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Swiss Agency for Development
and Cooperation SDC

Culture Sector Mapping in the Horn of Africa

2020-2021



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This report was prepared by Robert Kluijver and Jonathan Rider of [Aleph Strategies](#) for the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, between September 2020 and March 2021.



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Acronyms

CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CTO	Culture and Tourism Office (Ethiopian MoCT)
ESR	Ethiopia Somali Region
INGO	International Non-Government Organisation
LAs	Local Authorities
LNGO	Local Non-Government Organisation
MoCT	Ministry of Culture and Tourism (Ethiopia)
MoICNG	Ministry of Information, Culture and National Guidance (Somaliland)
MoICT	Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism (Federal Somalia)
MoITHCT	Ministry of Information, Telecommunication, Heritage, Culture and Tourism (Puntland)
MoSCH	Ministry of Sports, Culture and Heritage (Kenya)
MoTIT	Ministry of Trade, Industry and Tourism (Somaliland)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OPOV	One-Person One-Vote
P/CVE	Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
UNESCO	United Nations Education, Scientific and Culture Organisation

Note on nomenclature: In the text below, Somaliland is treated as an independent entity, because it functions as one – as indeed does Puntland, which is also treated separately. A visit to Kismayo and Baidoa might have induced us to also treat Jubaland and the South West State separately, but we lacked the opportunity to visit these places. ‘Federal Somalia’ refers to the area controlled by the Federal Government. When ‘Somalia’ is used, this includes Somaliland.

Note on spelling: standard English spelling has been used rather than Somali spelling for places and names, to facilitate pronunciation.

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is a rich and vibrant cultural sector in Somali regions across the Horn of Africa. Set against a backdrop of political, social and economic unrest, contemporary and traditional culture provides an important avenue for self-expression, learning, leisure and entertainment. It also provides opportunities for addressing broader socio-economic challenges such as youth unemployment and gender inequality.

At a regional level, the review team identifies four overarching needs within the culture sector:

Finding	Need
Interest in cultural programming among government and donors is low. There is poor regional coordination of cultural programming between governments, donors and multilaterals.	Improved coordination between government, donors and multilaterals. Stronger advocacy for cultural programming.
The culture sector is highly fragmented, with poor physical and institutional infrastructure to link cultural actors.	Efforts to link cultural practitioners together, within and across sectors, locally, regionally and internationally.
Tangible and intangible cultural heritage is at risk from neglect and lack of interest, both at a political level and among citizens.	Research, documentation, conservation and promotion of tangible and intangible cultural heritage
Culture is an important avenue for youth self-expression in a context of limited opportunities to participate in political discourse.	Greater access to funding for artists and creatives. Outlets / avenues/ platforms for youth self-expression

There are very few donors or external implementing agencies working in the field of culture in Somalia. This is clearly a missed opportunity. Culture can play an important role in humanitarian and development intervention, but is often overlooked by funders and implementing agencies. Culture can be a useful vector for mediation efforts between political and religious groups; it can drive societal and political transformation and it can unlock economic opportunities, particularly in the creative industries.

Working within the culture sector, particularly as an external agency, requires sensitivity and caution to avoid accusations of enforced Westernisation or of deploying soft power to achieve less lofty objectives. Further, caution is needed to avoid creating aid dependencies between individual donors and grant recipients.

This study identifies the scope for a regional, cross-border engagement in the field of culture, building on the common traits of Somali culture. This should be a grass-roots, community driven process. Working through national governments in a top-down process presents several disadvantages: each government sets its own priorities and many institutional actors wish to monopolise access to their field, to manage funding flows and determine outcomes.

The kind of approach suggested in this document requires a long-term, strategic vision. Part of this effort is nurturing the incipient and still disorganised Somali cultural sector to grow in a democratically organised, collaborative and network-based manner. This may take many years. Encouraged by SDC's 12-year planning horizon, we have ventured to make some recommendations to create an enabling environment for culture. We hope that this document will encourage donors to support Somali arts and culture, preferably in a coordinated, long-term and sustainable manner.

2. INTRODUCTION

2.1. About this Document

Aleph Strategies was commissioned by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) to conduct a culture sector mapping exercise in the Horn of Africa, between September 2020 and March 2021. The objective was to lay the foundations for developing a 12-year regional engagement strategy for cultural programming. Aleph was tasked with identifying ‘entry points’ in the culture sector from the level of national governments to local grass-roots organisations.

A full report of this work was submitted to SDC. This is a modified version of the original report and is aimed at a general audience. For those planning programmes in the region, it contains a single simple message: ***cultural programmes can contribute to positive development outcomes: invest in culture.***

This report contains the combined findings from a detailed literature review and key informant interviews with culture sector stakeholders in Somalia, Somaliland, Ethiopia and Kenya.

The findings are based on fieldwork conducted in Mogadishu, Beled Weyne, Garowe, Burco, Berbera, Hargeysa, Jigjiga, Dire Dawa, Addis Ababa and Nairobi (Eastleigh) by Robert Kluijver, Noural Huda Ali Banfas and Sara Abu Bushra, and desk studies conducted by Jonathan Rider. The report was written by Robert Kluijver and Jonathan Rider of Aleph Strategies, and any inaccuracies can solely be attributed to them, not SDC.

The sources mentioned in the footnotes are provided in the bibliography at the end of this text.

2.2. SDC’s commitment to cultural development

SDC is unique amongst international development agencies – and certainly amongst those active in the Somali areas of the Horn of Africa – for its focus on the role of culture in development. Globally, SDC commits 1% of its budget to art and culture in its partner countries,¹ providing country offices with long-term visibility on cultural funding.

SDC’s programme in the Horn of Africa focuses on the arid and semi-arid lands and was triggered by the drought of 2011-2012. Most of these areas are inhabited by Somalis, whence the focus on Somali culture, but this focus does not preclude working with other groups that inhabit this area, for example Oromo and Borama populations. SDC has implemented a range of cultural projects throughout the Somali areas of the Horn of Africa, but is now looking to develop a 12-year strategic engagement plan to deliver a coherent suite of programmes and projects that foster cultural development on a sustainable path. This is a timely endeavour, as SDC’s wider Regional Cooperation Strategy is also due to be renewed in 2021, presenting opportunities to integrate and align cultural priorities with SDC’s wider programme goals.

SDC’s global cultural objectives and priorities can be summarised as follows:

- i) Strengthening the role of civil society;
- ii) Protecting freedom of expression
- iii) Encouraging inclusion and social cohesion;
- iv) Preventing violence and conflict;
- v) Promoting discovery and access to new ideas;
- vi) Instilling dignity, meaning and a sense of beauty, inspiring hope and confidence.

To date, SDC’s cultural projects in the Somali areas of the Horn of Africa share three common characteristics: they are *small scale*, *self-contained* and *largely urban based*. This is to be expected in the current operational and security context where access to rural areas is limited. SDC has typically

¹ SDC (2016) P.26

supported events, exhibitions and festivals, such as the Addis Foto Fest in Ethiopia and the Hargeysa Book Fair in Somaliland, ‘Art for Inclusion’ in Somalia, and ‘Who I am, who we are’ in Kenya. It is difficult to judge the impact of these projects in the absence of independent evaluation data, yet we can deduce some inherent advantages to these types of project. Firstly, they are high profile, taking place in areas of high population density, and achieving (some) media coverage. The Hargeysa Book Fair and Addis Foto Fest have garnered attention from the international media², and raising awareness of the importance of culture both domestically and abroad. Secondly, events like these are cost-effective when viewed alongside their potential cultural and social impact. Thirdly, they allow Somali culture to be projected on a broader stage, national or international, alongside other local cultures. Finally, they provide opportunities for pooled funding with other donors, serving as a powerful advocacy opportunity to promote the role of culture amongst multiple agencies. A key lesson we take from this, is: *small amounts of funding invested in strategic entry points can deliver exponential value.* We return to these approaches again in the ‘Recommendations’ section at the end of the report.

However, the general thrust of our recommendations is to explore an integrated step-by-step development, spread over the time-span of at least a decade, to address some of the identified shortcomings of the Somali cultural sector as a whole in a practical, and above all sustainable way.

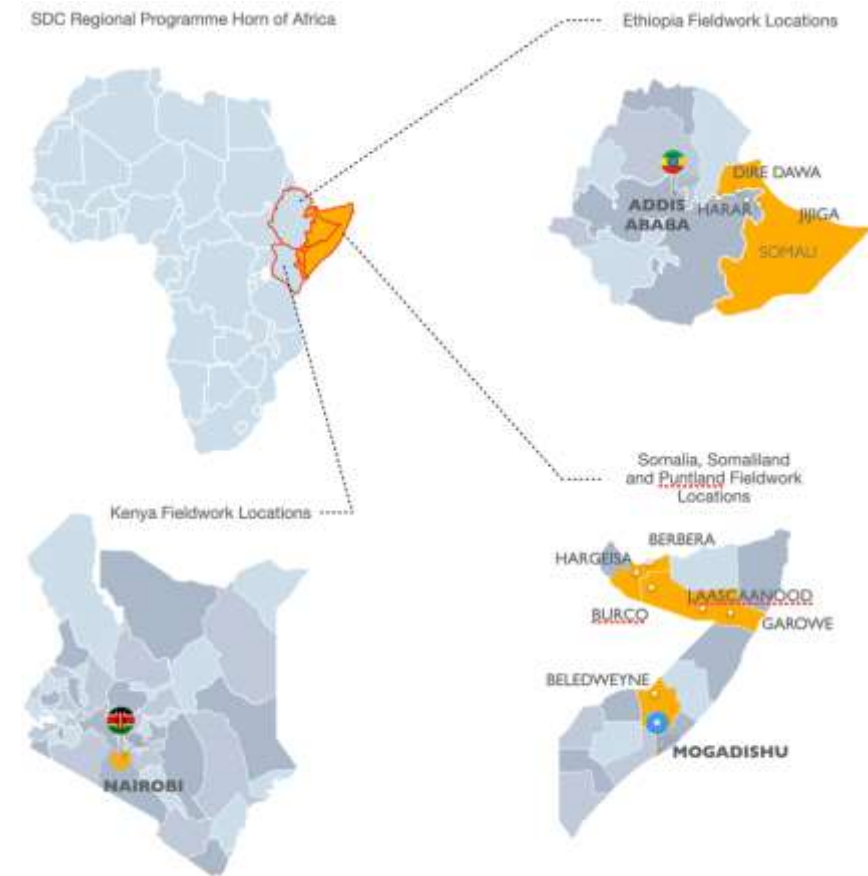
2.3. Methodology

This was an exclusively qualitative exercise, relying on insights, ideas and information gathered through extensive key informant interviews and desk-based research.

The Fieldwork Phase entailed field missions to Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya. Figure 2 shows specific locations in each country where the fieldwork was conducted. The field missions were carried out from 28th September to 25th

October 2020 (Federal Somalia, Puntland, Somaliland, Kenya) and 26th February and 7th March 2021 (Ethiopia) under challenging conditions due to Covid 19 (time sensitive vaccination requirements travelling between countries, restricted access to Ethiopia etc.).

Figure 2: Fieldwork Locations within the Somali areas of the Horn of Africa



² see for example [African Arguments](#) and the [BBC](#).

An extensive mapping exercise was undertaken across the region in order to:

- Identify culture institutions and potential partners in the Somali areas of the Horn of Africa region;
- Identify on-going donor initiatives and potential synergies in the culture sector;
- Identify new potential initiatives not supported by others geared towards culture;
- Identify concrete entry points of engagement for the preservation of tangible and intangible heritage and artistic expression such as, but not limited to music, poetry or a combination;
- Identify regional issues that can be addressed through culture;
- Identify activities that foster social cohesion, inclusion and reconciliation.

Aleph Strategies conducted a range of meetings and interviews in each location. Meetings and interviews were conducted face to face for the most part, although a small number were also conducted via video-conference or telephone where physical meetings were not possible. In total Aleph engaged with 115 culture sector actors across a range of organisations. A breakdown of the sample is provided in the table below, showing the distribution of interviewees by organisation type and location.

Table 1: Sample Sizes by Location and Type

Interviews by Stakeholder Type	
SDC	7
Government	17
Donor	3
INGO	18
LNGO	30
Local Actors	30
Media	4
Other	6
TOTAL	115

Interviews by Location	
Nairobi	17
Mogadishu	20
Beledweyne	4
Garowe	17
Somaliland	26
Jigjiga	12
Addis Ababa	10
Dire Dawa	6
Harar	3
TOTAL	115

In parallel to the field missions, Aleph conducted a review of national policy frameworks in each of the fieldwork locations to understand the political framework in which national cultural institutions are established.

Caveat: this was not intended as a comprehensive mapping exercise of Somali culture; indeed, this would be an undertaking of a vast scale. We acknowledge that the views and insights presented here only represent a snapshot of the diverse spectrum of cultural actors across the region.



Participant in a body painting workshop, Mogadishu. Photo courtesy CISP

3. OVERVIEW OF THE SOMALI CULTURAL SECTOR

3.1. General Observations

It is difficult to make generalisations about the ‘culture sector’ in the Somali areas of the Horn of Africa. Each country faces its own unique set of circumstances and needs. Nevertheless, to varying degrees within each country, a number of broad observations can be made.

In general, *Somali culture is vibrant and has an ‘up and coming’ feel to it* that, despite conservative religious opposition, feels unstoppable. Supporting cultural activities can play an important role in strengthening social cohesion, fuelling economic growth, and, perhaps most importantly of all, giving people a sense of pleasure, enjoyment and intellectual stimulation. Like anywhere in the world, cultural self-expression is an integral part of how Somalis see themselves and of how the rest of the world sees Somalis. As one informant put it, external recognition of Somali culture will help to promote a more confident self-image in a region that has been beset by conflict and violence for decades.

However, *the cultural sector is highly fragmented, with many local groups acting independently*, and in isolation, often without knowledge of each other. This is largely a function of weak institutional and physical infrastructure to support artists and creatives. Government action to support the culture sector in the Somali areas of the Horn of Africa is weak. And, while social media certainly plays a role in promoting and connecting cultural actors, there is not the same sense of a cultural community or ‘sector’ as might be found in other countries where there exists a comparatively greater range of physical locations for cultural actors to congregate (galleries, schools, museums, public meeting spaces, etc.), and a greater number of institutions to support cultural actors (funding bodies, artists collectives, arts councils etc.).

Funding access to the culture sector, particularly in Somalia is often restricted by ‘gatekeepers’. Many of the stakeholders interviewed for this research highlighted the danger of Somali government officials who

position themselves in such a manner as to control external access to a field. This is particularly a problem when dealing with authorities. It can also be the case with ‘donor darling’ non-governmental organisations who tend to attract the majority of funds from external actors (though there are some advantages to working with these latter groups as illustrated later in the report).

