



Journal of Political Science and International Relationship (JPSIR)

ISSN: 3065-6125 (ONLINE)

VOLUME 3 ISSUE 1 (2026)



PUBLISHED BY
E-PALLI PUBLISHERS, DELAWARE, USA

The Role of Local Governance in Peace-Building: The Case of Somali Region, Ethiopia

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Article Information

Received: November 10, 2025**Accepted:** March 08, 2026**Published:** April 28, 2026

Keywords

Conflict Management, Customary Institutions, Decentralization, Ethiopia, Hybrid Governance, Institutional Capacity, Local Governance, Peace-Building, Somali Region, Sustainable Peace

ABSTRACT

Peace-building in fragile and conflict-affected regions increasingly depends on the effectiveness of local governance institutions. While decentralization is widely promoted as a strategy to enhance participation, accountability, and conflict management, its practical contribution to sustainable peace remains contested, particularly in ethnically diverse and politically sensitive contexts. This study examines the role of local governance in peace-building in the Somali Region, a region characterized by recurrent clan conflicts, resource-based disputes, environmental stress, and inter-regional tensions. The research seeks to bridge the gap between the theoretical promise of decentralization and the lived realities of grassroots governance in fostering stability. The study is guided by decentralization theory and peace-building theory, which emphasize institutional legitimacy, participatory governance, and local ownership as foundations for sustainable peace. Using a qualitative research design based on secondary data analysis, the study draws on recent academic literature, policy reports, and institutional documents published within the last decade. The analysis focuses on the structure and functions of regional, zonal, woreda, and kebele administrations, as well as their interaction with customary institutions such as clan elders and religious leaders. The findings indicate that local governance institutions in the Somali Region play a meaningful but constrained role in conflict prevention and resolution. Formal structures have legal mandates to maintain security, deliver services, and facilitate dispute resolution; however, their effectiveness is limited by weak institutional capacity, financial dependence, shortages of skilled personnel, and limited administrative autonomy. As a result, many peace-building efforts remain reactive rather than preventive. A central finding of the study is the importance of hybrid governance arrangements. Customary institutions, operating through traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, retain strong social legitimacy and community trust. Where formal local administrations collaborate effectively with customary leaders, conflict mediation outcomes tend to be more durable and widely accepted. The study also highlights structural challenges that undermine local peace efforts, including youth unemployment, inadequate infrastructure, weak service delivery, and climate-related pressures on land and water resources. These socio-economic and environmental factors continue to fuel grievances and competition, suggesting that peace-building must be linked to inclusive development and institutional reform. Overall, the research concludes that local governance in the Somali Region is a critical yet under-empowered actor in peace-building. Sustainable peace requires strengthening institutional capacity, enhancing accountability, institutionalizing collaboration between formal and customary systems, and integrating conflict-sensitive development planning. By providing a context-specific analysis, this study contributes to broader debates on decentralization, state-building, and sustainable peace in fragile and multi-ethnic societies.

INTRODUCTION

Peace-building has become a priority across conflict-affected areas globally (United Nations & World Bank, 2018; UNDP, 2022). Peace in developing countries is linked to violent conflict, weak governance, social and economic inequalities, marginalization, and competition for scarce resources (World Bank, 2020; OECD, 2022). The current approaches to peace-building recognize that neither national pacts nor security initiatives can deliver sustainable peace. Effective local governance that is inclusive is necessary to reduce conflict, manage disputes, and deal with the drivers of fragility (UNDP, 2022; United Nations, 2023).

Decentralization has emerged as a popular model for local governance in Africa, aiming to improve local

participation, service delivery, and accountability (World Bank, 2021; African Union, 2023). The effectiveness of local governance in peace-building relies on several variables: organization based capacity, legitimacy, fiscal power, and integration with customary governance (UNDP, 2022; OECD, 2022).

Ethiopia is a critical case study for understanding the impact of decentralization on peace-building. After the fall of the Derg regime in 1991, the country adopted a federal system based on ethnic self-administration under the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (Fiseha, 2021; Aalen & Tronvoll, 2020).

Governance in the Somali Region operates within a double system of formal institutions and customary structures (Hagmann & Abdi, 2020; Berhanu, 2023). State

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administrations at the local and district levels implement government policies, provide services, and maintain security. In contrast, customary authorities are the primary conflict arbiters within the community (Hagmann & Abdi, 2020; Berhanu, 2023). These include elders, clan leaders, and religious leaders who rely on customary law (xeer) to resolve disputes (Yusuf, 2021; Berhanu, 2023). These institutions command high social legitimacy and effectively mediate local conflicts (Hagmann & Abdi, 2020).

