political or religious ends. The aim of modern education was not transparent to the government and public as it was developed in foreign lands for foreign children and may have had agendas unknown to the government and the public. Western colonial powers knew what they wanted from education for the colonial territories, which was often to produce "clerical workers" with minimal basic skills, lacking neither the capacity to comprehend the colonial agenda nor the creativity to oppose colonial rule.

The Italian and British colonial administrations in both the North and South of Somalia began enrolling students into modern schools which are distinct from Qur'anic schools in curriculum, management and structure. Quranic schools generally function outside of the realm of government and are family-driven. However, the government initiated and promoted modern education became a cause of concern for some parents and religious clerics. They were mainly concerned about the lack of clarity on the aims of modern schools and feared the potential indoctrination and Christianization of impressionable young children (Awale, 2004). The secret

nature of modern education whose curriculum, language of instruction and instructors were all foreign, led to the gradual development of widespread negative perception of modern schools (Anzar, 2003). Given the nature of modern schools, it was easy for parents to speculate on their aim as it completely lacked local input and little effort was made for community understanding, engagement, and buy-in.

Records indicate that Christian churches were offering education and humanitarian services in Somalia as early as 1881 which signifies church presence before the fateful partition of Somalia into five regions at the Berlin Conference in 1884 (Ali, 2021). Church-provided schools were established in both the North and South of the country including major towns such as Mogadishu, Berbera, Jowhar, Jamame and others. Christian organizations with strong presences and established schools include the Sudan Interior Mission, the Swedish Overseas Lutheran Church, the Mennonite Mission, and the Roman Catholic Mission, among others (Eby, 1963; Shenk, 1973; Hussein, 2005).

The introduction of foreign language teaching such as the use of English as a medium of instruction in schools in the North and Italian in the South as well as assigning churches as institutions of teaching and learning alarmed some parents and religious groups. However, elite families with little concern over indoctrination but more interested in modern education welcomed these institutions despite their religion. However, the voices of concern over modern education dwarfed those supporting modern schools.

Moreover, supporters of modern schools saw Egyptian-run Arabic schools as rivals and portrayed them as inferior. To counter the allegations of Christianization, supporters of modern education publicized the view that Western education aims to guarantee graduating students a job in government, while Egyptian schools and by extension Islamic education turn students into street beggars (Baxter, 2003; Sonna, 2023). This hard-hitting propaganda was intended to show Arabic schools as inferior to modern schools whose graduates possess the modern skills the country needs for its future development. This was not well received by clerics and concerned parents alike. Consequently, furious activists took to the streets to mobilize public rallies in opposition to modern schools which later turned into violent demonstrations.

The Somali government received complaints from the clergy and community supporters regarding modern schools and their alleged hidden agenda requesting them to weigh in on the involvement of Christian churches in education. Consequently, staff expulsions and church closures were instituted by local authorities to diffuse tensions. These actions were taken as a response to increasing public pressure against modern schools and the growing fear of their religiously inclined motives. Church-managed school closures began during the

colonial administration and continued after Somali independence in 1960.

To effectively respond to the growing tensions and gain insight into their programming, the first post-independent Somali government came up with a strategy to require church schools to recruit Arabic and Islamic studies teachers and include Arabic and Islamic studies into the school curriculum. This decree was gradually fulfilled despite the reluctance of church-managed schools and their local supporters. Some church schools eventually decided to close up shop voluntarily and left Somalia for good, while others remained hopeful that the situation may improve. Despite the introduction of Arabic and Islamic Studies courses in the curricula, public frustration over church schools grew and mounting pressure on the government precipitated the complete expulsion of the Mennonite Mission in 1976 that ran the last church-managed schools in Somalia.

It took several years to rebuild public confidence in education; however, the use of foreign language in schools was necessary as the nation lacked a local script available for use in the classroom or public administration. Moreover, the public was divided over the choices between Arabic schools and modern schools. Many viewed Egyptian schools whose Arabic-based curricula and Islamic education as a better alternative to modern schools, while others felt that modern schools which are a global phenomenon cannot be ignored altogether if only their Christian association can be eliminated (Herrera, 2004).

The contrasting views of these school systems and the resultant feuds highlighted some of the reasons why modern education was seen by many as a foreign concept with ulterior motives bereft of local input. Equally, others viewed Egyptian schools whose curriculum was also foreign, as institutions with a religious motive of their own, expanding and solidifying Islamic knowledge and understanding in schools. The latter concern, however, did not gain much traction as Somalis considered themselves Muslims and did not see a problem in the teaching of Arabic and Islamic studies in schools. Public and private schools continued the use of Arabic, Italian and English as mediums of instruction in schools and official public administration in government until a new script was formally adopted in 1972 (Sonna, 2023).