There is great suspicion towards government in the culture sector. In Somalia and Somaliland interviewees expressed concern about government involvement in the cultural sector, as there is a legacy of using art for propaganda purposes. Key informants from all Somali regions reported that criticism of the authorities will cause cultural performers and journalists to be harassed, regardless of existing legal safeguards. In this sense there is limited freedom of expression. Suspicion towards the government is deepened by a perception that commercial operating licenses are often granted on the basis of personal connection or political gain, leading to monopolies of local organisations such as printing houses and communication agencies. This creates a highly restrictive cultural economy. In Kenya and Ethiopia, the government is viewed differently. While suspicions of corruption persist, interviewees report that the governments here are useful development partners, though this varies significantly from one local authority to the next.

Cultural programming in Somalia has historically been employed as a ‘stabilisation’ tool. Since the early 2010s the international community has been using access to culture as a ‘stabilisation’ benefit: for populations previously (or still partially) under Al Shabaab control, access to culture (and the supposed freedoms of expression this entails) is brandished as an attractive benefit of coming under federal government rule. There *is* a risk, therefore, that artists could be seen as instruments of government messaging, or worse, that they are seen as proponents of western cultural values, especially if their work has an overtly P/CVE dimension. Artists, fortunately, seem capable of dealing with these contradictory pressures and are rarely targeted by local conservative groups or Al Shabaab. Conservative attitudes are certainly dominant but Somali artists seem adept at navigating this complex environment. However, Al Shabaab is a real threat, and in a

place like Beled Weyne, surrounded and penetrated by the militant group, no public cultural activity seems possible. The same is undoubtedly true of other towns surrounded by Al Shabaab and areas under their control.

There is a perception among many cultural actors, particularly the older generations, ***that traditional Somali heritage is gradually being lost***. Several elderly (and some young) informants observed that there is no cultural memory among the youth. The older generation complains that young people are turning their backs on their rich Somali heritage, as they cast their eyes towards online influencers and contemporary cultural trends. This is a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon, and one that we have observed in numerous development contexts around the world.³ What can be said with certainty is that there is a ***lack of art education*** across the Somali areas of the Horn of Africa at primary, secondary or tertiary levels (with the possible exception of some private schools).

There is little research conducted or published on traditional Somali cultural heritage. While there is great interest in cultural research among those we interviewed, there are few opportunities to pursue research interests due to limited funding and insecurity. Most research is performed and published privately by elderly Somali scholars. Foreign researchers generally cannot access fieldwork locations. Somali universities hardly engage in academic research, and offer few culture-related subjects, because few students are willing to pay for courses that have no immediate economic or commercial value, as university informants in Mogadishu and Puntland explained. In the Ethiopian Somali Region the situation is markedly better, with Jigjiga University actively pursuing a socio-cultural research agenda. The most popular research topic, we found, is Somali language and linguistics, followed by research into cultural practices, with a focus on preserving the diversity of cultural expressions that seems to be quickly disappearing.

Underlying both subjects is an enquiry into the roots of Somali identity which also preoccupies some young Somalis.

Paradoxically, traditional Somali culture itself often instils disregard for the physical elements of traditional Somali cultural heritage. Artists that use their hands to create (e.g. painters and sculptors) are generally held in the same low regard as craftspeople – a legacy of the region’s nomadic culture. The practice of creating objects is historically (and controversially) related to the *Gabooye* – minorities such as the *Madhiban*, *Tumal* and *Yibir* with a lower caste-like status– especially in Puntland and Somaliland.⁴ Likewise, there is little market demand for traditional handcrafts or physical art forms in Somalia or internationally. Informants noted that Somalis generally prefer to buy new Chinese items than restore their grandparents’ antiques. The above is true especially for the predominantly pastoralist North (from Galmudug northwards) and among the youth. In Mogadishu and the South, by contrast, the ‘old’ and visual artists are held in comparatively higher esteem, and the elderly recall how the Barre regime gave artists a privileged status.

Women are highly active in the culture sector across the region. Gender does not seem to be a major barrier to participation in cultural life per se, but it remains a barrier to participation in public life in general, especially in the current conservative climate. Cultural programming is therefore a good entry point for supporting women both in terms of social and economic inclusion.

³ Rider, J., Skillings, D., and De Taisne, F. (2020): “The Role of Culture in Post-Emergency Reconstruction. Case Studies from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Indonesia” in *Asian Affairs*, 51:3, pp 621-641. ([Link](#))

⁴ Several informants believe that artists had a higher status in pre-Islamic societies. They pointed out that Islamization went hand in hand with the conquest by Northern clans of the rest of Somalia and led to artists and craftsmen being relegated to minority status – e.g. intermarriage with non-minority clans is not allowed.

3.2. Sectoral dynamics

Poetry is not always the benign pastime Westerners may imagine it to be; in the beginning of the civil war (1991-93) some poets and singers fanned the flames of clan conflict. Warmongering poetry has strong roots in Somali history; Sayyid Hassan, the leader of the Dervish revolt (1899-1920), which was primarily an internecine conflict, is considered one of the main national poets.⁵ Poetry and the performing arts are still often used as forms of political and social satire, pillorying corruption, injustice and inequality. One of the reasons why poetry and comedy are so appreciated among Somalis is because they address the gap left by a non-existent public debate.

There is a nascent **literature** scene in the region. It came as somewhat of a surprise that so many informants mentioned they were writing, or planning to write, fiction. Despite the international fame of Nuruddin Farah and the up-and-coming Nadifa Mohamed, fiction writing has not been a prominent feature of the Somali literary tradition (although writers such as Farah Awl and Maxamed Daahir Afrax were well-known in the Barre era). This seems to be changing. The popularity of book fairs and the ease with which writings can be disseminated online may contribute to this trend. Book publishing however seems only an option for the richest authors.

Drama and comedy are popular among Somalis. Most informants see this as a consequence of the strong oral culture, while the social media multiplier effect encourages youth who hope to become ‘social influencers’. Stand-up comedy and the mix of performative arts displayed during ‘Got Talent’ TV shows are particularly popular today. Informants in almost every location we visited – and North East Kenya most of all – hoped to organise a ‘Mandera/Mogadishu/Kismayo/Garowe/Hargeisa/etc. Got Talent’ show. Somali theatre is mostly of the socially engaged kind. It is not widely practiced but there were groups operating in all regions we visited, often working on donor-driven programmes but sometimes autonomously; audiences generally welcome theatre performances with enthusiasm.

⁵ See Lidwien Kapteijns ‘Clan Cleansing in Somalia’ where she quotes from the poetry of the early 1990s, turning communities against each other. As to the Dervish leader, the scholar

Traditional Somali music is still going strong, but informants everywhere mentioned that very little skills transfer was happening and there are no music schools; so traditional music performers are generally over 50 and studied music and started performing during Siad Barre’s time. According to informants, the best musicians are to be found in Somaliland, due, they said to a more peaceful environment for the last three decades and a stronger tradition of music. Famous musicians have an itinerant lifestyle, traveling between their residences abroad, Kenya, Ethiopia and Somalia. Sponsors (often politicians or businessmen) are willing to pay many thousands of dollars, sometimes tens of thousands, for a performance by a famous musician.



Theatre of the Oppressed rehearsal in Mogadishu. Photo courtesy CISP

David Laitin mentions the “derisive clan sentiments pervading the verses of the doyen of Somali invective, the Sayyid Maxamad Cabdille Xasan”.

Traditional dance often accompanies musical performances. There is no contemporary dance, although dance styles are evolving (for an overview of Somali dances see [here](#)). The Addis-based ‘Destino Dance Company’ travelled to the Somali Region of Ethiopia to give a workshop and integrate elements of Somali dance in their acclaimed contemporary dance productions⁶. There are many different traditional dance forms across the region. We encountered members of dance groups in Jigjiga, Garowe and Hargeisa – in the capital of Somaliland there are even several professional dance ensembles – able to earn a livelihood from their art. In these regions the practice of dance is widespread. While traditional dancing is popular in the rest of Somalia and in North East Kenya it is frowned upon by Al Shabaab or other conservative religious forces. In general, the growing influence of Salafi Islam throughout the lowlands of the Horn of Africa is limiting music and dance performances.

The **Somali disco and funk scene** seems diminished since the vibrant decades of the 70s and 80s (as captured on the record [Mogadisco](#)), although it lives on in the performances of the UK-based Dur-Dur band.

Somali pop music today is mostly influenced by the Ethiopian Somali ‘Dhaanto’ style, which rode to success during Abdi Iley’s presidency of the Somali region thanks in part to his backing. Although based on traditional Somali music and singing, Dhaanto incorporates modern sounds (see [here](#) for an example). Other contemporary music influences heard widely are afro-beat, rap, reggae and hip-hop. A Nairobi-based Somali hip-hop group called ‘Waayaha Cusub’ rose to prominence in the early 2010s, especially after organizing and starring in Mogadishu’s first music festival, in 2013. But after producing an [anti-Al Shabaab song](#) (as part of a US-funded P/CVE programme) most group members obtained asylum abroad, where they continue to produce music and perform⁷.

At the time of conducting fieldwork, the new rage was *Sharma Boy*. Informants were surprised by his meteoric rise (he has more followers than

President Farmajo on social media) and took pride in the fact that, although they think his musical skills may be unimpressive, at least his music and videos are produced in Mogadishu (see [here](#) for a sample). Sharma Boy’s lyrics, which are critical of current society and politics, stir many young people. A song about youth unemployment prompted the Minister of Education Godah Barre to meet him. But his music is also appreciated because it provides a Somali response to the highly popular Afro-Beat style that dominates most continental entertainment channels. This is fusion rather than evolution. An example from neighbouring Ethiopia is Jano Band; although it is a group of Addis-based, non-Somali musicians, they have included some songs sung in Somali in their repertoire ([Hamza](#)).

The current capital of **Somali music production** is Hargeisa, followed closely by Jigjiga. In the rest of Somalia contemporary music production is close to zero, including in Nairobi. The production quality of music audio and video from Jigjiga and Hargeisa is generally poor. Only Somali music produced abroad (such as that of the Ethiopian Somali [Aar Maanta](#)) is of better quality. There is a clear case for improving the quality of Somali music production; audio first, but also video. Recordings exist of collaborations between Somali, Afar and other Ethiopian musicians⁸, which could be released by a World Music label to sensitise international audiences to the potential of contemporary Somali music.

⁶ This was partially funded by SDC Ethiopia

⁷ As they were touring in Europe the Kenyan government revoked their visas, not allowing them to return to Kenya, according to the band’s Wikipedia page.

⁸ Interview with Girum, director of the Addis Jazz School, who participated in the recordings and believes they were of significant artistic quality



Painting by Hamad Arts (Hargeisa) describing the horrors of 'tahriib', illegal emigration

Graphic and visual arts are generally not highly regarded in Somali culture according to key informants interviewed during the fieldwork. Nevertheless, several informants, especially those working in media, expressed that there was a need and a market for better commercial photography – from photo-reporting to advertising. We heard of several young female Somali photographers, who face many obstacles to their work but are nevertheless successful. The same is true for digital graphic arts – a commercial market seems to be there but it has somehow not yet connected with the practitioners. Painters and graphic artists derive most of their income from painting shop facades and public buildings, or the rare portrait order placed by businesspeople or officials. Painting is also used, sometimes, by NGOs for therapeutic objectives. There is little art painting, and most of it is by diaspora returnees. What is highly popular, however, are satirical news cartoons, mostly published and distributed on social media.

Handicrafts are slowly being rescued from oblivion by a few organisations and individuals intent on safeguarding them. Museums such as the Wajir Museum in Kenya or the Saryan Museum in Hargeisa vaunt the nomadic

production of tapestries, jugs and utensils. National museums currently being established in Mogadishu and Hargeisa will certainly focus their collections on such ethnographic objects. Vocational training programmes offer opportunities for embroidery and other textile works and could be employed to improve woodworking, leathercraft, tinnery and other crafts. Consumer demand for handicrafts, however, is muted, and handicraft items command low market value. The return of diaspora Somalis, some of whom become home designers, and a resurgence in Somali pride is however slowly changing these attitudes towards craftsmanship. Market development depends on further penetrating the upper reaches of the domestic market – for example, making home decoration with Somali traditional objects fashionable – and on a solid programme of skills transfers, from the few elderly who still practice these crafts to young people seeking employment.

The Somali region's **archaeology** is poorly researched and heavily underfunded. While Somali culture has been traditionally nomadic, the landscape is rich with monuments and archaeological sites, most of which remain undiscovered, or only hinted at by visible clues. Dr. Sada Mire is pioneering research into Somali archaeology, leading perhaps the only local team to excavate and explore built heritage in the region. However, as told by interviewees for this study, interest in the distant past is muted. Looting from archaeological sites in Somaliland demonstrates some demand for antiquities on the international market but is also symptomatic of opportunistic income generation. The sale of artefacts by government officials entrusted to protect them is not unheard of. Awareness-raising among local communities about the value of their heritage is essential.

Some **conservation** work is underway, though the need far outstrips the availability of funding or the availability of trained personnel to conduct such work. There are stunning architectural ensembles like the Mogadishu seafront, the old town of Marka, the Ottoman town of Berbera and the complex of forts and other early 20th century structures in Taleex; there are also isolated forts, aqueducts, bridges, old cisterns and wells and the like dotted around the Somali countryside. All these urgently need conservation, research and restoration but informants bemoaned that

nothing is done to preserve them. The Hargeysa Cultural Centre has embarked on a preservation drive around the ancient rock-art site of Laas Geel which includes training government officials. Another project funded by the EU, a conservation effort in Mogadishu and Berbera, is still in the starting blocks. Berbera has made some efforts to preserve some of its older buildings, and Puntland authorities seemed eager to start conservation work, for example in the town of Eyl which has an impressive 19th century fort and touristic potential.

Radio is a popular means of broadcast in South Central Somalia and in Kenya; many new radio stations are being set up throughout South and Central Somalia as part of an anti-AS strategy and they either produce or are eager to broadcast cultural content. In general radio (FM, AM and SW) is highly regulated in Somalia; in Somaliland there is only one government transmitter: Radio Hargeisa. In Puntland and the Ethiopian Somali and Oromiyya region private FM stations exist, but they seem to be tightly controlled by government, which is not an issue for the dissemination of traditional and 'highbrow' culture but limits their attractiveness for and impact upon the youth.

As to **television**, key informants report that it is gaining in popularity vis-à-vis radio in urban areas but it is even under tighter government control and is mostly used to disseminate government public messaging.