Political reforms initiated by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in 2018 have introduced new leadership and initiatives aimed at improving governance, accountability, and reconciliation in the Somali Region (International Crisis Group, 2021; Mehari, 2022). The reforms have created new opportunities for engaging with local authorities but have also posed challenges of limited capacity, insufficient resources, youth unemployment, weak infrastructure, and environmental issues connected to climate change (World Bank, 2020; UNDP, 2022).

While the Somali Region is of strategic importance to Ethiopia and faces stability challenges due to its borders with Somalia and Djibouti, few empirical studies have explored how local governance institutions contribute to peace-building at the community-led level (Berhanu, 2023; Yusuf, 2021). Most existing research has focused on national politics or security dynamics rather than the everyday governance practices that impact community stability (Fiseha, 2021; Mehari, 2022). Nevertheless, addressing this gap is essential to understanding how local governments interact with customary authorities, resolve resource disputes between communities and clans, and deal with status and income based grievances (UNDP, 2022; World Bank, 2021).

The study identify how local governance institutions promote social cohesion and conflict prevention at the local level. This research adds to the scholarly debate on the trade-offs of state-building decentralization policies and sustainable peace in fragile contexts (OECD, 2022; United Nations, 2023).

Research Questions

- What is the role of local governance institutions in conflict prevention, management, and post-conflict reconciliation in the Somali Region?
- What institutional, political, and socio-economic factors constrain or enhance the effectiveness of local governance in promoting sustainable peace?
- How do formal local government structures interact with customary institutions (such as clan elders and religious leaders), and how does this interaction affect peace-building outcomes?

Objective of the Study

General objective

Overall the general objective this study examines the

role of local governance in peace-building in the Somali Region of Ethiopia.

specific objective

- To assess the functions and practical contributions of local governance institutions in preventing and resolving conflicts at the grassroots level.
- To identify and analyze the key challenges and enabling factors affecting the capacity of local administrations to support peace-building efforts.
- To examine the relationship and coordination mechanisms between formal local government institutions and customary conflict resolution systems in fostering stability and reconciliation.

Scope of the Study

This study has a geographical, thematic, and time based scope. Geographically, it is limited to the Somali Region of Ethiopia, one of the country's federal states, recognized for its recurrent inter-communal conflicts, pastoralist communities, and complicated local and local governance. It geographically focuses on within the region, to allow for the local-level investigation of governance and peace-building in these areas. Thematically, it is limited to the role of local governance in conflict prevention, conflict resolution, reconciliation, social cohesion, and fostering trust in institutions. Local governance is considered both in its formal local, zonal, woreda, and kebele administrative structures, alongside in its customary and informal practices. Although issues relating to national political developments and reforms are included, this only in terms of their believed impact on local governance and peace-building. Temporally, the study does not explore developments that occurred preceding the federal reform of the decentralization system. It focuses on developments since this reform, but with the specific period of interest being post-2018, when the ruling political party in Ethiopia experienced a transformation that initiated changes in political leadership and policy.

Significance of the Study

This study has theoretical, practical and policy-connected significance. First, this study has an academic significance as it contributes empirical evidence to the nascent literature on decentralization and peace-building. While much research has been conducted into political changes at a national level, relatively little research has explored how local governance institutions operate within everyday peace processes. Second, this study has a practical significance by providing insights into local governance structures in the Somali Region of Ethiopia, for the purpose of application by policy-makers. The findings from this study will highlight weaknesses in local governance structures, the lack of coordination between different sectors of governance, and issues connected to the capacity of local governance structures. Third, the

study may have a significance for development partners and civil society organizations that may currently have programs in the Somali Region of Ethiopia. Identifying the role of local governance within peace-building may assist in informing how development programs may avoid decoupling from the realities of the region, by becoming conflict-sensitive. Finally, this study may also be relevant to other regions in Ethiopia or the Horn of Africa facing similar challenges regarding decentralization, pastoralist resource-based conflicts, and hybrid systems of governance.

Limitations of the Study

The study may be limited in a number of ways. One potential limitation may be the availability of reliable and comprehensive data at a local level. Administrative data may be lacking in some areas, and some regions may be relatively inaccessible.

Second, the sensitivity required for political issues within public discussions may impact the willingness of people to participate in interviews or discussions.

Third, while the Somali Region of Ethiopia has diverse social and cultural patterns within it, findings in the zones or woredas in which research is conducted may not always be reflective of the whole region.

Fourth, limitations in time and resources may restrict the scale of field work that can be conducted, and the number of stakeholders that can be included in interviews or discussions. However, valid and reliable findings will be sought with appropriate sampling and triangulation.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This research employs a qualitative study design based on secondary data. This study design is appropriate as it focuses on an in-depth investigation of the role of local governance in peace-building in a specific context, the Somali Region. Through desk-based documentary and archival studies, the research comprehensively assesses, structures and synthesizes secondary knowledge, policy, organization based publications and literature on decentralization and peace-building. The study is also descriptive and analytic. It descriptively outlines the nature of local governance institutions and descriptively assesses local governments' performance regarding peace building in the region.