Expansion of education

The military government which took power in 1969 was the first polity to develop a unified national curriculum, and then later developed a much-needed script for the Somali language. It expanded the educational system, built new schools, recruited and trained new teachers. Responding to a public outcry for change, the new regime proclaimed its unwavering commitment to make education a national priority, setting aside necessary

resources to establish free education for all school-aged children in the country. A new initiative for which its predecessors started but failed to accomplish was undertaken in earnest which is the selection of modified Latin as the official script for the Somali language. Other scripts considered for the selection included the Arabic alphabet and Osmania among others. Somalis are very familiar with the Arabic script, however, the Osmania which was developed locally by Osman Yusuf Kenadid resembled the Ethiopian script which proved to be its Achilles heel. This new script gradually replaced Italian and English as languages of instruction and their use in official government business.

As part of their commitment to enhance education, the regime introduced a compulsory education program requiring all school-aged children to be enrolled in school which paved the way for the massive expansion of education. Literacy rates before the introduction of the Somali script stood at a mere 5 percent which was the lowest rate in the region and within a few years literacy rates soared to 65 percent (Awale, 2004; Hussein, 2005; Mohamud, 2013). This incredible feat is due to a strong national commitment and sustained urban and rural literacy campaigns spanning the years 1972 to 1976. Education, therefore, played a significant role in the military regime's agenda and was seen as a path towards national development. It can be argued that this was a period of maximum achievement for education in Somalia as literacy rates soared, school enrollment expanded, and a large number of school facilities were constructed throughout the country.

In addition to the regular science and arts courses, the academic curriculum included Arabic and Islamic Studies courses to affirm and complement student's academic skill sets and knowledge with a strong Islamic foundation. The 4-4-4 system was initially used where students study 4 years in elementary, 4 years in intermediate and 4 years in secondary schools. Secondary school graduates are guaranteed to get a government job or pursue higher education with public support. In addition to the regular academic curriculum and to promote national cohesion and in support of the regime, the Ministry of Education (MoE) instituted annual public festivals for students and schoolteachers to celebrate the anniversary of the 21st of October revolution through marching bands, student marches and acrobatic demonstrations during summer school breaks.

Education, therefore, was presented and generally viewed as building the whole self socially, morally, and physically. The military regime invested a significant portion of GDP in education starting merely with a \$3 million budget in 1970 and gradually reaching up to \$10 million by 1989 (Mundi (2021). In retrospect, the military regime led by Major General Mohamed Siad Barre which ruled the country from 1969 to 1991 despite its later brutal and autocratic atrocities against its people deserves praise for expanding the nation's education by

unifying the curricula, developing the Somali script, and enhancing educational opportunities to the masses. Before that, the masses felt marginalized and deprived of education and other economic opportunities. The military regime's educational efforts indicate to future policymakers that sustained commitment, strategy as well and securing public investments were necessary to achieve tangible results in a short period. "Teach if you know or learn if you don't (Bar ama Baro)" became the national motto for education encouraging the public to engage in the learning process requiring that if they don't have education credentials or are illiterate to become a student and learn or conversely if they have the credentials or are literate to join the teaching force. Community centers in towns and villages became centers of learning the new script for the adult population. Mobile and radio education programs were effectively used to provide distance learning to nomadic communities as part of the national literacy development programs (Awale, 2004; Hussein, 2005).

Despite tangible gains in education, political, and economic challenges of the 1970s and the international community's "Structural Adjustment Programs" (SAPs) in the 1980s designed as a tool for austerity measures and to balance national budgets hindered the government's ability to assume sole-ownership and pay for education. Foreign agencies contemplated that parents as stakeholders must contribute to the cost of educating their children (Nsouli and Zulu, 1985; Maloney, 2017).

Later, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank began implementing structural adjustment policies curtailing government expenditures in education and other basic public services. Full implementations of SAPs meant decreased government spending on social services, such as education, health, law, and security. To meet IMF austerity measures, the government terminated its policy of guaranteed employment of secondary school graduates and freed itself from its financial burden. This meant that thousands of graduates would either compete for the few seats available at the Somali National University or seek employment in the oil-rich Gulf States. Despite suggestions to privatize education and require parents to pay their fair share, the government insisted on staying the course and continued providing free education despite its huge impact on the national economy.

The campaign for massive expansion of education eventually faced a shortage of qualified teachers to fill new classrooms requiring the recruitment and training of new teachers mainly from middle school (grade 8) graduates. The primary program (PP) as it was called trained thousands of primary school teachers to help fill classrooms. The newly trained teachers were dispatched throughout the country improving access to education. Even though many people had low regard for the new primary school teachers due to their youthful age, barely a few years older than their students, and for their lack of

preparation, maturity and qualification. Contrary to that negative view it is the fact that these middle school graduates with 1-2 years of training and ongoing teaching seminars were far better trained and qualified than primary school teachers already in the classrooms who were recruited with only 4th grade level education or equivalent. These teacher recruitment and training efforts reduced teacher shortages, improved student learning and enhanced teacher qualifications. However, these educational improvements require extensive resources out of the government's budget.