Social media is the main platform for dissemination of arts and culture. Websites remain popular but they mainly distribute their content through social media. In Somaliland and Puntland Facebook seems particularly popular, in Mogadishu Twitter. Tiktok is also extremely popular. WhatsApp is the primary method of group communication and is often mentioned as reinforcing clan politics: each lineage has its WhatsApp group resulting in different media feeds, often within the same family as women remain connected to their father's lineage. Social media thus works both to reinforce divisions and to connect to the rest of the world.

Income generation through culture remains highly problematic. Musicians, dancers and poets can earn substantial income at events such as weddings, national days and other celebrations. Hundreds of dollars are a minimum

fee for most artists, tens of thousands of dollars for an event are not rare. Visual artists, by contrast, earn a meagre income with photography, painting and graphic work for advertisement and more rarely home decoration. A professional artist from the diaspora noted that asking \$200 for a large painting in Hargeisa provoked derision among potential buyers, who found that \$50 was enough for a canvas. In general, as in many other places in the world, the idea of pursuing a career in the arts is dismissed by most Somalis, who see it as not more than a hobby.

Commercial sponsoring is still rare. It happens mostly in Hargeisa and Nairobi, and the main sponsors are telecoms and remittances companies. The Corporate Social Responsibility Manager of a local bank, perhaps the prime commercial sponsor in the Somali region, explained that they did not plan to decentralise commercial sponsoring anytime soon, afraid that branch offices would make the wrong choices and generate conflict. This may explain why local groups cannot access commercial funding in Garowe, where very few private businesses have their headquarters (Puntland's business capitals are Bosaso and Galkayo). In Mogadishu there may be opportunities for commercial sponsorship given the number of businesses headquartered here, but we did not encounter any examples during our fieldwork. In Nairobi commercial sponsoring is growing; Dahabshiil was mentioned as a likely sponsor for cultural events by several informants.

The **diaspora** plays multiple roles. We found little evidence of diaspora funding for the culture sector in Somalia. According to interviewees, the diaspora tends to invest mainly in business and politics. When asked about funding, almost none of the informants mentioned diaspora support. But Somalis in the diaspora played an important role in keeping Somali arts alive after the 1991 collapse of the state; whether informally, at friends' gatherings, or through the establishment of arts and culture initiatives abroad (for example Kayd in London - [link](#)). The success of prominent Somalis abroad such as the rapper K'naan, the model and philanthropist Iman Bowie, the painter Abdi Farah or the novelist Nuruddin Farah however hardly seems to have an echo in the Horn of Africa. Some Somali artists return to Somalia from exile to give performances, provide training, or do artistic research. See for example the Anarchist Citizenship project ([link](#))

engaging Somali art professionals in the Netherlands with Somaliland. Additionally, foreign-raised Somalis with a background or an interest in the arts return to Somalia, and either produce contemporary Somali artforms, or enjoy and encourage Somali art manifestations. Somali cultural initiatives in the diaspora may provide opportunities for Somali artists abroad – for example, the Somali Museum of Minnesota ([link](#)). Finally, the remittances of the diaspora, of which the lion’s share is spent on consumption, allow ordinary Somalis to also enjoy art.

3.3. The Scope for a Regional Cultural Programme

Coordination with National Policy Frameworks

In scoping opportunities for a regional cultural strategy, Aleph reviewed relevant national policy frameworks to identify points of commonality.⁹ There are three main themes that stand out in the various national cultural development policy frameworks of Somalia, Kenya and Ethiopia: i) youths, ii) gender and iii) employment. Cultural programmes that create income for vulnerable or marginalised groups, and especially young people, are likely to gain good traction with national governments in the region. Orientating towards international markets is conceivable - though a more realistic goal may be to focus on domestic markets – providing goods and services that meet local needs. Business skills training for women and youths is an obvious example of the type of programming that would support this work.

Any donor that wishes to engage in a regional cultural programme – particularly one that celebrates a shared Somali culture, will need to tread carefully and sensitively as this could run against the grain of national culture agenda in Kenya and Ethiopia. Cultural policies in Kenya and Ethiopia are preoccupied with strengthening *national* rather than *regional* identity. Though often marginalised, Somali speaking communities are considered

⁹ We do not provide a detailed analysis of culture policy per se in each of the Somali areas of the Horn of Africa countries, as this was beyond the scope of the exercise. Suffice it to say, there is significant room for legislative reform to improve the status, recognition, and protection and conservation policies of culture within each location. As this work typically

part of the national fabric in each country. Cultural policies in both Kenya and Ethiopia speak of the importance of cohesion. For example, Article 1.5 of the Kenya *National Policy of Culture and Heritage* states: *Culture diversity acknowledges the fact that each culture is distinct and has its own value to the community embracing it as well as to other communities interacting with it. Making cultural diversity a recognizable fact and working towards preserving it is a bold statement of the Government that the richness of our diversity does not negate national cohesion.*¹⁰

As noted below, the Ethiopian government also supports the development of regional cultures. Donors could prevail themselves of such language to defend cultural support programmes to Somalis and neighbouring population groups. But a regional cross-border cultural programme will run afoul in Ethiopia and Kenya of official attempts to integrate ‘their’ Somali culture into a highland-dominated cultural nationalism. In our view, there is therefore greater scope for regional programming starting at a grass-roots level, particularly in the near term.

People-to-People cultural development

The Somali regions of the Horn of Africa are clearly united by language and many cultural elements, such as poetry, (pride in) pastoral origins, cross-border migration and wide dissemination of the most important clans; for example the Darood, Hawiye and Dir/Isaaq clan families are each present in Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya. But the past decades of conflict and the divergent orientations of cultural policies in the countries composing the region have driven these regions apart and made any attempt to address the region as one cultural whole a complicated venture.

The ‘Greater Somalia’ (*Somaliweyn*) agenda of the first post-colonial governments in Mogadishu led to a long conflict with Kenya (from 1963 to

falls within the mandate of UNESCO, we avoid recommendations to this effect within our report.

¹⁰ Office of the Vice-President Ministry of State for National Heritage and Culture (2009), p.6

the mid-1980s) and the Ogaden war with Ethiopia (1977-78). Somali secessionism in Ethiopia continued in the 1990s and 2000s, leading to the brutal suppression of the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) until the movement was rehabilitated by Prime Minister Abiy in 2018. In Kenya there are no more secessionist Somali movements but there are concerns that the Somalis will side with the Muslim coast in its long conflict with the inland ('upcountry') tribes, and of course fear of terrorist attacks. This incentivises the national governments of both countries to try to integrate Somali communities into a national political culture that is based neither on ethnicity nor on religion, as expressed in the policy documents analysed above.¹¹

In Somaliland a national 'Somaliland' culture has emerged that is based on adherence to national symbols (the flag, the anthem) and the rejection of reunification with federal Somalia. Artists who show acceptance of federal Somalia by performing in Mogadishu or giving interviews on federal media can be persecuted by Somaliland's authorities, although some pragmatism prevails: high-profile people are not treated in the same way as young and lesser-known ones. Similarly, artists that argue for the independence of Somaliland are not treated kindly by Puntland and federal authorities, although Somalilanders in general are welcome, especially in Mogadishu. Within Federal Somalia the conflict between the central government and the regional states may encourage the emergence of local cultural identities; to an extent this has happened already in Puntland. But creating a 'Jubaland', 'Galmudug' or 'Rahanweyn' identity on a cultural basis does not seem to be a priority for any of the regional governments, for the time being.

At the popular (i.e. non-political) level there is much less animosity, and people generally accept each other regardless of origin. Informants in Mogadishu repeated the view that Somaliland and Puntland, because of their peace and higher levels of education, are better places for the development of culture than South and Central Somalia. Artists in these

regions, vice versa, long to go to Mogadishu to connect to wider audiences and increase their opportunities. At the popular level, the division into majority vs minority clans still plays a role, but less so in the cultural sector than elsewhere in society. Kenyan Somalis often enjoy a higher status as they are generally better educated and speak more English, allowing them to get better jobs in Somalia; but they are often gently derided by other Somalis because of their lack of linguistic and cultural Somali knowledge.¹² Ethiopian Somalis are rarely seen outside of Ethiopia but seem to be equally welcome.

As a result of these dynamics, a region-wide programme has more chances of success as a 'bottom-up' venture, connecting Somali artists and audiences across borders, than in a 'top-down' approach trying to bring together authorities in the different regions of the Horn of Africa in a common programme.

3.4. The role of international organisations

Here we include two groups: bilateral and multilateral *donors*, and international *implementing agencies*.

Donors

There are few donors funding culture in Somalia other than SDC and the EU. In general, there is little interest in culture among donor organisations because it is seen as a luxury compared to other requirements of the Somali people. This is a misconception that must be addressed through advocacy. In addition, the Somali cultural sector lacks the capacity to interact with donors, in part because donors are difficult to access, and because funding instruments tend to become ever more complex, requiring the kind of superior administrative capacity which Somali civil society sorely lacks. Donor contracts become longer and legally more complex with each passing year and the 'box-ticking' approach to project design and implementation

¹¹ This leaves a role for language, which is not targeted today, even though in the past linguistic assimilation (to English/Swahili and Amhara) led to the loss of linguistic skills.

¹² They are jokingly referred to as '*sijui*', which means "I don't know" in Swahili.

is often more in tune with headquarters' requirements than local realities. Finally, there is a growing suspicion of NGOs and development funding in general, among both local authorities and populations. All this discourages potential applicants. However, Somali cultural actors may not realise that there are opportunities to engage with decision-makers and budget-holders who have a *personal* interest in culture and may go out of their way to make their organisation support artistic expression and cultural development. In our fieldwork we met several such individuals. There is thus a dearth of communication channels between cultural producers and donors, and this can be addressed by creating them.

European Union

The EU provides support to Somali culture through two channels: direct funding from the European Commission (EC), and through the EU Delegation in Somalia.

The main objective of EU development cooperation with Somalia is “to rebuild the state, improve security and stability and reduce poverty”.¹³ The EU aligns itself closely with the Somali National Development Plan 2017-2020. The EU development budget amounts to about 160 million €/year for these objectives¹⁴, plus an equivalent amount in humanitarian spending and an unspecified amount of security expenses (maritime security & training missions). The EU also contributes to the World Bank-managed Multi-Partner Trust Fund, to the UN system, to UNOCHA's yearly appeals, and foots the bill of the AMISOM peacekeeping force to the tune of nearly a billion €/year. The EU is thus by far the largest donor in Somalia.

The EU delegation, like the Somali federal government, bases its strategy for culture on the UNESCO report of 2013 “[Scoping Study on the Culture Sector in Somalia](#)”. The 2018 [EU Somalia development strategy](#) considers culture a ‘fundamental pillar’ for reconstituting the Somali social fabric. Stating that the Somali cultural memory is lost, that the youth need culture to form a new national identity, that the cultural sector is destroyed and civil society lacks capacity, the EU recommends building the capacity of the

government and that of ‘non state actors.’ As the EU's main objective is to build the Somali federal state, it cannot interact constructively with Somaliland; but the EU does fund the Hargeysa Cultural Center, the Masaf Art Foundation and other civil society groups in Somaliland. Through a project focusing on Laas Geel rock art site, the Hargeysa Cultural Centre is building the capacity of Somaliland government agents with EU funding.

There are clearly chances to secure funding for Somali artists with the EU delegation. The EU recently commissioned the young artist ‘Nujuum’ to paint a mural in the EU base and supported a poetry competition in Kismayo. Beneficiaries of the EU delegation office's small grants have included individual artists, NGOs, cultural organisations, and public institutions such as the Somali Academy for Sciences and Arts (SOMASA). The European Commission also funds activities in Somalia directly (from Brussels); for example, the CISP grant ‘ArtXChange’ used for capacity building and psychosocial work in the cultural sector (to which SDC also contributed) came from the Commission.

United Nations

The United Nations is present in Somalia through many agencies. Broadly speaking there are three types of UN agencies: political (UNSOM), humanitarian (UNOCHA, WFP, UNHCR) and development (UNDP, UNICEF, WHO, FAO, UNHABITAT, UNESCO).

Culture is most specifically the remit of UNESCO (described separately below), but this agency has limited regional presence, and no physical presence in Somalia. Of the considerable funds distributed by the UN in Somalia, only a small amount is allocated for cultural programming. This may take the shape of messaging for humanitarian or development goals (as when a local NGO contracts local artist to write and perform a song about how to prevent the spread of Covid-19). Of the few instances of UN-funded cultural projects, most belong to the ‘stabilisation’ category.

¹³ EU [website](#) accessed on November 2, 2020.

¹⁴ Three year average, 2017-2019. Somali Ministry of Planning, Investment and Economic Development: “Aid Flows in Somalia” 2019, p. 10.

For example, in 2014 the UN contracted the consultancy firm, Albany Associates, to set up an 'Information Support Team' to assist the government and AMISOM in their communications endeavours in areas recently retaken from Al Shabaab. Some cultural events were funded through this mechanism, including the first Somali Cultural Festival (2014). Another example: until 2020 the Somali Stabilization Initiative, that focuses on the reintegration of Al Shabaab supporters in Jubaland and the South West State, used art therapy as one of its tools. This US-funded programme was managed by IOM, a UN-agency.

Another funding instrument of the UN is the Peace Building Fund (PBF) which is used for social reconciliation, community strengthening and peacebuilding projects. In the 192-page evaluation report of December 2019, the word culture is only mentioned once, as part of a project led by IOM and UN Habitat and implemented by the federal member state governments in South West State and Jubaland, to support drought-affected populations.

Like the EU, the United Nations cannot deal with the Somaliland government as that of an independent state, but it considers it a regional government that must be approached through the federal government, which the Somaliland government refuses. This has led Somaliland to currently suspend its relations with the UN. But in practice UN agencies and most donors deal with local authorities and government agencies in Somaliland either directly or through the Somaliland Development Fund.

Because of these self-imposed limitations, the UN has very little impact on the Somali cultural sector and is generally viewed neutrally or negatively by Somali cultural practitioners. See also UNESCO, below.

Other Donors

The Netherlands Embassy in Kenya expressed interest in collaborating on a multi-year strategic development programme. The Netherlands Embassy has small-scale funding available; other embassies, European or other, might similarly have such flexible funding instruments, but these are opportunities best pursued through personal/professional connections, rather than formal channels. The Heinrich Böll Stiftung has been cited as a

supporter of the Somali cultural week, but no other support to Somali culture or society can be found on the website of their Kenyan office, and it is unclear whether they remain active in the region. Certainly, none of the stakeholders interviewed in the fieldwork mentioned the Heinrich Böll Stiftung when discussing on-going cultural programmes in the area.

In Ethiopia there may be opportunities to collaborate with donors with similar interests, such as SIDA (which funds Selam Ethiopia) and the British Council (which funds Talent Youth Association).