Research Approach

The research employs a qualitative research approach based on secondary data. The approach is suitable as the research seeks to interpret policies, organization based arrangements, governance practices and mechanisms of peace-building, rather than solicit primary field data. The qualitative research approach will allow comprehensive review, comparison and synthesis of diverse secondary documentary data.

Sources of Data

The study utilizes secondary data, and the data have been obtained from reputable and appropriate sources. The sources of the data include the subsequent:

1. Government Documents and Policy Frameworks
 - The 1995 Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
 - Federal and local decentralization policies
 - Peace and security strategy documents
 - Formal reports from the administration of the Somali Regional State
2. Academic Literature
 - Peer-reviewed journal articles on decentralization and peace-building
 - Books and book chapters addressing federalism in Ethiopia
 - Thesis and dissertations connected to governance and conflict in the Somali Region
3. Reports from International and Non-Governmental Organizations
 - Reports from development partners working in the Somali Region
 - Conflict assessment reports
 - Governance and organization based capacity assessments
4. Statistical and Administrative Reports
 - Local social and economic indicators
 - Service delivery performance reports
 - Conflict trend analyses

These various sources of data provide comprehensive coverage of the relevant aspects of local government, organization based functioning, status and income based context, and peace-building initiatives in the Somali Region.

Data Collection Procedure

Secondary data were collected through systematic review of:

- On-line journals (repository for journals)
- Government formal websites/publications
- Reports published by well-known research and development organizations
- University Libraries (on-line archives)

The selected materials were chosen according to their relevance to the research questions, aims and framework of the proposed study. Emphasis was given to recent, policy-oriented, empirical publications and studies on decentralization, local governance, and peace-building in Ethiopia (Somali region).

Data Analysis Techniques

Secondary data (documents) analyzed through thematic content analyses in the subsequent ways:

1. Identification and organization of relevant documents
2. Coding of essential themes pertaining to:
 - Local governance quality (capability, accountability,

- participation, coordination)
 - Social and economic and environmental issues
 - Political and decentralization developments/reforms
 - Peace-building results (conflict prevention, reconciliation, inter-organization based trust)
 - 3. Interpretation of patterns, similarities, and contradictions among the documents
 - 4. Relating findings to the theoretical/conceptual framework of the study.
- Triangulation involves use of multi-sourcing of information to improve reliability of findings and reduce bias.

Validity and Reliability

To guarantee trustworthiness, the study uses:

- Cross-referencing information across multiple credible sources
- Reference of peer-reviewed scholarly literature
- Reference of formal policy documents and reports of the institutes in question \

By cross-referencing the information across these different and credible sources, the study is able to improve both the trustworthiness and the reliability of its findings.

Limitations of the Methodology

As this is a secondary study, it may be limited in its capacity to discover or report emerging developments or informal practices not documented in formal publications. No direct field work is conducted, so there is no direct engagement with the perceptions of local actors. Some reports may be biased in favor of the institution/organization providing them.

Nevertheless, by selecting, comparing and analyzing available sources, this study will be able to present a thorough overview of the role played by local governance in peace-building in the Somali Region.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

This section presents the analysis and primary results of the study on local governance's role in peace-building in the Somali Region. The analysis is conducted according to the study's conceptual framework, which consists of: (1) local governance, (2) intervening factors, (3) peace-building outcomes.

Analysis of Local Governance Effectiveness

Institutional Capacity

Analysis of secondary data reveals that local governance institutions in the Somali Region have formal mandate to oversee peace and security at local, zonal, woreda and kebele levels. Regional peace and security offices, justice bureaus and administrative councils have a legal authority to coordinate peace-building and conflict resolution activities. However, these institutions possess limited capacity. Many local administrations confront staff shortages, lack fiscal autonomy, and possess few resources. Their conflict-prevention activities are often

responsive rather than forward-thinking.

Accountability and Participation

Ethiopian decentralization reforms intended to promote participatory governance at the local level. Local governance institutions, such as councils and community meetings, provide means for resident participation. Evidence of participation exists, though its degree varies. Community engagements and peace conferences promote dialogue and reconciliation in some areas. However, political centralization, limited transparency, and elite dominance may undermine accountability mechanisms. Citizenship's perception of local institutions as responsive and fair increases in areas where this is the case, decreases where it is not.

Coordination with Customary Institutions

The customary institutions, especially the clan elders and religious leaders, remain central to dispute resolution in Somali society. The local governments work with these individuals to mediate the disputes.