Moreover, the global economic crisis of the 1970's and cyclical regional droughts exacerbated mass movements to urban areas coupled with higher levels of inflation made urban and rural living conditions unbearable. The economic crisis forced some parents to pull their children out of school realizing the need for extra hands to bring food to the table and make ends meet. Generally, girls were among the first to be removed from schools, as well as children from low-income families whose physical labor was very much needed by the family. In some cases, teachers themselves abandoned their assigned classrooms to seek additional resources to supplement their income. Some math and Science teachers, for example, established private afterschool tutoring programs for secondary school students for a fee, often presenting important topics that are not covered in the regular classrooms putting some students at a disadvantage. This was also a backhanded ploy to force all students to enroll in the tutoring program if they wanted to succeed in school. Some teachers published exam preparation documents containing questions and answers for which the final exam may come from. Teachers collected fees from these students to supplement their meagre government salary.

Unfortunately, the severity of the economic crisis led to the involvement of global monetary agencies such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in Somali internal affairs and proposed strategies to reverse course and address these economic challenges. The panacea proposed was none other than the "Structural adjustment Programs (SAPS) championed by the IMF and the World Bank which led to a sharp decline of the economy, student enrollment, quality of teachers and the overall educational output (Maloney, 2017). To soften the impact, donor organizations introduced food-aid programs to supplement declining incomes and food shortages. However, the food aid program destabilized the agriculture industry as people collected food rations instead of growing them which contributed to abandoning farming and dependency on food rations. Furthermore, cyclical droughts and water shortages contributed to many families moving away from their natural habitat to other areas effectively becoming internally displaced persons (IDPs) (ESEA, 2022).

Public concern on education during the military regime focused mainly on the deterioration of the quality of

education due to criticisms of the utilization of the Somali script as the language of instruction, the shortage of trained teachers and the absence of sufficient textbooks or educational materials to support the new curriculum. Many people felt that using Somali as a language of instruction limited the ability of children to access quality education overseas, even though foreign language subjects are included in the school curriculum. The debate on the language of instruction in schools continues to this day as some people look at it from a linguistic pride and nationalism perspective, while others see it from a pragmatic point of view. Other concerns include misgivings on the effect of the military regime's indoctrination of young minds on the doctrine of "scientific socialism" which was borrowed from the Eastern Bloc nations during the Cold War. The initiative was seen by many as a radical philosophy which is incompatible with the Islamic faith adhered to by the Somali people. Despite these concerns, the regime moved on with its educational plans and even though the impact on education is publicly praised, its philosophical influence on society is at best noteworthy.

The state of higher education

The closure of the Somali National University (SNU), which was the only Higher Education Institution (HEI) in the country after the failure of the state in 1991, necessitated the proliferation of smaller private colleges and universities. Responding to existing educational needs, most of the new colleges and universities were established with little academic capacity and inadequate resources to attain a fully functioning institution. The quality, purpose and capacity of these newly founded institutions vary with curricular support from local, Diaspora or foreign International Non-government Organizations (INGOs). Some HEIs were established as a competition to the educational accomplishments of rival communities. This is an outgrowth of the incessant clan rivalry among the Somali people since the advent of the civil war which forced some communities to imitate and copy the works of others so as not to be outdone by rival communities or become dependent on their services. Consequently, a nation that once had a single national university based in Mogadishu has today more than 180 colleges and universities scattered throughout the country (Cassanelli and Abdikadir, 2008).

The growth and expansion of IHEs is a positive step which indicates a local commitment to education and an ardent desire of parents to establish IHE in their community to benefit their children. In retrospect, despite the low quality and capacity of many of these IHEs, it can be argued that their existence and the services they provide to the public were necessary and closed a vacuum created by the absence of a public or private higher education system.

The Somali National University (SNU) which was the flagship institution for higher learning offered more than 13 colleges with 700 faculty staff and over 15,000 students at its peak during the 1970s and 1980s (Crawshaw 2014). Some affluent families who could afford to send their children abroad did so primarily discouraged by the deteriorating educational capacity of local institutions. They sought quality education in mainly Italy, the UK and other European countries or the United States. However, despite economic challenges and political instability, SNU met as much as practicable the higher educational needs of the country. The College of Education, for instance, known as Lafole whose main campus is located south of Mogadishu on the road to Afgoi provided rigorous college-level education curricula to students trained as teachers (Cassanelli and Abdikadir, 2008). The institution was established with the support of Eastern Michigan University of the United States and was the only faculty using English as a medium of instruction while other faculties used Italian (Hussein, 2005). Moreover, some high school graduates who could not enroll at the Somali National University for a variety of reasons including but not limited to lower grade point average (GPA), were offered employment in the government or joined the coveted military academies. There were no alternative private higher education programs in the country as education was completely a government mandate.