Implementing Agencies

Aleph interviewed informants working for INGO and multilateral organisations currently working in the culture sector in the region. While this is not a comprehensive list of every organisation working in this space, it provides a near-exhaustive description of the most prominent and visible organisations.

UNESCO

UNESCO has focused on supporting the federal government to join international regulatory regimes such as the UN conventions on the preservation of cultural heritage ([link](#)), and adopt corresponding national legislation. Furthermore, UNESCO has provided small-scale support to the Somali Academy of Sciences and Arts (SOMASA) for a heritage mapping exercise in 2018. UNESCO has also tried to establish a much-needed coordination platform for the culture sector (the *Friends of Somalia*), although this has been beset by sensitivities about political representation from Somalia, Somaliland and Puntland, and difficulties in finding a suitable, neutral location for meetings.

UNESCO has partnered with smaller cultural organisations, for example with Awjama during the Somali Heritage Week in Nairobi, and with CISP on capacity building of SOMASA; it has explored partnering with the Mogadishu Book Fair, the National Film Agency and the Mogadishu municipality (Benadir Regional Administration) to have Mogadishu apply for the *Creative Cities* status. UNESCO has also delivered a project in Somalia

through the Heritage Emergency Fund (HEF), which funded management and administrative support to the newly rehabilitated National Museum of Mogadishu ([link](#)). As to Somaliland and Puntland, UNESCO cannot engage local authorities directly as it must pass through the national commission in Mogadishu.

The difficult working relationship with the Somali authorities has resulted in a lack of UNESCO focal point for Somalia: the previous one was never replaced. The person dealing with Somalia now covers 13 countries as 'Regional Advisor for Culture at UNESCO Regional Office for Eastern Africa'.

[Comitato Internazionale per lo Sviluppo dei Popoli, CISP](#)

CISP ([link](#)) is an Italian organisation based in Nairobi that has run cultural programmes in Mogadishu and Galkayo. Its programme *Arts for Social Change* supports youth, women, IDPs and minority groups through social and cultural activities. Their programmes seem to have had markedly more impact when supporting activities of the informal cultural sector such as street theatre and public arts exhibition than those of the formal sector. For



'Photovoice' exhibition on Lido Beach, Mogadishu. Photo courtesy CISP

example, the production of an extracurricular arts education programme for primary schools was ultimately not adopted by the Ministry of Education. Another project run by CISP, *ArtXChange*, funded by the European Commission, fosters collaborative relationships between artists in Somalia and Kenya. CISP seeks to foster creative entrepreneurship. See below under Mogadishu for examples of some of their successful projects.

[Steve Turner/Bar Kulan Trust](#)

Steve Turner, active in Somali media development since 2010, was often mentioned by our informants. He is founder and director of the Bar Kulan Trust. His main activity is radio development, ranging from setting up local stations to helping write national legislative frameworks. In 2014 he initiated the *Somali Cultural Festival in Mogadishu*. Despite a successful event acclaimed by participants and observers alike, the festival was not repeated for lack of funding and initiative. A recent activity was the production of a *picture and narrative book about Marka* ([link](#)), upon the initiative of the local community; 200 copies were printed and distributed locally.

[Somali Arts and Culture Network, SOMAAC](#)

Steve Turner has partnered with Abdisalam Aato (see below, Mogadishu) and a few other allies to set up a Somali Arts and Culture Network (SOMAAC). This should consist of local or sectoral membership-based groups (for example cultural producers in Kismayo or Somali photographers) who use the network for self-help and information exchange in the first instance. SOMAAC is to be led by a central network of senior Somali cultural figures. This committee would then be supported by an office set up under the Bar Kulan Trust, which can manage grants from the international community for artists and producers, especially collaborative ventures. The purpose is to build the cultural rather than the administrative capacity of local organisations and strengthen ties between them instead of fostering competition for grants. A first plan is to organise photojournalism courses after establishing a network of photographers.

[Rift Valley Institute, RVI](#)

The Rift Valley Institute ([link](#)) is a research organisation, but it touches the field of culture in many ways. For one, its director believes that culture is at

the heart of development. He sees RVI's task as 'generating, preserving and disseminating knowledge', which is fundamentally a cultural activity, and therefore welcomes a multi-year strategic approach.

RVI has a close working relationship with the Hargeysa Cultural Centre, which it helped co-establish with EU funding in 2014; it funds research activities through several channels in Hargeisa. This includes **oral history** research, conducted by RVI in several East African countries and in Puntland. Several informants mentioned oral history as essential for the preservation of historical and cultural knowledge; it also builds bridges and supports knowledge transfer between young researchers and elderly interviewees.

RVI is engaged in a more general effort to **improve research capabilities** in local institutes of higher learning. Partners in Somalia during a 2015-2018 programme funded by the UK Government were the Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies at Hargeisa University and the Puntland State University in Garowe. One of the results of this partnership, still ongoing, is the publication of the Somaliland Peace and Development Journal ([link](#)) which publishes scholarship from all RVI partners in East Africa.

Horn Heritage

A leading organisation in the fledgling field of Somali archaeology is Horn Heritage ([link](#)), led by Dr. Sada Mire. She has acquired international recognition as a speaker and writer on cultural heritage preservation. She has leveraged her popularity, also in the Netherlands where she is now based at the University of Leiden, to set up cultural preservation activities in the Horn. Her organisation has embarked upon a vast digitisation project of Somali cultural heritage. Dr. Mire has undertaken several research activities in Somaliland, publishing frequently, and is currently engaged in an archaeological research and cultural conservation project in Aw Barkhadle, north of Hargeisa. Besides Somaliland, her foundation is active in the Somali Region of Ethiopia, where it has engaged alongside local authorities in the preservation of the site of Darbi Balanbaale, and it aspires to work also in Kenya and federal Somalia.

Interpeace, Life and Peace Institute and other mediation organisations

Other organisations that we encountered in Somalia and North East Kenya were Interpeace and the Life and Peace Institute, both of whom engage mostly in community reconciliation and peace-building efforts. They sometimes fund cultural events to bring communities together. Other organisations that have funded cultural events as part of peacebuilding programmes are Saferworld or the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue. As their interest in culture is very incidental, the consultants did not seek to meet them, but synergies could be explored between such organisations and other donors as part of a wider social reconciliation scheme through culture.

Alliance Française and other cultural platforms in Nairobi and Addis Ababa

The branches of the Alliance Française, the Goethe Institute and local cultural institutes such as Kuona Trust in Nairobi and Addis Ababa, among others, have hosted Somali artists and cultural groups. The Destino Dance Company and Addis Foto Fest are two such organisations funded by SDC Ethiopia in the past (see Annex 2) which provided a platform with international resonance. Performing in such locations empowers Somali artists and exposes them to the rest of the world, while integrating them into the national cultural fabric.



Destino dance performance (with handicapped people) at Alliance Éthio-Française (AEF) in Addis Ababa, 2018. Photo courtesy AEF

4. CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

The following section describes our encounters with actors of the cultural sector in the locations we visited. Admittedly, it reflects a superficial level of knowledge and understanding of Somali culture and a limited engagement, in terms of time and geographic scope, with our object of enquiry. Moreover, a Somali reader might encounter a certain bias toward particular forms of art, or certain practitioners; we request their indulgence. We would be hesitant to publish our findings here were it not that no similar publication on Somali culture seems to be available in English (and most probably also not in Somali or another language). This survey should thus be taken as a starting point for further research and enquiry, and our hope is that it will soon be made irrelevant by more expert publications.

4.1. Mogadishu

Mogadishu, called ‘Hamar’ by its residents, has a history going back at least one thousand years (the Sultanate of Mogadishu flourished from the 9th to the 13th centuries). The city, which occupies the coterminous Banadir region, counts between 1.5 and 3 million inhabitants.

It was one of the richest trading cities along the Indian Ocean coast until the Portuguese arrived and disrupted trade routes in the 16th century. Its original population belongs to minority clans of mixed ancestry (Arab, Persian, Indian and other African alongside Somali groups) but the city is home to populations with origins all over Somalia, who identify with the city, contributing to its open character. Originally formed around two rival towns of Hamar and Shingani, the city’s current layout is mostly the result of Italian colonial modernist urban planning (until 1941).

From the 1960s to the 1980s the city was known as ‘the Pearl of the Indian Ocean’ and it had a lively contemporary music scene, museums, theatre and arts. It suffered disproportionately during the civil war (1991-93), when many of its inhabitants fled clan cleansing, and the city is still heavily scarred by the conflict. It was divided into clan areas until 2005, when the Islamic Courts Union briefly brought unity and peace, reopening the port which is



Ruins of the Sultan of Zanzibar's palace in Mogadishu, previously ‘Museo de la Garesa’.

the economic lifeline of Mogadishu. After the Ethiopian invasion (2006-2008) the city was occupied by Al Shabaab until 2011, and the insurgent group retains a lot of influence in the city.

Although Mogadishu has its own mayor, and is governed by the Banadir Regional Administration, the federal government also has a disproportionate influence over the city; it is often confusing to understand at what level governance responsibilities lie.

The Federal Government of Somalia

Government capacity is weak but this is not primarily due to a lack of resources or the adverse security situation, but to a fundamental lack of interest in the cultural sector. Local informants report that federal institutions spend most of their time engaged in politicking, with little attention to their actual mandates. Certainly, it was a struggle for the fieldwork team to secure interviews with government representatives on the strength of conducting a survey of culture for a donor. While the fieldwork did coincide with the replacement of the Minister of Information and Culture and the passing of a Public Broadcasting Act, the lack of interest of federal authorities in this study was conspicuous.

There has been little growth in federal government capacity in the field of culture since 2013, when UNESCO conducted a thorough culture sector scoping exercise. According to UNESCO, the findings of this study remain just as relevant today, having been validated several times by Somali government officials over the last two years. Cultural policies are still non-existent, and implementation capacity is extremely low. Implementation capacity is further undermined by the rivalry between the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism and the Ministry of Education, which until recently was called the Ministry of Education and Culture, over which ministry is more eligible to receive donor funding in the field of culture. In general, it seems the former has a more general mandate, and the latter a specific mandate in the field of cultural research and education; but many ambiguities remain and are settled not by closer definitions of institutional mandates, but by the personalities involved.

There is little evidence of any kind of cultural programming such as building cultural institutions and infrastructure, supporting local organisations, contracting local craftsmen or artists, or preserving heritage. The exception is the re-establishment of three key cultural institutions: the National Theatre, the National Library and the National Museum, which were reopened with significant international media attention in July 2020, to celebrate the 60th anniversary of Somalia's independence. When we visited in October, however, the three institutions were closed and none of our informants had visited them. It appears that the museum collection is not on display¹⁵, and staff remains to be trained. The same seems to apply for the National Library. As to the National Theatre, it is only used for government ceremonies. The three buildings are on the edge of the highly protected government area around the Villa Somalia (the presidential palace), which may be one reason they remain closed to the public. Over the past years, the National Theatre has been damaged several times by terrorist attacks because of its proximity to one of the main checkpoints leading into 'Villa Somalia', the seat of government.

In Mogadishu, as in the capitals of the federal member states, cultural programming seems largely reduced to organising events during celebrations. When asked about the most recent performances of arts in Baidoa, for example, it appeared they had taken place twenty months earlier, during the January 2019 inauguration of the new President of South West State. Federal and local authorities can typically count on police and military bands for public events, and in Mogadishu a band called 'Waaberi' operates under the auspices of the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism (they are based at the National Theatre).

The Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism also provides (or sells) licenses for cultural events to take place. Unlicensed events may be disrupted by security forces.



Residents of Hawl Wadaag confronted with a public art exhibition. Photo courtesy CISP

¹⁵ Sada Mire (2019:11) explains that all the museums of Somalia and Somaliland were looted in the past.



Meeting at the Somali Academy for Sciences and Arts; 3 Oct 2020. Photo courtesy Huda Ali

Generally, our informants preferred authorities not to take the lead in building the cultural sector, as they fear governments will only use it for public messaging and stifle rather than encourage creativity. There is a widely shared perception that the current government is increasingly authoritarian. For example, during the consultants' visit to Mogadishu the Public Broadcasting Law was passed; despite its lofty name, it has drawn criticism for reinforcing government control over the broadcasting sector.

This negative perception applies less to smaller government organs and local authorities. The Somali Academy of Sciences and Arts could play a role in the development of national standards, although views of the Academy's capacity were quite critical¹⁶. As to local authorities, they are generally viewed more positively as they are seen to have a bigger stake in local cultural life. The Mogadishu City Council has embarked on an urban

¹⁶ For example, a two-day international seminar on the Somali language was held at SOMASA while the researchers were in Mogadishu; scholars had been flown in from the regions and even abroad. Participants however confided it had been a 'waste of time' as the event had been poorly managed and little substantial discussion took place; instead, participants were treated to speeches of one government official after the other.

conservation scheme with an EU-funded, UN Habitat and World Bank implemented urban regeneration plan, and informants viewed some of the key people working on this project as committed professionals rather than 'politicians'.¹⁷

Policy reform and government capacity building are long-term undertakings. The reasons are lack of institutional capacity, lack of political will, danger of programme funds being trapped by gatekeepers, and insufficiency of cultural budgets to motivate federal authorities' participation in the first place. But cooperation between non-governmental partners and local authorities and government institutes can be encouraged, notably in those places where they seem to be staffed by serious, committed professionals who harbour no political ambitions. It is generally easier for Somali partners to assess and deal with their authorities than for foreigners. Meanwhile, donors can support UNESCO's effort to develop policy frameworks with the government.

Cultural life in Mogadishu

Mogadishu ought to be the cultural capital of the Somali people, but it is not. The city is dynamic and its population a vibrant and mostly youthful mix of Somalis of many origins. However, the cultural scene here is significantly muted compared to Hargeisa and Garowe. This is because Mogadishu is still an embattled city, contested between Al Shabaab and the government and between many different power groups based on clan, religious affiliation or political parties. In these power struggles there is little space for culture. Nevertheless, we found a strong appetite for cultural activities during our interviews with stakeholders in Mogadishu.

¹⁷ The previous mayor of Mogadishu, Engineer Yarisow, assassinated by Al Shabaab, was a popular person in the cultural community; but the new mayor appointed by President Farmaajo, Omar Mohamud Finnish, is not: he's considered a political appointee without a true interest in developing the city. However, his team still consists of capable professionals like Mrs. Hodan Ali (Urban Development, reportedly close to the new mayor) and Mr. Antoobo (Social Affairs).

The cultural scene is fragmented, consisting of small groups and scattered activities. This means there are missed opportunities for sharing access to limited resources such as funding, equipment and physical space and a lack of chances to share creativity and inspiration.