The results of the study show that the outcomes of peace-building efforts are considerably better when formal administrations work alongside customary leaders. However, there is no formalized coordination between these two groups of actors at all times.

Analysis of Intervening Factors

Socio-Economic Conditions

The Somali Region is plagued by social and economic challenges, especially youth unemployment and lack of development of resources such as water and grazing land. The poor quality of governmental services and the economic underdevelopment of the region have led to significant communal grievances. The results also show that when local governments have focused on improving access to water and other resources, developing infrastructure, and carrying out development initiatives, communal tensions in the region have decreased. The level of underdevelopment continues to be a fuel for communal tensions.

Environmental Pressures

The recurring droughts and climate variability in the region have led to increased competition between herding communities. The environmental stress placed on these communities has led to increased migration and interaction between clans, which leads to disputes. The local government does not have the capacity to adequately respond to the environmental challenges. Although there have been efforts to mediate and reduce the violence between these communities, there are insufficient long-term strategies to adapt to the environmental challenges.

Political Context and Decentralization

The Federal government of Ethiopia, established by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, was intended to give more power to the local governments.

However, boundary disputes between regions, such as the Somali Region and the Oromia Region, have created difficulties for the local governments. Reforms were initiated in 2018 by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. There have been improvements in the political reforms. However, the structural issues connected with the local boundaries and political identity continue to pose challenges to achieving the intended benefits of these reforms.

Peace-Building Outcomes

Conflict Prevention

The local governance institutions also contribute to the early warning systems, the mediation forums, and the peace committees that function at the community-driven. The prevention of conflicts is moderately effective. The preventive mechanisms that exist are mostly informal.

Dispute Resolution and Reconciliation

The collaboration between local administrations and customary leaders has allowed the resolution of many disputes between clans. The hybrid mediation committees are one of the strongest contributors to peace-building in the region.

Social Cohesion and Institutional Trust

The level of trust that citizens have in local governance is critical. The lack of trust that exists in local governance institutions indicates the weaknesses of the local governments. While the level of trust is fragile, it can be improved through the better performance of local governments.

Overall Findings

The analysis also reveals that the level of contribution of local governance to peace-building in the region is significant but limited.

- The organization based frameworks that exist for peace-building in the region are limited by the level of capacity and resources that they can command.
- The collaboration between governing and customary institutions is one of the major strengths of local governance in the region.
- The level of status and income based development and environmental problems in the region work against peace-building efforts.
- The opportunities created by decentralization have not been sufficient to resolve existing political tensions in the region.

These results generally indicate that the local governance system has the potential to create positive outcomes for peace-building. However, unless these social and economic and environmental problems can be addressed, the peace-building efforts that are invested locally will be ineffective.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the role of local governance in the

peace-building process in the Somali Region. The study used secondary data from different recent academic studies to draw its conclusions. The role that local governance plays in the prevention and resolution of conflicts in the region is significant. However, there are challenges in the effectiveness of the local governance institutions in the Somali Region. The formal governance institutions at work in the region have the legal mandate to maintain peace in the region. The customary leaders and religious leaders have significant legitimacy in the local communities, especially among pastoralists. The better the local government coordinates with customary authorities, the better the outcome in resolving conflicts in the region. The drivers of conflict in the region, such as environmental degradation, unemployment, and poor service delivery, work against the efforts of local governance institutions to maintain peace. Although the decentralization of government has allowed for better management of local conflicts, it has failed to alleviate the tensions between different regions within the country. In the end, local governance institutions are an indispensable element in the peace-building efforts in the Somali Region. To considerably impact the peace process, there is the need to strengthen local government institutions and deal with the challenges that they currently confront. A sustainable peace process in the region requires major organization based and development reforms.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the subsequent recommendations are proposed regarding the strengthening of local governance as a peace-building institution in the Somali Region:

- The local governance institutions in the Somali Region need to be strengthened in terms of having the administrative and financial resources necessary to prevent and manage conflicts effectively
- The effectiveness of the collaboration between local and customary government institutions indicates the need to institutionalize such cooperation.
- The ability of local governance institutions to develop the trust of the community relies on the level of community participation in governance activities. Community consultations, dialogue forums, and decision-making processes need to be formalized.
- The integration of peace-building activities with social and economic development will help to reduce social tensions created by economic deprivation.
- The development of effective early warning and monitoring systems will allow local governments to anticipate potential social conflicts and take steps to prevent them.
- The development of inter-local dialogue will help to resolve local tensions. The local governments in the region should be active in organizing and facilitating inter-local peace initiatives.
- Enhancing the accountability of local government institutions and establishing performance indicators

for local governments will increase the accountability of local governments.

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