As described earlier, education in Somalia during the military regime was purely public and accessible to the masses for free. Unlike many neighboring countries in the region, primary, secondary, and higher (tertiary) education was provided to the public free of charge. Accessibility to education for urban, rural, and nomadic communities varied with urban centers receiving the largest concentration of education and employment opportunities. The SNU, being the only HEI in the country was physically located in Mogadishu drawing students from all over the country. Even though students were offered free tuition with room and board (Cassanelli and Abdikadir, 2008), incoming enrollees from outside of the capital faced adjustment hardships, lack of supplementary living expenses and deprivation from family. However, in due course, the benefits of free education while developing social networks offset initial concerns and adjustment challenges.

In hindsight, it is conceivable to reflect that commitment and passion for education alone which is devoid of a sustained financial plan grounded on a strong economic foundation is insufficient and bound to fail. However, the military regime's efforts to improve education, increase literacy rates and enhance educational opportunities for the masses did after all succeed and produced the expected results, despite the political and economic challenges facing the nation. The military regime's education policy and its desired noble outcomes for the Somali people are by far unparalleled, exceptional, and

praiseworthy. Of course, the success in the education sector is unfortunately buried under monumental rubble of corruption, nepotism, conflict and state failure.

DISCUSSION

Post-conflict educational challenges

Private education during the military regime was very negligible and geared towards foreign language acquisition, after-school support programs or special schools for the children of the affluent, diplomats and other expatriates. There was no need for private education to the general public as free basic, secondary and tertiary education was available to all. Moreover, the public generally viewed education in the realm of government mandate and not the responsibility of the family particularly as it relates to the cost of educating the child. Additionally, their view is that the state is fully responsible for education inclusive of building school infrastructures and providing schoolteachers. Conversely, they see the parent's role as merely responsible for enrolling their children in schools and making sure their children go to school ready to learn.

Since the fall of the Somalia state, the administrative style of governance has changed from a unitary state to a federal union constituting five federal member states. These are Puntland, Galmudug, Hirshabeelle, Koofur-Galbeed and Jubbaland. Each state has its own charter, executive and legislative branches and has control over local security, provision of public services and other administrative matters. This political dispensation came out of a power-sharing agreement in which suspicious clan leaders and warring factions needed to retain some level of regional autonomy over internal matters while setting aside national defense, ports administration and foreign policy to the Federal Government. This was done to prevent dictatorial tendencies of central authorities against the wishes of the public, decentralizing power, and resources while developing local government infrastructure and services. However, the northern region responding to local grievances against the brutality of the military regime established itself as a breakaway de facto republic named Somaliland in 1991 and to this day remains separate and somewhat independent of the FGS.

On the other hand, Puntland state which existed as a regional authority before the reconstitution of the FGS and calls itself the "Mother of Somali Federalism", is often at loggerheads with the FGS on basing its claims on constitutional grounds. This is so because, unlike other member states, Puntland self-appointed itself and acts as a watchdog against the dictatorial tendencies of the FGS which often behaves as a unitary state. Puntland leaders continue to challenge the leadership of the FGS to adhere to the constitution. This often leads to political

crises that impact the working relationship between the two governments. Moreover, many Somalis see Puntland leaders as a nagging barrier that holds Somalia to the current state failure, while others see it differently that Somalia cannot stand on its feet until it adheres to the federal constitution and works with all stakeholders on all consequential matters facing the state.

In the absence of a regulatory agency providing educational support to schools, umbrella education associations were formed to fill the administrative vacuum. They kept the mantle going until the year 2000 when the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) was established, and the MoE began its services at the federal level. Somalia's once unitary education system that was managed by the national MoE based in Mogadishu was no longer tenable as the country disintegrated socially, if not politically into three distinct units. The formation of regional entities such as Puntland in the East and Somaliland in the North signaled a genuine desire for autonomy or self-rule. Claiming atrocities committed by the former military regime, Somaliland seceded from Somalia and declared itself as an independent republic.

The educational mandate naturally changed hands and was practically under three distinct authorities, namely the Ministry of Education, Culture and Higher Education (MoECHE) of the FGS at the national level, the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) of Somaliland, and the MoE of Puntland. Each regional entity gained control of education services and established state-level education departments often competing for resources and legitimacy from donor groups and rivaling the federal MoE. The mistrust and lack of cooperation between the federal and state agencies seems to be a byproduct of the provisional constitution that needs to be completed and ratified as well as the ongoing political quagmire, insecurity, and instability at all levels of government.