One ‘mover and shaker’ referred to by some informants is Abdisalam Aato. He focuses on production, mentoring and training in the field of video, audio and graphic arts. To this end he established the **Arts and Creativity House for Somalia (ArtCH)**, which participates in creative projects, such as making movies or recording Somali sounds. ArtCH envisages producing a series of ‘vodcasts’ (video podcasts) interviewing cultural leaders such as Ahmed Shemali (the ‘Brad Pitt’ of Somalia who has now become a tailor – he appears briefly in [Mogadisco](#)). Aato has a broad sectoral overview and is primarily interested in assisting creative pursuits by the youth. ArtCH has been funded from his personal revenue for a year. Aato is one of the founders of **SOMAAC** (see above).

Another group of cultural actors has formed around the programme manager for **CISP** (see above) Mohamed Abdulkadir ‘Ato’ who, also from his own revenue, hosts two groups which emerged out of previous CISP activities. One, **Fanwadaag** (‘Art Cooperation’) is a group of photojournalists, graphic artists, video podcasters, storytellers and poets who share common facilities; the other, **Theatre of the Oppressed**, performs in the same space outside office hours. This social, participative street theatre company established in 2018 consists of eight women and four men; they have continued performing without donor funding, although they occasionally get paid for performances. Their focus has been on women’s emancipation and ending female genital mutilation. Besides Mogadishu, they have also performed in Kismayo.

At another level, one may mention the **Somali Arts Foundation** ([website](#)), which opened as we were in the capital; but we did not visit the exhibition which occupied one room in the highly protected Peace Hotel in the airport ‘green zone’ area, showing the work of two female photographers, and thus was visible only to a very restricted audience (mostly foreigners) for a few days. The founder, Sagal Ali, is also the head of the national UNESCO commission and DG at the Ministry of Education. Despite a bit of

[international media attention](#), few of our informants in Mogadishu were aware of the event. It seems that SAF has not had any activity since then.

There is a lack of public spaces in Mogadishu: there are practically no parks or cultural venues. When groups perform, they do so at restaurants – there are many busy restaurants open until late at night – or at Lido Beach, where the Theatre of the Oppressed held one of its interactive performances. Fanwadaag once invested a ruined building at the busy ‘Dabka’ intersection for [a pop-up exhibition](#), with the agreement of the City Council.



Late-night cultural gathering to discuss history and literature at the Hiraal

The Somali capital also hosts most of the country’s research institutes, both private and public. Think tanks like the **Heritage Institute for Policy Studies**, **Hiraal Institute** and **Somali Public Agenda** exist alongside more than 30 universities, most of which have weak research capacity (as they focus mostly on the business of providing education and degrees for money). Many of the country’s main intellectuals, also from Puntland and Somaliland, gravitate toward Mogadishu for government jobs and influence. Research institutes provide a favourable setting for such people to meet and broadly discuss cultural affairs. But the café life of Mogadishu, which gets busy in the evenings, also provides such settings.

Overall, there is both demand and supply of culture, but the two do not always meet. Cultural work should thus focus on bridging these two, and on creating new platforms (or supporting existing ones) by encouraging organisations to team up with one another, local authorities, private businesses, educational institutes etc.

Below: Aden, result of a body-painting workshop. Right: Photovoice project. Photos courtesy CISP & Fanwadaag, Mogadishu, 2018-2019



" This tuk-tuk driver has a University degree and he never got the job he wanted. Every day he faces many obstacles. He could be shot or die in an explosion. Despite this, he thrives and brings a bit of money to his family. Young people in Mogadishu are often struggling and feel disempowered despite being the backbone of this society.

@ Yasmin

"Bajaajlahaan waxuu heeystaa shahaado jaamacadeed shaqadii uu rabayna ma helin. Maalin kasta caqabado badan ayuu la kulmaa. Waa la toogan karaa ama qarax ayuu ku dhiman karaa. Haddana wuu shaqeystaa qoyskiisana xoogaa lacagta masruufka ayuu u geeyaa. Dhalinyarada Muqdisho badanaa weey dadaalayaan, hadana waxeey dareensan yihiin in la awood tiray ayagoo weliba ah lafdhabarka bulshada .

@ Yasmin

4.2. Central and South Somalia outside Mogadishu

When discussing art and culture in South and Central Somalia, it is important to recognise that most of this area is either under Al Shabaab control, or penetrated by the militants. Cultural freedom of expression in insurgent-held areas is virtually non-existent, as in the Salafi view culture is a pollutant that has affected the purity of Islam. Internet, photography, music, dancing etc. are banned. It must be pointed out that non-violent Salafism imported from the Gulf through commercial and educational networks is rapidly expanding among Somalis; it allows for accommodation with the rule of both Al Shabaab and a modern state. However, views on artistic expression are the same under both violent and non-violent Salafis.

Little research has been undertaken to investigate the impact of Al Shabaab on culture, whether positive or negative. Those towns where some cultural activities may take place are practically surrounded by Al Shabaab, and in such places contemporary culture becomes very insular, as in Beled Weyne, where the field team conducted a short field visit.



Meeting with youth in Beled Weyne – photo courtesy Huda Ali

Case Study: Beled Weyne is a historic town of Somalia, situated in a meander of the Shabelle river about thirty kilometres after it crosses the Ethiopian border. Situated on trade routes between Ethiopia and the Banadir coast, and on the main road linking southern to central and northern Somalia, Beled Weyne (meaning ‘large town’) enjoys the lasting prosperity of an agricultural production hub located on trade routes. This green town situated among fertile fields has often been praised by poets but today the town’s cultural life is practically dead. Al Shabaab occupied the town for several years, and since their expulsion in 2012, they have nearly encircled the town; only the road North to Ethiopia remains free of their influence.

Very little cultural life is possible within the town, as Al Shabaab allegedly maintains strong networks in many areas. There are no venues for cultural activities, no events, no bookstores and no production facilities; only small-scale private events take place behind closed doors. These include the traditional Somali *buraanbuur* (women beating drums and chanting improvised texts), *ka’alsho* music and singing, and the *walasaqo* traditional local dance. Painters and calligraphers do not expect their work to be publicly shown, and while there is some interest in artwork among the public, they are unable to make a living from their work. Artists must go to Mogadishu if they wish to make an income. Informants were keen to point out that this situation was not only due to Al Shabaab’s presence, but also to the inherent conservatism of the population.

In the past, some NGOs had apparently focussed on women’s vocational training for handicrafts (embroidery, dyeing textiles), which faced little opposition from local community members. However, according to Ugaas Xasan Ugaas Khaliif, (the ‘King’ of the Hawadle clan which forms the absolute majority in the town), these initiatives were unsuccessful as they failed to find a market for their products, and women struggled to gain market access.

Young people (even artists) in Beled Weyne seem uninterested in reviving a cultural life in town. The Ugaas recognised the importance of culture but still found it a secondary priority compared to other social and

development needs. He echoed young people in saying sport activities have priority over cultural events. People are waiting for peace first, then good governance. For the moment at least, we do not see many opportunities for supporting cultural activities in places like Beled Weyne.

The situation in many towns of South and Central Somalia seems similar to that described above: between the skeleton presence of Al Shabaab and prevalent social conservatism, and in a context of economic crisis, unemployment and chronic insecurity, there is little public interest in art and culture. Only Kismayo and Baidoa seem to have sufficient size to allow for public cultural activities. There may be places such as Marka and Baraawe, historic port cities, where the balance between social conservatism and cultural expression is tipped more toward the latter.

Most of the artistic activities in this area funded by donors fall under Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P&CVE) projects. These include:

- The setting up of community radios in places such as Baraawe, Marka, Baidoa, Afmadow, Xudur, which creates opportunities to broadcast cultural content;
- Arts and culture as part of a UN Peace Building Fund supported project called *Midnimo* in several districts;
- Psychosocial healing of Al Shabaab defectors (but open to ordinary civilians too) through community theatre in Jubaland and South West State, organised by IOM with an Armenian theatre director.

Mostly NGOs are discrete about funding they receive for P&CVE objectives, as it makes them into a target of Al Shabaab. Outside of P&CVE, several international NGOs specialise in social reconciliation and peacebuilding. They also occasionally use culture as a peacebuilding tool. Such organisations (Life and Peace Institute, Saferworld, Humanitarian Dialogue and others) keep a low profile and do not advertise their work.

Other cultural projects that have taken place are a poetry contest in Kismayo organised by the EU delegation office, while Steve Turner funded

the creation of a book celebrating the art and culture of Marka, consisting of contributions (photos, texts, art, history) by the town's inhabitants (see above). In Kismayo **Aqil Arts** was mentioned by several key informants as a capable and active group of mostly senior artists engaged in modern painting and organising public cultural events.



Darwish fort at Geedda Mirale near Garowe, Puntland; built ca 1915.

4.3. Puntland

Puntland has been effectively autonomous since 1998, with a functioning government resting largely on lineage-based self-governance capacities. Despite an Al Shabaab presence in and around Bosaso, and occasional AS attacks in Galkayo, the state is quite peaceful. The economy of this arid region dependent on pastoralism is in a dismal state; by printing its own Somali shillings, the Puntland government has caused inflation while employment opportunities are scant. Most income comes from remittances and trade with Gulf countries through the port of Bosaso, including transit trade from the Ogaden and South and Central Somalia (export of livestock and import of consumer goods) through Galkayo.

Peace has allowed a higher degree of education, governance and culture to emerge. Traditionally, Puntland's population is more conservative than that of Southern Somalia and even today public music and dancing is not authorised in any of Puntland's cities (Galkayo and Bosaso being even more conservative than Garowe). Youth informants explained that they would leave Garowe to enjoy music and dance in gardens outside town.

Although Puntland has a fair share of Somali practicing artists and cultural heritage (both tangible and intangible) there have been almost no efforts to support the cultural sector by local authorities (except by commissioning artists to perform at national celebrations). There is relative artistic freedom, however, and private initiatives support arts and culture.

The decision by Puntland's authorities to go ahead with planned 'one person-one vote' local government elections in October 2021, despite the



Participants in Awjama's Galkacyo Cultural Festival, 2018. Photo courtesy Awjama.

¹⁸ Puntland's Revised Development Plan 2017-2019 outlines two objectives under its goal of supporting youth employment: Output 1: Technical vocational trainings are improved & Output 5: Centre for art and culture for youth development.

federal decision to return to clan-based indirect elections, has energised youth and cultural activists eager to end the domination of politics by traditional clan elders. Many of the informants we spoke to were planning to engage in awareness raising and other elections-related activities.

Puntland Government

Puntland authorities welcomed the field team and took the time to present their strategies and policies. The main, repeatedly formulated request, was support to build a theatre and cultural centre on a plot belonging to the **Ministry of Information, Telecommunication, Tourism, Culture and Heritage (MoITTCH)**. Officials are eager to convince the educated youth to remain in Puntland¹⁸, and realise that a cultural life may contribute to that.

Puntland's government institutions may lack capacity and budget in general, but the institutions we interacted with seemed driven by eager civil servants with some technical capacity. Perceptions of the authorities among non-government informants were quite positive, suggesting that Puntland government's cultural institutions and civil society are ready to cooperate. Such interactions include working with youths to organise cultural events such as a 'Puntland Got Talent' TV show.

The Chairman and the respected senior advisor of the **Transitional Puntland Electoral Commission (TPEC)** welcome any support to use culture to facilitate the transition to a modern political system. Cooperation is envisaged between TPEC and youth groups involving performance art groups to raise awareness about the upcoming local government elections.

Support was also requested for a cultural heritage mapping exercise and some emergency works. The Director General of the Ministry of Culture mentioned several sites worthy of immediate conservation and protection works. There are rock paintings that may be from the same epoch as Laas Geel scattered around the Nugaal plain. The old fortress of [Eyl](#) appears to

be close to collapse. The ex-director of the Somali National Museum in Barre's time, Mohamed Diriyooos, from Eyl, has retired there and made a **Small Museum of Eyl** next to the fort. Eyl, with beautiful beaches, has an obvious domestic tourism appeal. Finally, a Darwish fort called Geedda Mirale, at an hour's drive from Garowe, in the Nugaal plain, is also about to collapse.

Cultural Life in Puntland

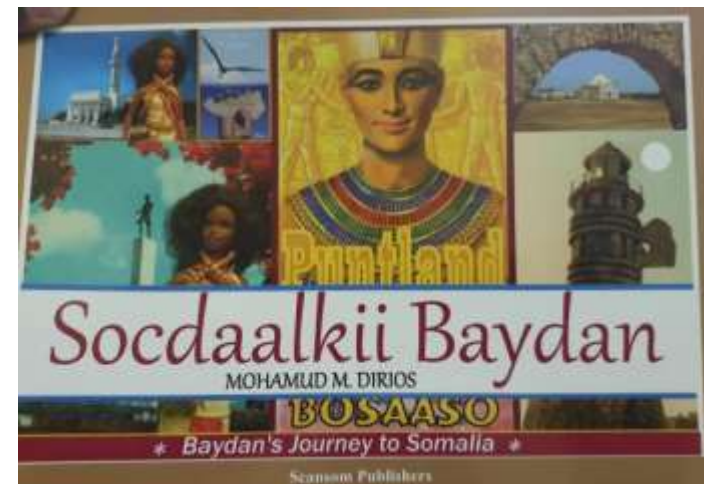
The youth of Puntland is relatively highly educated thanks to decades of peace and the establishment of many institutes of higher learning, of which the largest are Puntland State University and the University of East Africa.

Galkayo is the second city of Puntland (after Bosaso). The town is divided between the centre and north belonging to Puntland and the south belonging to Galmudug; violent clashes between both armed forces have occurred in the past. But Galkayo is also a cultural town, where many maintain the best Somali is spoken. There are some private cultural initiatives, and also a branch of the **Awjama Cultural Centre** (based in Nairobi, see [website](#)), that includes a library and educational activities on the Puntland side of town. Awjama's founder, a US citizen, is originally from here. Informants said that many people come to their events, indicating a thirst for culture in this town.

Awjama also had a branch in Garowe, which had to close for lack of funding. Its erstwhile director 'Faduumo' expressed a commonly held perception among youth for cultural renewal: "It is time to rid Somali culture of camels and spears". She maintains an active role, notably supporting activities geared toward the emancipation of women and youth. She works with the **Somali Dance Academy**, a young but successful group of traditional dancers (sixteen women, nine men). Director Zekeria trained with Hiddo academy in Hargeisa and is now training his troupe to learn different dances from all over Somalia. This group is linked to the [Mahuraan Band](#), which seems to be Puntland's main contemporary music (pop) act.