Even though most schools are privately owned and not in the direct control of the authorities, the Ministries however play a critical role in promoting education and constantly engage with donor agencies to assist in the development of curriculum, assessment, teacher training programs and other educational services. Moreover, most private schools belong administratively to a dozen or so education umbrella organizations which provide uniform curriculum, assessment and high school leaving certificates for their graduates. The Formal Private Education Network (FPENS), Safe Education and Strategic Research Network (SAFE) and Somali Formal Education Network (SOFEN) are among the recognizable umbrella organizations currently managing schools throughout the country (Cassanelli and Abdikadir, 2008). Fortunately, despite limited or no interaction in the case of Somaliland between the three political authorities, umbrella organizations continue to function and manage schools throughout the country irrespective of regional boundaries or political differences. Remarkably, in a post-

conflict environment where political differences limit collaboration, private school organizations, communication technology firms, and remittance financial services defy political boundaries and serve the whole country. Umbrella education organizations, Dahabshiil Financial Services and Hormuud Telecom are among the visible private companies working directly or indirectly throughout the country.

In the absence of government-provided schools, parents pick up the tab for school fees and are the largest source of funding for the education of their children despite economic challenges affecting their livelihood. Remittances from Diaspora communities continue to sustain the lives of many families who would otherwise be unable to pay for education (Hammond, 2011). Family support for education generally dwarfs in comparison educational resources and support from both donor agencies and the Federal government. Family funding for education in 2017 was seven times more than the government's budget for education. Fee waivers and scholarships for needy students offered by some education umbrella organizations generally reduce the financial burden for some families. However, girls are often deprived of education or drop out prematurely when scholarships are not available, and their families are unable to pay for their education. When economic considerations are made and limited resources for schools are available, some parents tend to send boys to schools opting to keep school-age girls at home.

Historically, when primary education in Somalia was free and compulsory education laws were in place, enrollment figures soared to higher levels leaving no children behind. As the evidence from Somalia and other developing countries indicates, when education is made free, socio-economic status (SES) variables such as parental education or income do not play a significant role in student achievement. This is where education normally levels the playing field and creates new realities that defy existing norms and divisive social strata. In this condition, students from lower SES backgrounds develop strong motivation to learn, stay in school and often graduate. However, as soon as the cost is injected into education, the trend reverses to the detriment of children of lower-income families and marginalized communities. Consequently, a new correlation is established between lower SES and income which often leads to lower academic performance for students as is the case in most developed countries. In hindsight, lower SES students in Somalia during the 1960s and early 1970s frequently performed higher on national assessments compared to their peers from affluent backgrounds when the cost of schooling such as fees, textbooks and supplies were removed. The reason for this was mainly student and family motivation towards long-term educational benefits such as employment in government or in the private sector which often leads to improvement in the livelihood of the whole family (Mohamud, 1996).

Unfortunately, this positive trend did not last long as the economic downturns of the 1970s and 1980s well as the substantial austerity measures imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) raised inflation which led to severe economic challenges. Eventually, the steep rise in inflation forced many families to pull out all or some of their children from school as they needed extra hands to put food on the table. School uniforms, textbooks, calculators, and other school-related costs pushed many children especially from economically marginalized communities out of school. Consequently, academic achievement trends turned 180 degrees in favor of students from higher SES backgrounds.

Looking at higher education, there are currently 118 registered universities with the Ministry of Education, Culture and Higher Education (MOECHE)'s Electronic Management Information Systems (EMIS) and only 41 IHUs met the requirements. Seventy percent of these institutions are in the Banadir region, 6 per cent in Puntland, and 11 percent in Somaliland, while the other four FMSs share the remaining 14 percent of IHUs. The majority of spending in higher education is concentrated on the Somali National University, with very little left for the Commission for Higher Education. Due to their geographical location, most HEIs are accessible to urban dwellers with little access to rural and nomadic areas. Jubbaland is the only FMS with a publicly managed technical professional college. There are 58 Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) centers with varying capacities in the country, distributed across eight regions.