The young directors of the **Puntland Youth Association Network (PYAN)** are invested in both political and cultural renewal. This umbrella organisation of Puntland youth groups, many of whom have cultural interests and activities, seek cooperative ventures to engage their members in. Besides a 'Puntland Got Talent' show – a hugely popular one took place in 2016, and a 2019 edition was cancelled because of Covid-19 – PYAN is involved in workshops and meetings between traditional elders and the youth, for information sharing and to 'close the generation gap'.

The concern with the generation gap was echoed by Ali Farax, the director of the **Puntland Development Research Council, PDRC**. In a slightly different vein, he mentioned a current project to create peace collectives with participants from both sides of the contested borders with Galmudug and Somaliland. In such dialogue efforts culture plays a major role, bringing together people divided by politics. PDRC had obtained positive results with a *mobile cinema unit* that travels to areas wracked by conflict to hold film-based discussions. In terms of bridging the gap between the elderly and youth, PDRC is contemplating a project called 'Oral Historiography for Peacebuilding'. PDRC also operates a lively cultural centre and library in the centre of Garowe.



Baydan's Journey by Mohamed Dirios, presented at Garowe book fair 2019

Garowe also had a **book fair** from 2016 to 2019, but its future is uncertain. Faduumo of Awjama, who is also involved in the book fair in her native Laas Caanood (contested town between Somaliland and Puntland), mentioned funding uncertainties.

Both **Puntland State University** and the **East Africa University** are planning to launch research activities and would like to include cultural research. But as universities are paid by students' fees, and there is little demand for PhD studies, it is not clear how they will fund such research activities.



Market vendor praying in Bosaso



Rock art at Laas Geel. Note the highly stylised forms and the structural complexity

4.4. Somaliland

Somaliland proclaimed its independence in 1991 shortly after the fall of the Siad Barre regime. Its independence has never been recognised or supported by other countries, and the Somaliland state had to be built on local forces alone, which made it solidly rooted and consensus-based. The (mostly Isaaq) elites that emerged in this process, including important businesses, have gradually strengthened their hold over the institutions of state, leading to a form of oligarchic control which is detrimental to development and the expression of youth talent. On issues such as freedom of expression, religious and media freedom Somaliland scores no better than federal Somalia.

Nevertheless, the long stretch of peace, from 1996 onward, has allowed higher levels of sociocultural development than elsewhere in the region.

Notably, education levels among urban youth are high, and there has been intense diaspora involvement in Somaliland, opening the country to global trends. Many young Somalilanders want to build a progressive, peaceful country and this includes a role for culture and artistic expression. To an extent, Somaliland has become a beacon of modern Somali culture also for other Somalis. However, the poor state of the economy means that here, as elsewhere in Somalia, there is significant brain-drain and those with artistic talent prefer to find a job and provide income for their family.

Somaliland has significant cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible. The most famous site is Laas Geel, with its four to five thousand year old rock paintings. There are many other archaeological sites of interest; indeed, it seems the southern coast of the Gulf of Aden was integrated into the antique world culturally and economically. More recent built cultural heritage includes the Darwish fort of Taleex (also claimed by Puntland) and the old Ottoman town of Berbera. The intangible pastoral heritage includes chants, dances, pre-Islamic lore, herbal knowledge, story-telling and handicrafts that risk disappearing under the twin assault of Western scientific rationalism and Islamic orthodoxy.



Live music in the Hiddo Dhawr cultural restaurant

Somaliland Government

Culture is not a priority for the government in Somaliland, be it promotion or protection. Like the Federal Government, ministries and government institutions in Somaliland seem to be entirely hostage to political processes with very little attention to their specific remits. The division of responsibilities over the cultural sector between the **Ministry of Information, Culture and National Guidance** and the **Ministry of Trade, Industry and Tourism** (under which, for example, the Department of Archaeology and the development of cultural heritage falls) increases political conflict. According to informants, government officials in key positions have no commitment to cultural development. The research team was even offered the chance to purchase antiquities from one government official. The previous Minister of Information, Culture and National Guidance was removed after (very rare) corruption charges were levelled against him. The above applies to high-level (political) appointees; among the ordinary civil service, one can find many committed professionals.

A positive development is the existence of a **Department of Archaeology** with some committed researchers, who under the guidance of Dr. Sada Mire in 2015 produced an impressive mapping of cultural heritage sites in Somaliland ([link](#)). A national theatre has been refurbished, but it may not be used much for cultural events, like its counterpart in Mogadishu. Currently **a national museum** is being built, which will house the small collection of the Department of Archaeology plus donations, but fears are that appointments to this institution's direction are motivated by political gain rather than professionalism.

The research team struggled to secure interviews with government officials. Informants explained this by a pattern of growing suspicion towards foreign organisations sparked by recent developments between the Federal Government and the international community, as well as by the current administration's effort to take full control over government. The Ministry of Planning announced on 19th October that it was conducting a full review of all projects of NGOs and international agencies, and that it would take action against all activities not in line with the National Development Plan.

On 25 October, 2020 the government of Somaliland suspended relations with all UN agencies. They have since been partially re-established.

Nonetheless, Somaliland's policies strongly encourage programmes boosting youth employment and providing vocational skills training. The Somaliland Government also prioritises marginalised and vulnerable groups. Youths are a cross-cutting theme, with a particular focus on promoting employment generation and sports activities and promoting patriotism and a sense of national identity through inter-regional youth activities. Youth and gender programming, particularly for activities that support income generation and those that encourage interregional exchange and trade, provide obvious entry points for donors.

Cultural Life in Somaliland

Hargeisa's cultural sector is more structured than other Somali cultural sectors. For example, one finds art education, performance venues and live events, media eager to produce or broadcast art, museums and collections and cultural research activities. Although the market where cultural supply meets demand is still incipient, there seems to be a growing public appreciation of art. The lack of government planning and funding means that most cultural projects are delivered through local NGOs or private initiatives. The capacity level of many of these NGOs is quite high but the sustainability of such initiatives is doubtful. For example, the privately-managed Saryan Museum ([link](#)) plays the role of a national museum, documenting the liberation struggle against the central government which led to independence, and showcasing ethnographic objects.

Salafi ideology has been slowly gaining ground, also in the political sphere, but many educated youngsters want a modern society with its opportunities and entertainment, creating a growing rift in society. On Thursday evenings there are at least six clubs in Hargeisa where young people can dance into the night, which leads Salafi clerics to fulminate against moral decay at Friday noon prayers. A religious police force remains active. Facing such restraints, and with high education levels but few



The future museum of Berbera

employment opportunities, Somaliland's young residents leave to seek their luck elsewhere – overseas or in Mogadishu, mostly.

These developments impact Somaliland's towns differently. Informants in Burco, the second city of Somaliland with about 300,000 inhabitants, where youth unemployment is particularly high, estimate that 75% of the youth follows a Salafi ideology. Self-appointed guardians of virtue close venues where women and men mix, and most organisations no longer dare hold concerts or dances. Two large CSOs in Burco, **SOYVO** ([link](#)) and **SOYDAVO** ([link](#)), continue to organise cultural events for the other 25% of youth but are increasingly careful. Two diaspora returnees set up a **Burao Technology and Innovation Hub** ([link](#)) for young people in town, hoping to host start-ups, create jobs and defuse tensions.

Informants mentioned cultural groups, mostly composed of young people, in other towns of Somaliland: Borama, Berbera, Buuhoodle, Ceerigaabo and Laas Caanood. Activities range from reading and debating clubs to organising poetry readings and music performances. Local authorities may

assist in the organisation of a book fair (see below) and other events, but generally the initiative comes from civil society groups.

Only in Berbera do the local authorities seem committed to the establishment of a cultural sector. Berbera receives some support from the UAE-based Dubai Ports World which operates the port, and it receives part of the port income directly. This makes it one of the richest municipalities in Somaliland. Berbera has an active civil society with a modern, pragmatic outlook – for example the *Berbera Economic Forum*. In 2017 a *public library*, entirely funded by the local community was inaugurated, and now the municipality has started restoring a grand English colonial building to host a *museum*. It is still waiting for UN Habitat to start implementing [an EU-funded project for urban regeneration](#), but, since UN Habitat does not prioritise culture, fears are that these plans may contribute to the destruction of the old Ottoman town and the overall impoverishment of cultural life.

In Hargeisa, the most famous cultural organisation is the *Hargeysa Cultural Center* ([link](#)), which has a compound with performance hall, library, exhibition space and several offices with production facilities. It evolved out of the Red Sea Cultural Foundation, which organises the annual Hargeysa Book Fair. Its major donor is the European Union, but many other donors have taken an interest in the organisation and funded part of its activities – including SDC. The Hargeysa Cultural Center organises discussions, presentations, events, research, exhibitions and development work. It has secured an EU grant to organise the preservation of Laas Geel rock art site; it trains government employees in cultural preservation, because the EU cannot give grants directly to Somaliland’s authorities.

The *Hargeysa Book Fair* was set up in 2008 and has been held every year since (except in 2020, because of Covid-19). It has spawned book fairs all over the Horn of Africa: Jigjiga, Djibouti, Borama, Berbera, Burco, Laas Caanood, Garowe, Mogadishu and Kismayo. These are organised by local readers’ clubs, mostly, who coordinate dates among themselves. Only in Mogadishu does the book fair (with USAID funding) seem to be organised without coordination with Hargeisa. Despite the name, the event is not solely or even primarily about books, but has become a cultural festival with



Mustafa Saeed: *Monument*, 2020. Photoprint 120x84 cm. Photo courtesy of the artist

music, dances, debates, poetry readings and other events. It is held annually in July.

Another cultural centre is the recently established **Masaf Art Foundation** ([link](#)) in the peripheral residential Red Sea (Badda Cas) neighbourhood. In normal times it holds public events such as music and poetry and provides vocational training in handicrafts design to women. They are self-funded through membership fees and course fees, but they have also received an EU delegation grant, together with the Burco-based youth group SOYDAVO and Media Ink, to promote the political participation of women and children; they have deployed a mobile theatre group to that purpose. By actively involving neighbourhood residents in their activities, they have defused tensions caused by music and events mixing young men and women, including in the evening. But for any cultural centre gaining social acceptance remains a precarious task.



Khadra showing her collection at SOCSA

SOCSA, the Somaliland Culture and Sport Association, was set up by a female basketball champion from Siad Barre's era. The centre, with a big basketball court in the middle and classrooms around the court, was established in 2000, but has increasing difficulties finding funding, because, she says, NGOs have been forced by the government to fund government priorities and the women's sport sector is not big enough. She mentioned that social attitudes toward girls' sport were changing, as health is becoming an increasing priority for people. SOCSA had to cancel dancing classes because girls

were no longer interested in the traditional music-less dance (accompanied by chanting and clapping hands) but wanted to dance on music, which is

socially problematic. SOCSA has a collection of old Somali handicrafts of museum quality and has provided handicrafts training to women, but they are discouraged by the lack of a market for such objects. She plans to transfer her collection to the new Somaliland national museum. Meanwhile, the shop **Asli Mills** ([link](#)), which specialises in local culture – herbal remedies, local production of essential oils and perfumes, antique objects – roams the countryside in search of traditional craft because they cannot find any quality production in Hargeisa.

The **Hiddo Dhawr** cultural centre has long been the prime place for cultural performances and it continues to provide a traditional cultural setting for both classic and modern Somali performances. Two of the most famous dance groups in Somaliland are the **Hiddo Academy for Traditional Dance** and **Halkar Music and Dance Troupe**. It appears they have sufficient work performing at mostly private events.

The market for arts and culture continues to expand steadily, assisted by the return of diaspora Somalilanders. Although most home decoration is undertaken by Yemeni refugees, there is also a small but growing demand for art and cultural objects to decorate homes. **Amal Arts** and **Café Lalays** are two places where people can buy objects produced by modern Somali designers; the owner of Amal Arts is an art painter herself. Photography printing for home decoration is a potential market. The young female photographer **Huda Ali 'Banfas'** has produced a glossy 'coffee table' book with photographs of Somaliland's cultural and natural heritage.

The artist and photographer Mustafa Saeed is establishing **Fankeenna** in Hargeysa, a space with a creative studio where people can come to work, watch documentaries/films, have talks and workshops; an open space for cultural collaborations. In the absence of public spaces for culture, such private initiatives play an essential role.

Dahabshiil is probably the biggest company based in Hargeisa, with hundreds of branches worldwide. The company's Corporate Social Responsibility Manager, who also takes decisions on sponsoring cultural events, explained that Hargeisa is the only place where commercial sponsoring of cultural events is frequent. The ideal type of event for

corporate sponsoring is one drawing a lot of youth and media attention, such as a '*Somaliland Got Talent*' show, of which a past edition was very successful.

Media play an important role in cultural dissemination, but few media programmes are devoted to culture. The director of a large media development organisation, *Media Ink*, which produces content for 45 FM and 12 TV stations throughout Somalia and Somaliland, and is actively involved in policy, training and capacity building, reflected that culture had become a somewhat staid concept; it has to be revitalised and made more attractive to young audiences, who tend to associate 'culture' with dusty handicrafts and old poetry. Some cultural awareness training for journalists might also help. Media Ink is intent on securing funding for the digitization of *Radio Hargeisa archives*, which go back to the 1950s.

Among more affluent communities in Somaliland, attitudes toward art are changing, and parents appreciate art education for their children. This allows a small-scale education centre like the *Banfas School of Art* to offer art classes to children, because art classes are almost never offered by schools. But overall, art and handicraft production is relegated to the domain of the *Gabooye*, a minority which is now attempting to claim a new positive identity as the original Somali artists. They are also involved in one of the archaeological projects of *Horn Heritage* (see above), which is attempting a community mobilisation project around the historic shrine of *Aw Barkhadle*, where objects belonging to Islamic, Judaic, Christian and pre-Islamic cults have been discovered, pointing to a pluralistic religious past (Mire, S. 2015b).



Cornered Energies by Mustafa Saeed, Hargeysa, 2019. Photography and video: <https://vimeo.com/160701074>

4.5. Somali Culture in Ethiopia

The Somali population in Ethiopia is estimated at around 6% of the total population, or roughly 6 to 7 million. But the Somali Region of Ethiopia covers nearly 30% of the Ethiopian territory and is half the size of Somalia (including Somaliland) itself. It is inhabited by people belonging to the same clan families as in Somalia, and until the late 19th century was not separated from the rest of Somalia by any borders.

The city of Harar played an important role for Somalis for about 1000 years, from the 10th to the late 19th century. It was the centre of Islamic learning and pilgrimage – one of Islam’s holy towns - and an important commercial hub for the caravan trade between the coast and the fertile Ethiopian highlands. With the construction of the Djibouti-Addis railroad (finished in 1917) the role of commercial hub devolved to the railway town of Dire Dawa, situated in Somali lands but soon populated by foreigners (principally Greeks and Armenians) and highland Ethiopians, mostly Oromos – today Somalis are in a minority in Dire Dawa (about 25%), and this occasionally leads to conflict.