The south-central designation

Initially, donors remained neutral on the political squabbles between the FGS and regional governments. However, after so many complaints from regional authorities on the lack of resource sharing from the federal government, they began to shift their thinking and began to perceive regional governments as victims and the FGS as aggressors. As a result, donors began to consider areas controlled by the FGS as the "South Central" region, which is the area south of Galkayo to Jubbaland. Areas under the control of Somaliland and Puntland are treated separately and considered distinct regions for funding purposes. Dubbing the area controlled by the Federal Government as "South Central" in all educational documents considered the reality on the ground which is that the former Somali Republic has separated into three de facto independent zones, effectively denigrating the FGS' status as a sovereign state. In addition, the three zonal approaches treat FGS on the bar with its member state Puntland and the breakaway republic of Somaliland. Both Somaliland and Puntland gradually gained distinction and autonomous stature at least when it comes to education funding. Consequently, donor funding for Somali education has

been divided between the three zonal units, namely, South-central, Puntland and Somaliland. This issue is still outstanding as the FGS is campaigning to bring Puntland back into its fold as a member state while leaving Somaliland aside for now.

The reality on the ground is that both Somaliland and Puntland Ministries of Education develop their curricula, manage their schools, and generally remain outside of the jurisdiction and direct supervision of the FGS's Ministry of Education. This arrangement may have been practical and necessary during the formation of the FGS, however, its continuation to this day is proving to be a barrier as the FGS continues to require Puntland, a federal member state, to be part of the FGS education system with the rest of the Federal Member States. On the other hand, Puntland argues that it cannot join the other FMSs as it preceded the formation of the FGS itself and has a functioning and effective educational system, unlike other regions. Puntland posits instead that its MoE is capable and more advanced in managing its education system than the FGS. Educational ministries at the other FMSs are mostly in their infancy, offer few services if any and do not compare with the MoE of Puntland. Puntland continues to refuse to be part of the federal education system as it claims its educational system is more rigorous and advanced than FGS's.

Furthermore, according to the provisional constitution, education is the domain of the FMSs, its management and implementation should therefore be kept at the state level. In fact, as part of the devolution of government services, member states should also devolve services to municipalities at the local level. However, unlike Puntland, other federal member states lack the capacity and infrastructure to take up the education mandate and are completely dependent on the FGS for educational services and support. As such, the country's education system remains contested and under three distinct educational entities, all competing and outdoing one another. It was unfortunate and very revealing to Somalis when they saw on social media three distinct delegations representing Somalia who spoke one after the other at the Global Partners in Education (GPE) conference in 2018 which was held in Dakar, Senegal and reporting on educational progress in each of the three zonal areas to the chagrin of participants.

The impasse between the FGS and Puntland has been going on for over a decade now. Students from Puntland do not currently participate in the national secondary school leaving exams and instead take regional assessments developed by Puntland. FGS policy requires national secondary school leaving certificates to be issued to students who succeeded in national exams which are aligned with the unified national curriculum. Consequently, students from Puntland pursuing higher education opportunities in foreign countries do not possess the national certificates necessary for enrollment as well as access to government scholarships. This challenge also affects students from Somaliland seeking

higher education abroad.

This protracted feud between FGS and Puntland puts students and parents from the latter at a disadvantage. Unlike other FMSs whose students participate in the national exams, Puntland insists its tests and student scores are equivalent and refuses federal ministry oversight on its assessments or input on its decision-making process. Considering multiple vantage points, this impasse is a constitutional crisis that requires political settlement or the judgment of a constitutional court which Somalia currently doesn't have. Moreover, the Somali provisional constitution lacks clarity on education mandate, resource-sharing and supremacy clause when conflicts arise, which makes immediate court ruling on the subject impossible.

Remarkably, some Puntland students recently defected and sat for the national exams despite Puntland's ban which indicates that the public is realizing the impact of the political impasse on the future of their children. Even though this sounds reasonable to some, it is not a good practice to test students on assessments which are not aligned with their curriculum and the outcome cannot be a reliable measure of student learning. Future defections of students may not be a solution to the problem, but concerted effort must be given to resolve the problem. If this matter remains unresolved, the other four member states could act similarly and ask to be treated like Puntland until a fair system is established.

Reviving public education

Estimates indicate that over 75 percent of primary and secondary schools are private with parents and guardians paying for school fees and other school-related expenditures such as textbooks, school uniforms and transportation. Less than five percent of schools are purely public and in direct control of the government. School ownership consists of 3% public, 39% publicly supported, and 58% private. Close to 90% of secondary schools in the Benadir region are privately owned. Community-owned public schools, private schools, and Non-governmental (NGO) managed schools continue to dominate the Somali educational landscape.

The Somali GEA adopted in 2021 is a major legal milestone which guarantees education as a basic right for all Somali citizens and enshrines every citizen the right to free education up to the secondary level. Moreover, with the passage of the GEA, many parents and educators anticipated that the Act would apply to all primary and secondary school students regardless of the type of school students attend. However, FGS considers public only 5% of schools in which students can attend free of charge. The rest of the primary schools which are community-owned or private schools continue to be tuition-based and parent or donor-supported. Surprisingly, with the increase of the educational budget in the year 2023 which quadrupled education funding to \$34 million,

the highest education budget in years, the Somali government continues to spend well below the 20% threshold of GDP globally recommended for government expenditures in basic education. As far as education in Somalia is concerned, parents and donor communities continue to bear the brunt of financing education.