The Somali Region of Ethiopia was formed as one of the member states of the newly federal Ethiopia in 1991, and its capital became Jigjiga in 1995; the importance of this town is thus relatively new. It was ruled with an iron fist until 2018 by the long-standing regional president Abdi Mohamud Omar, a.k.a. Abdi ‘Iley’. Culture was part of Abdi Iley’s governance tools, and [Dhaanto music and dance](#), in particular, became popular not only in the Somali region but in other Somali areas. The less religious atmosphere of Jigjiga allowed the performance of female singers and dancers, contributing to the music’s popularity throughout the Horn.

After violent clashes in 2017 between Oromos and Somalis, leading to hundreds of deaths and hundreds of thousands ethnically purged displaced people, Prime Minister Abiy removed Abdi Iley. The moderate opposition

¹⁹ In line with the Federal Government’s Proclamation No.839/2014 (*A Proclamation to provide for the classification of cultural heritages into national and regional cultural centres*) each region in Ethiopia has its own Culture and Tourism Bureau and enjoys the

politician Mustafa Omer, with a background in education and NGO work, became President of the Somali Region in 2018. His much more liberal course has been beneficial to arts and cultural development.

Cultural Policies in Ethiopia’s Somali Areas

Economically, the region is quite buoyant, profiting from the freedom of movement and enterprise which came with the downfall of the tightly oligarchic previous regime. Conflict and violent clashes have virtually ceased, as have cases of human right abuses. Importantly, access for international NGOs has increased and development programming has resumed.

Encouragingly, the *Culture and Tourism Office* (CTO) in the Somali Region was established in 2019¹⁹. It works in collaboration with the Somali Region Development Office and the Office of Women, Youth and Children to develop tourism, to research and promote culture and to support youth groups in developing cultural activities. It plans to set up a cultural infrastructure of public libraries and cultural centres and to build a national museum. Plans to establish the first *cultural centre* on a plot of land provided by the regional government were presented to the consultants and the funding appears to have been secured, but the lack of resources means that for the time being there is no capacity



Design for the cultural research centre in Jigjiga, provided by the CTO of Somali Region of Ethiopia

autonomy to formulate and pursue its own plans, funded with regional income. See UNESCO (2017) Ethiopia Report ([link](#)).

to implement the rest of its plans. The CTO is actively seeking external financial support. It requested the consultants to explore possible support to an upcoming cultural festival it would like to hold.



Arch in the ruined town of Darbi Balanbaal, March 2021. Photo courtesy of Shafi Kaariye

The CTO focuses on three sectors: heritage preservation, building a cultural infrastructure and promoting live, performing arts. Staffed by only five officials, it is however hamstrung by low capacity. Some mapping of historical and heritage sites has taken place in the Somali region by consultants such as Ahmed Zekaria, and the CTO has undertaken to protect the archaeological site of **Darbi-Balanbal** by fencing the site in. The CTO cooperates with Jigjiga University, including its Somali

Language Institute (est. 2014) to conduct research, for example by conducting a survey of popular attitudes toward traditional medicine practices.

Jigjiga University, with an enormous campus and student body, has ambitious research development plans, and has undertaken to host the **International Conference of Somali Studies** scheduled for July 2021 ([link](#)). Students and researchers at Jigjiga University complained of the lack of opportunities to conduct further research, even in Addis Ababa, and hope that a scholarship programme will soon allow more academic exchange.

The **Somali Language Institute** at Jigjiga University is purportedly the first in the world to offer a bachelor's degree in Somali language²⁰. Over the past years 40 to 80 people have graduated each year, but the institute also gives

²⁰ The Federal Government's *Growth and Transformation Plan II 2015-2020* ([link](#)) specifically seeks to develop local languages and indigenous knowledge.

summer courses for hundreds of Somali teachers. It does not engage in much original research (none was published) but it hopes to become the main local incarnation of the **Intergovernmental Academy of Somali Language**, which was established in Djibouti in 2012, and whose headquarters are now in Mogadishu. This academy does not seem active for lack of budget and apparently also good leadership, but it reminds one of the need for standardisation of the Somali language across regional borders.



Dire Dawa Museum

Dire Dawa is one of the two chartered cities of Ethiopia (the other is Addis Ababa) and does not fall under the Somali Regional administration, but has its own. Although we were not able to speak to the local authorities, we spoke to senior members of the cultural community and a member of parliament. They mentioned the use of culture for peacebuilding among communities and political awareness. Facilities are sufficient, with two big podiums (the Majestic Hall built by the Greeks, and a National Theatre) and outdoor facilities in the Millennium Park and a local Museum.

Authorities typically commission artists for public messaging purposes, and then they use Somali artists to reach out to Somali audiences. But Somali cultural life in Dire Dawa clearly is subordinated to highland culture, and this is partially the result of its chartered status.

Meetings with directors at the Federal Ministry of Culture and Tourism in Addis Ababa confirmed a very ‘hands-off’ approach to cultural development; the cultural policy of Ethiopia (which dates from the previous EPDRF regime) does not even mention cultural exchange among the peoples of Ethiopia; rather, each region is supposed to develop its own local culture. For many Ethiopians, the epitome of national culture is the ***Nations, Nationalities and Peoples’ Day***, which is celebrated on December 8. In a spectacle reminiscent of the great colonial exhibitions, each ethnic group in Ethiopia sends a representative group dressed in traditional clothes to perform. The federal government also organises a yearly exhibition of folk art submitted by the CTOs of the federal member states, but further does not organise or back any other form of cultural expression (such as theatre, music or film festivals) – nor does it see it as its function to promote forms of contemporary artistic exchange.



Youth and Culture Unity group in Jigjiga. Photo courtesy of the artists

Somali Cultural Life in Ethiopia

Historically, Ethiopia has pursued a strong state agenda, leaving little room for civil society to grow. Faced with wider development challenges, humanitarian crises and conflict, cultural programming has rarely been a priority for successive governments. As a result, there are very few cultural groups operating in Ethiopia. It is only in recent years, and notably since Abiy Ahmed became Prime Minister in 2018, that the growth of civil society is encouraged.

There is no lack of artists and people interested in culture, but the level of organisation is minimal, making support by an external development partner challenging. For external investments to take place, socio-cultural life first needs to be developed in terms of civil society organisation. A partner such as the ***Talent Youth Association*** ([link](#)), which is already present in all other areas of Ethiopia with largely British-Council funded civil society and cultural development work and which is eager to start in Jigjiga too, could be an invaluable partner over the medium term. Such an organisation could create platforms for collaboration, share resources, and support efforts by local artist groups to secure external support, funding and collaborative ventures.

There is a circus group in Dire Dawa, which is starting to receive support from ***Selam Ethiopia*** ([link](#)). Selam Ethiopia has supported such circus groups in other areas of Ethiopia. Although Selam Ethiopia receives core funding from Swedish sources such as SIDA and Forum Syd, it seeks project funding to expand its outreach in the lowlands of Ethiopia, notably the Somali and Afar regions and Dire Dawa.

Dire Dawa, according to local informants, needs community peacebuilding, and culture is seen as an ideal tool to achieve that. Clashes occur mostly between Somali and Oromo youth; peacebuilding at the senior level (elders, religious figures, politicians) has little impact as the youth no longer listen to them, and because real political power is in the hands of the Amhara. Unemployment and the constant migration from highland Oromo to the town are aggravating factors. The upcoming June 2021 local elections are

seen as a possible flashpoint, but the need for peacebuilding is long-term. The circus may provide an avenue for this effort.

Currently, Somali culture in Dire Dawa is heavily influenced by neighbouring Djibouti; both areas are dominated by the Dir/Isse clan, for whom the border is a fluid concept. On the one hand, this allows Somalis from Dire Dawa to enjoy the comparatively much better cultural infrastructure of Djibouti²¹; on the other, President Guelleh, who only allows praise of him to be expressed, can easily punish Somalis in Dire Dawa who oppose him. When he is mentioned, voices lower to a whisper.

Altogether the level of Somali culture in Dire Dawa seems high; intellectuals such as Ali Moussa Iye, musicians such as Mustafa Omar Roble ‘Cirro’ who leads the Millennium Band; senior poets such as Abdi Faf, the Imam Mohamed Sheikh Omer ‘Juud’ – all are evidence of a more liberal and progressive Somali culture, made possible by the environment of Dire Dawa. Nevertheless, the town and its inhabitants seem to be cut off from the rest of the Somali-speaking peoples, Djibouti excepted. Exchange opportunities could be explored.

In Jigjiga, compared to Dire Dawa, there is not much cultural life at all. The main cultural activity seems to be the production of contemporary Somali pop music. Somalis from different origins agreed that Jigjiga probably has the second most lively music scene after Hargeisa. Some of the currently fashionable musicians include Ali Dhaanto ([link](#)), Aar Maanta ([link](#)) and Suldaan Seeraar ([link](#)). However, as the music producers of Selam Ethiopia in Addis rightly remarked, the quality of recordings is feeble, and it could use some improvements. Selam Sound, the mother organisation in Sweden, specialises in recording non-mainstream Ethiopian music (see their excellent youtube channel [here](#)).

Besides the above, and the small-scale activities of Horn Heritage to document existing cultural heritage and raise awareness about it, and the Youth and Culture Unity group, we did not identify any independent cultural

activity, and we thus refer to the initiatives taken by the Culture and Tourism Office and Jigjiga University mentioned in the previous section.

We also scoured Addis Ababa for Somali artists. Although there is a significant Somali community centred in the district of **Bole Mikael**, there are no cultural venues in that area, and our informants could not identify any cultural groups. There are musicians and poets who perform privately, and there are bound to be some artists, but no formal groups. We enquired in Addis’ music schools, but could not find any Somali teachers, and the schools could not say if they had any Somali students. We sought



Gouled Ahmed self-portrait 2020

We sought Somali photographers who might have participated in the previous **Addis Foto Fest** edition but did not find any. In the capital’s universities, likewise, there seem to be no Somali students. Ethiopia’s Higher Education system allocates slots for students in their home region, making exceptions only when there is no capacity in local universities or the chosen discipline is not offered. In fact, we found only one Somali artist, a fashionista who develops his own clothes and prepares his own photoshoots: **Gouled Ahmed**. He admitted not knowing of any other Somali artists in Addis.

Some Ethiopian artists, however, have shown interest in integrating Somali art forms in their work. The cutting edge **Destino Dance Company** ([link](#)), for example, travelled to Jigjiga to study Somali dance forms while giving a workshop to local dancers (a project partially funded by SDC). **Jano Band**, one of Ethiopia’s most popular rock bands, has a few Somali songs in its repertoire, for example [Hamza](#) or [Diriyan](#). Finally, cultural centres such as the **Alliance Ethio-Française** ([link](#)) which has turned into one of the most lively cultural venues in Addis Ababa, is eager to program Somali culture if it falls within its target of contemporary, emerging culture.

²¹ Some of Djibouti’s most well-known musicians include Awaale Adan ([link](#)) and Dandawi ([link](#))

4.6. Somali Culture in Kenya

Somalis form about 6 % of the Kenyan population, with 2.5 million living in the counties of North Eastern Kenya and a few hundred thousand in Nairobi. The three counties of Garissa, Wajir and Mandera, along the Somali border, are entirely Somali. In addition, about 500,000 Somali refugees live in Kenya.

The integration of Kenyan Somalis into national sociocultural life has not been easy, as the latter has long been defined by Christian highlands Bantu peoples such as the Kikuyu and Kalenjin. Over the past decades relations have remarkably improved, with Kenyan Somalis now in charge of their own counties and occupying high positions in national politics and the administration.

As to Somalis from Somalia, a highly visible group is formed by the federal elites and their families, some of whom are businessmen who contribute to the thriving market of Eastleigh in Nairobi; others are senior civil servants and NGO staff keeping their families in safety. For them Nairobi is preferred for its better educational, health and business facilities.

But most are refugees who fled the civil war in the early 1990s. About half of this refugee population today lives in Dadaab, a cluster of refugee camps between the town of Garissa and the Somali border; many others are in Eastleigh. Those wishing to escape camp life are often forced to lead hidden lives and are regularly threatened with deportation, especially since Al Shabaab started organising terrorist attacks in Kenya. Acrimonious official relations between both countries have not helped. At the time of writing, Somalia has re-established diplomatic ties with Kenya, but relations are not warm. Kenya has reiterated a previous warning it wants to close Dadaab camp, creating uncertainty among Somali refugees.

²² Kenya has ratified the 1998 ICOMOS *Stockholm Declaration*, which espouses the right of everyone to partake freely in the cultural life of the community, and the 2003 UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage*. National acts that relate to culture include *the National Museums and Heritage Act* (2006); *the Environmental and Co-*



Artists in Wajir commissioned to produce public messaging about Covid-19; 2020. Photo courtesy Farah Sirat Farah, Wajir Museum

When one speaks about Somali culture in Kenya, one thus is dealing with several distinct realities: integrated native Kenyan-Somalis, jet-setting Somali diaspora, and resource-poor Somali refugees. Many foreign agencies are mostly concerned with the latter, whose needs are indeed the highest. Increasing their connection with Kenyan Somalis may help their integration into Kenyan socio-economic life.

Cultural Policies and Government Action in Kenya

The Kenyan government has a strong cultural policy framework²², having ratified international cultural treaties, legislated in consequence, and set up a comprehensive institutional infrastructure for cultural development and expression. However, the implementation of cultural policy is uneven. In

Ordination Act (1999); *the Land Act* (2012) and *the Antiquities and Monuments Act*. The 2009 *National Plan for Culture and Heritage* outlines Kenya's plans for promoting and protecting Kenya's diverse cultural landscape.

practice there is not much government support to culture: little in Nairobi, and less in the counties.

Nevertheless, the National Plan for Culture and Heritage provides good entry points for external donors wishing to support local cultural development: for example, it commits to establishing **Community Cultural Centres** in all constituencies and districts and focal points for the promotion of intercultural dialogue and national cohesion.²³ In the three Somali counties of Northeast Kenya these community cultural centres exist, but more as a place to rent than as a lively community hub with its own programming. It also advocates **regional and international exchange**, which could allow more cooperation with Nairobi, Mombasa, Somalia and even Ethiopia.

In our discussions with informants in Mandera, Wajir and Garissa, we heard repeatedly that the devolution (of power, for example over income, budgeting and expenses) from central to county levels had not led to more cultural programming; to the contrary, cultural budgets had decreased. “County governments have other priorities” one informant said euphemistically.