Somali education data recently published indicate that more than three million children are out of school and for those fortunate enough to enroll, they rarely absorb the full benefit of education. Access to education is limited to those living closer to urban centers and formal education is a rarity in rural and nomadic areas where many school-age children live. Looking at school infrastructures, most school facilities were built before the failure of the state and need refurbishing, with overcrowded classrooms and inadequate water, and sanitation facilities. Current Education reports show that over 3 million children and youth between the ages of 6-18 are out of school, while only 3 percent of nomadic children and 7 percent of children in IDP camps are enrolled in schools.

A survey of schoolteachers and administrators conducted by the MoE found that males dominate the teaching profession with a ratio of 8:1 and 10:1 in higher education. Gender inequalities are found throughout the education sector with the highest incidence being in the teaching workforce. Most schoolteachers today are inadequately trained with no school libraries or textbooks available to students. As it is common in post-conflict environments where men dominate the workforce, male teachers account for more than 80 percent of the teaching force with 18 percent females at the primary level, and fewer than 5 percent at the secondary level. Since employment opportunities are limited and hard to come by, private school teachers are paid significantly less than those in public schools. Even though many unqualified teachers fill classrooms, secondary schools with a much higher credential requirement have more unqualified teachers in classrooms than primary schools.

Students with special needs are rarely identified and provided access to educational opportunities with assistive technology tools and supportive environments. Teachers should be trained on best practices in teaching multiple modalities and inclusion models that best deliver instruction to students with diverse needs. Unfortunately, community attitudes for special populations, and cultural insensitivities on their rights and basic needs act as a barrier to education for children and adults with disabilities. Schools and educators should take the lead in advocating for the plight of special needs populations and educate the public in altering their attitudes.

Research findings

Like everything else, education in post-conflict Somalia is contested by different groups and interests for entirely different reasons. Additionally, there is a lack of constitutional clarity on critical issues and a huge

misunderstanding on which polity is responsible for the management, administration and funding of primary, secondary and tertiary education. It appears that the confusion surrounding the Somali federal system regarding resource and power-sharing between the FGS and its member states is negatively affecting educational administration and management at all levels of government. Under the unitary system of governance during the military regime (1960-1991) education was very much centralized and under the control of the central government where major decisions on vision, type of curriculum, language of instruction, and qualification of teachers and principals were all made. In that educational structure, a unified system of teaching and assessment existed and there was no room for confusion, contemplation or conflict. Accordingly, the system did not allow for choice or autonomy to the 18 regions in the implementation process. Education was then a one-size-fits-all program despite existing differences in regional education needs and other student characteristics. For example, in agricultural states where farming is the main source of livelihood, the curriculum did not include Agriculture and related courses and other technical, hands-on practical knowledge and skills necessary for farming. Equally, in states where nomadic lifestyle or fishery is the main economy, the curriculum did not include courses that improve the quality of life for nomadic and fishery communities. Even though general education courses were offered to all students, there was no specific course developed or training provided to make education relevant and meaningful to the lives of the people and to enhance their livelihood. The unitary state was less interested in the socio-cultural differences of the population but was mainly focused on presenting Somalia as a homogeneous nation.

However, the civil war of 1991 and the ensuing breakup of the Somali civic institutions revealed that there were societal fractures with cultural and linguistic variations among different clan groups and regions. Some contemporary researchers studying Somali culture and language, particularly focusing on the inter-riverine areas (communities between the two rivers of Jubba and Shabelle), revisited and questioned the homogeneity doctrine perpetrated by the military regime and found that there are vast cultural and regional variations within the national Somali umbrella, that was kept under the rug for the sole purpose and perhaps noble aim of ensuring that the Somali state and people remain united and homogeneous. Of course, there is some level of truth to the homogeneity argument of the Somali people as they share ethnicity (isir) and traditional and religious values but that does not mean differences or traditional variations threaten social cohesion. Unfortunately, the homogeneity argument did not pan out after the failure of the state and in retrospect, Somalia could have taken a different path; one that acknowledged diversity as a national strength. Given that Somalis share many cultural

and religious traits, there are also subtle variations that need to be acknowledged and embraced which will improve the inclusivity and belonging of small clans and marginalized groups. The provisional constitution recognizes the “Maay” language as a distinct Somali dialect making it and the “Maxaa tiri” both official national languages. More linguistic studies are needed to extract and explain linguistic and other cultural variations for communities such as Benadiri, Jiido, Dabarre, Garre, Bravani, and Mushunguli among others.

Moreover, curricular flexibility and choice would allow regions where the Maay is spoken to use “Maay” as the language of instruction in primary and secondary schools. Moreover, the “Maxaa tiri language” can be offered as an elective course and vice versa for schools in the Maxaa-tiri speaking communities. Additionally, national assessments could be based on both language versions to allow students flexibility to choose their preferred language of choice.

As education is the domain of Federal Member States (FMSs), there should be flexibility and regional autonomy on issues such as teacher recruitment, teacher training, school calendars, textbooks and other educational materials beyond the shared national curriculum and assessment. The Federal Ministry could provide additional funding to the FMSs to assist with the education of special populations, and internally displaced persons (IDPs) and educational supports and services to nomadic and marginalized communities.

Delineating federal and state responsibilities for education requires that there should be clear boundaries on funding and management responsibilities with a written agreement on resolving educational issues and conflicts. A resource-sharing mechanism with specific guidelines on local and foreign scholarship opportunities is necessary to ensure equitable resource-sharing among education departments in FMSs.

As new FMSs build their capacities in managing regional educational programs, the Federal MoE, Culture and Higher Education needs to resolve outstanding issues with some of the federal states contesting management and resource-sharing issues thereby developing an all-encompassing single management and resource-sharing mechanism agreeable to all.

Leadership and management staff at all levels of government should promote strict following of the constitution leaving no space for preferences and personal choices that lead to conflicts. In cases where FMS laws contradict or conflict with Federal laws, there should be a clause in the national constitution addressing the resolution of these conflicts and if necessary, assuring the supremacy of federal laws when such conflicts arise.

Establishing the education of the future

Education in Somalia has been contested from its

inception. These contestations stem from the fact that the aim, purpose, and mandate of education were not specified and clearly explained to the public. Unlike informal education, which is amorphous, voluntary, homegrown and communal, formal education came with a mandate from colonial or governmental authorities requiring young school-age children to attend structured programs in schools with classrooms, textbooks, teachers and uniforms. Before the advent of modern education, Somalis were content with informal education programs which have been going on from time immemorial. In these homegrown systems, knowledge and skills were passed on from one generation to the next through apprenticeships or quasi-formalized Qur'anic education. Concerns over the aim of education, type of curriculum, foreign languages as well as absence of parent and community participation continue to dominate dialogue on education to this day. Moreover, Somalia's socio-political instability hugely impacted education as it continues to remain sporadic, rudimentary and on an emergency basis.

Consequently, education in Somalia today is mostly private, and donor-dependent with very few publicly funded schools. Moreover, Somalia's Federal system requires power and resource-sharing between the FGS and its member states which to this date has not been agreed to. Additionally, there is less clarity on education mandate specifically about resource-sharing mechanisms between all levels of government.

Given these critical challenges, the Somali people through their leadership need to revisit and agree on the value of education to society, invest in the education it needs and increase the national budget for education to 20% of GDP which is a standard for governments in the region. Reviving and establishing robust public education requires strong national commitment with funding levels sufficient to meet the basic education needs of all learners (Cassanelli and Abdikadir, 2008).

RECOMMENDATION

As has been the norm since the failure of the state in 1991, education in Somalia cannot completely depend on parents and foreign handouts if the nation needs to stand on its own feet and pave the way for the future. Current and future leadership must invest, develop, and take ownership of education. In doing so, they must make the financial commitment necessary for a quality and relevant education to society and establish an education policy framework to get there. Planning well and investing wisely in education will undoubtedly make education independent of outside influences, prepare future citizens and keep youth in school. It will also keep youth away from being lured into the unregulated job market where decent livable wages, job security and other labor rights protections do not exist.

Proper education planning and sufficient financing will surely pave the way for a better future for the nation and help create a skilled workforce ready to develop the economy, resolve regressive conflicts based on primordial cultural beliefs and maintain peaceful co-existence with each other and with their neighbors.

Abbreviation

EMIS, Electronic Management Information Systems; **ESA**, Education Sector Analysis; **FGS**, Federal Government of Somalia; **FMSs**, Federal Member States; **GDP**, Gross Domestic Product; **GEA**, General Education Act; **GER**, Gross Enrolment Ratio; **HEI**, Higher Education Institution; **INGOs**, International Non-governmental Organizations; **MOE**, Ministry of Education (national level before 1991) - State level ministry; **MOES**, Ministry of Education and Science – Somaliland; **MOECHE**, Ministry of Education, Culture and Higher Education - Federal Level; **NCHE**, National Commission for Higher Education; **SAPs**, Structural Adjustment Programs; **SDGs**, Sustainable Development Goals; **SES**, Socioeconomic Status; **SNU**, Somali National University; **TFG**, Transitional Federal Government.

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