A positive example of government intervention includes the centrally-administered National Museums of Kenya, which fosters cooperation and cultural development among its many branches; one of them, the **Wajir museum** ([link](#)), lies in the Somali territories. It showcases mostly traditional objects of the peoples of Northern Kenya (predominantly Somali objects) but it also has sections on colonial and recent history. The curator Farah Sirat Farah noted that the museum used to host cultural events organised by the county government, but that these no longer take place. However, with the support of the National Museums, the Wajir Museum still hosts exhibitions and events, albeit at a reduced pace. It also cooperates with (non-national) museums in Garissa, Isiolo and Marsabit and has sent regional Somali artists to the Somali cultural week in Nairobi in 2018. The

National Museums of Kenya also supported artists in Garissa to work on public messaging around the coronavirus crisis.

Cultural Life in Kenya’s Somali Counties

Informants in the North Eastern Provinces agreed that there are many young Kenyan Somalis interested in cultural production, notably poetry, drama and stand-up comedy. Traditional music and dance are secondary areas of interest. Contemporary music and visual arts are more difficult to practice in the conservative local social climate. Salafi violence appears to be less of an impediment to cultural expression than social conservatism.

The groups engaging in poetry, drama and comedy are informal and have low levels of organisational capacity. They receive no funding from either international donors or from the Kenyan government. County governments do not invest in culture, as remarked earlier in the report. A **cultural week** held in Mandera in 2018, funded by the county, was a notable exception



Participants in Somali Heritage Week in Nairobi, 2019. Photo courtesy Awjama

²³ Government of the Republic of Kenya (2009), p.7

but this event, supposed to be held every year, has not taken place since. The government does however provide ready access to its facilities, so cultural actors do have places to convene.

In Mandera, a youth organisation called **Mandera Got Talent** formed in 2018 and has performed since then at national and religious holidays and events like World Environment Day. They do not receive funding except for public awareness messaging campaigns on topics such as drug abuse, CVE, FGM, corruption, social peace and reconciliation. They cooperate with vocational training and employment programmes such as the Humanitarian Agency for Community Progress and Development (HACPAD) and the Women Empowerment and Youth Organization (WEYO), also both based in Mandera. A young activist called Ibrahim Mohamed Ali gives classes in art education to schoolchildren. **Interpeace** funded cultural peacebuilding activities in Mandera county in 2018-19 after recurrent clan clashes (Degodia vs Garre), but also in response to cross-border infiltration by Al Shabaab.



Gargar women's dance group, Garissa. Photo courtesy Garissa Mediation Council

Garissa, a university town with a significant youth population, has a correspondingly high level of cultural activities. A local chapter of the national civil society umbrella organisation 'Civil Society Urban Development Platform' (long supported by Sweden) is highly active here.

This **Garissa Local Urban Forum** is a consortium of around 35 local civil society organisations, of which the leading partner is the **Garissa Mediation Council** as it seems to have better administrative skills. This organisation also operates across the border in Lower Juba. One of the member organisations, the **Garissa Peace and Cultural Centre** has received a DFID grant to organise cultural events at the local Department for Culture and Heritage (government compound) focusing on issues of social reconciliation through culture or discussion. Another member organisation is the **Gargar Women's Group**, which has travelled abroad to raise awareness about issues facing Kenyan Somali women. The Garissa Peace and Cultural Centre supports traditional handicraft production and operates a branch office in Dadaab refugee camp. There are more organisations funded by UNHCR in the camps around Dadaab working on social empowerment; they occasionally use culture as a tool. Finally, the **Life and Peace Institute** funded a body mapping art project (see CISP) with Garissa community leaders.

In Wajir a local singer Mohammed Salat Abdi Yussuf ([link](#) to his Covid-19 awareness song) is up and coming, combining tradition with modern elements. **Wajir community radio** appears eager to broadcast more cultural content. In the three counties, informants reported, young people are severely underemployed and desires more cultural life.

Cultural Life of Somalis in Nairobi/Eastleigh

Eastleigh is often called the Somali business capital of East Africa. This neighbourhood beyond the industrial zone of Nairobi is thriving, even during the Covid 19 pandemic; but overall levels of Somali investment are declining, as opportunities in Mogadishu and other areas of Somalia pick up. Eastleigh has a mixed population of Somali refugees, Kenyan Somalis and other Kenyans. The neighbourhood was repeatedly targeted by Kenyan security agencies after terrorist attacks and thus acquired a bad reputation within Kenya, along with Somalis more generally. Many cultural activities in Eastleigh have been developed to improve the image of Somalis in Kenya.

Eastleighwood ([link](#)) is a Somali youth organisation established to change perceptions of Somalis among Kenyans, through movies, collective action

(environment clean-up), events (talent search, exhibitions) and education (art, P&CVE, citizenship). They claim to have a branch in Mogadishu (next to AMISOM) and organise projects in Garissa, Wajir and Mandera. They have laudable intentions and a professional appearance, but may receive substantial P&CVE funding, which may expose them to criticism.

One of the drivers of cultural production is **Star FM** (broadcast media plus online TV network). It is run from Nairobi and more recently also broadcasts from Mogadishu. It has a wide audience among the Kenyan Somali community. Noticeable broadcasts are a Somali puppet show called Hiddo & Hirsi ([link](#)). The presenter of this show and her husband, Abdi Gab, are central figures in the Somali arts community in Nairobi. Abdi Gab used to work in the Somali National Museum in the 1980s, and has many projects, including a book project of 200 objects of Somali culture. His wife is an actress who also plays the oud (luth). The puppet show they have developed could be used for many other outreach and awareness raising purposes. The director of Star FM explained that cultural programmes attract many listeners but not much funding. Somali media are typically paid to run stories, that is their business model, but they do not get paid for cultural content. Nonetheless, Star FM is eager to partner on more cultural programs.

The most oft-mentioned cultural organisation in Eastleigh is the Awjama Omar Cultural Research and Reading Centre, mostly simply called **Awjama** ([link](#); see also under Puntland). Its flagship program is the Somali Heritage Week which it has organised in Nairobi every year from 2015 onward (except 2020 because of Covid-19) with support by the Heinrich Böll Stiftung and occasionally of UNESCO and other donors. Awjama cooperates with Kenyan institutions such as the National Museums and Mandera County (for the 2018 culture week). It focuses on bringing together Somali refugees, Kenyan Somalis and other Kenyans for sharing their culture, and on providing opportunities for civic and cultural engagement for the youth and women. It has also developed commercial handicraft skills among Somali women, preparing traditional cultural objects that are sold during the Heritage Week.

Thrive Somali Women Refugees Group ([link](#)) is a small but meaningful initiative to improve the well-being of Somali refugees. The proceeds of commercial trainings organised by Thrive are reinvested in the overall wellbeing of Somali women refugees, through income generation (tie-dye and sewing), nature walks, yoga training, poetry readings and community alert systems for women in danger. In a meeting with a 'Sisterhood Group', they explained that there are no parks and barely any common facilities in Eastleigh for women and children, as the Somali community there is entirely focused on business and money-making. Many women live alone with their children and find it difficult to make a living in an unknown (Kenyan) environment. Culture brings them together, increasing self-help opportunities.



'Sisterhood group' of Somali refugees from Eastleigh visit a park in Nairobi and bond through group activities. Photo courtesy Thrive



An old Somali luh (prayer tablet) from the Aw Zein shrine in Harar

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations presented below are aimed at the broader community of donors, implementing agencies and cultural actors focussing on the Horn of Africa.

5.1. Needs

Taking a step back from the nuance of individual organisations and local dynamics, there are a number of overarching needs for the development of the culture sector in the Horn of Africa.

Finding	Need
Interest in cultural programming among government and donors is low, and regional coordination between governments, donors and multilaterals is insufficient.	Improved coordination between government, donors and multilaterals. Stronger advocacy for cultural programming.
The culture sector is highly fragmented, with poor physical and institutional infrastructure to link cultural actors.	Greater non-governmental physical and institutional infrastructure to bring cultural actors, artists and organisations together.
Tangible and intangible cultural heritage is at risk from neglect, both at a political level and among citizens.	Research, conservation and promotion of tangible and intangible cultural heritage.
Culture is an important avenue for youth self-expression.	Greater access to funding for artists and creatives. Outlets / platforms for youth, women and minorities self-expression.

5.2. Policy objectives

Based on the needs identified above, we identify a number of potential entry points for donors and organisations wishing to support cultural initiatives in the Horn of Africa. These objectives should be approached with a long-term horizon in mind.

Objectives	Activities
A: To mainstream culture within the broader development policy landscape.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Set up communication channels through which Somali cultural producers and potential supporters can meet and exchange informally. Let's talk about Somali culture 2. Encourage collaborative and long-term ventures between potential donors and implementing agencies for sustainable cultural growth 3. Continually reiterate linkages between culture and wider socio-economic development outcomes. Culture drives development 4. Convince national government counterparts to put building cultural infrastructure on the development agenda. Culture is not a luxury
B: Better collaboration across the region.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Somali culture sector actors must be encouraged to connect, coordinate and share also without external funding. Collaborate for culture
C: To protect cultural heritage from neglect, damage and loss. To create learning/teaching resources.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Fund the mapping of tangible and intangible heritage, including music, dance, poetry, crafts, (his)stories, local lore and local dialects to mitigate cultural entropy 2. Encourage local scholarship in cultural issues by funding research grants and fostering exchange between universities in the region. Strengthen culture through academic analysis 3. Support outreach and educational activities to build awareness of Somalia's rich cultural

	<p>heritage with as message: Cultural awareness-raising</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Support local communities' efforts to document cultural heritage, enact conservation and plan touristic development. Communities preserve their culture
D: To support creativity and artistic expression.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Allocate grants for small-scale grass-roots cultural initiatives administered by an implementing partner or external fiduciary actor. Grass-roots culture 2. Facilitate '...Got Talent' shows throughout the region to support youth expression. Culture is fun 3. Explore income-generating activities in both contemporary and traditional cultural markets. Income through art

5.3. Examples of potential activities

A: Mainstream culture in development discourse

A1 Let's talk about Somali culture

Reviving a 'Friends of Somalia' group among donors and potential supporters of Somali culture would be a good first step. This group can be an information exchange network that gathers yearly to discuss practical measures to support Somali culture. One of the barriers that needs to be broken first is that between culture and other areas of development, thus placing culture within the wider development agenda. Inclusive discussions or workshops can be organised by various topics loosely structured around the theme of 'the role of culture in health service delivery,' or 'the role of culture in post-conflict reconciliation'. Linked to this, we recommend the publication of more reports and other knowledge products – such as workshop outputs and thematic research pieces.

Informal meetings (e.g. receptions) can be organised between members of such a group and Somali cultural practitioners. For example, as part of CISP's ArtXChange project, Somali artists visited cultural institutions in Nairobi in April 2021; they could then also have met potentially interested donors. In Mogadishu, most international organisations are clustered in the Mogadishu International Airport zone (Halane), which is an ideal place to meet incoming or outgoing Somali artists and cultural producers.

A2 Sustainable cultural growth

SDC's 12-year planning horizon provides a unique opportunity to design a long-term strategy that aims at sustainable cultural growth. Although not many donors have the luxury to think long-term like this, they could use SDC's strategic plan as a reference point for their own actions, or even co-fund SDC projects. A shared policy document – or at least a set of shared principles – may be useful to establish a clear direction for strategic engagement in the culture sector. Some of these donors may have flexible 'small-actions funds' that could be directed towards cultural programming, in the form of pooled funding managed by a third-party.

For example, this allows donors to test and refine ideas and implementing partners on a local (national) level before scaling to a regional level. One of the problems that other donors may share with SDC is the lack of administrative capacity to deal with a multitude of small grants provided to local cultural partners, who themselves suffer low administrative capacity. Therefore, a Somali civil society organisation with sufficient capacity and neutrality to operate everywhere seems desirable; however we could not readily identify such an organisation. This may itself suggest a potential area for investment.

An 'exit strategy' to avoid or decrease donor dependency can also become part of a long-term planning process. Income generation through arts and culture becomes an essential part of such a strategy, and we stress, once again, how important it is to perform a proper value chain or market analysis for the cultural sector in the different locations discussed in this report. Perhaps a micro-credit facility for creative industries could be linked to the SDC strategy.

In view of sustainability, attempts to brand or design projects under the banner of *inclusion, peacebuilding, stabilisation* or *cohesion* may risk attracting cynicism at best, or (like P/CVE) outright suspicion and hostility. These objectives should be considered as long-term effects, rather than explicit programme/project goals. Support to Somali culture must remain discrete and linked to a broad development narrative, not specific short-term donor objectives.

A3 Culture drives development

Interviews with key stakeholders across the sector, and a detailed reading of national policy literature, show that there are four 'flagship' development policy areas that resonate among government and donor stakeholders. These are: **youth, inclusive economic growth, gender and peacebuilding**. In all of these areas **civil society development** plays a major role. Cultural programmes that can be linked to these areas are likely to find broad support from other potential funders and national governments.

Virtually all types of activities envisioned in our recommendations contribute to civil society development, support youth and women – both as actors and as managers of outcomes – and are sensitive to peacebuilding and social cohesion as they advocate inclusion and cultural exchange between Somalis and surrounding populations, including Ethiopian highlanders and Kenyans. However, cultural expression may also be divisive – when the ‘Other’ is mocked or disqualified, for example – so care must be taken in the selection of implementing partners and projects. The most difficult cross-cutting objective is ‘inclusive economic growth’ (see below, D3)

Collaboration with non-cultural development programmes implemented or funded by others may occur at a large scale. In Ethiopia, for example, the Comprehensive Refugee Reintegration Programme (CRRP) could provide an opportunity to integrate cultural initiatives (events etc.) to strengthen social cohesion with host communities. USAID is funding the Integrated Youth Activity Programme, also in Ethiopia. The programme aims to empower youth to advance their own social, economic and civic development. Implemented by CARE, this could be an interesting avenue to explore further. Similar programmes are being delivered by NGOs across the region.

A4 Culture is not a luxury

Donors can engage national government counterparts in a continual effort to ensure culture is considered a priority for regional development. As above, linking cultural programmes to wider national development priorities may open discussions with line ministries.²⁴ The planned use of artistic outreach by the Transitional Puntland Electoral Council is a good example. Direct engagement with the respective ministries responsible for culture should also proceed, of course, as part of standard dialogue with government. At a local level, proactive local cultural authorities can partner on projects delivered by local civil society organisations. Donors with higher

disbursement levels could consider partnering with local authorities to establish physical premises for cultural activities; this would fill an important gap in the sector and could form the basis of a regional network of cultural hubs. However, the management of such facilities should be at least partially in the hands of local civil society, to avoid regional authorities usurping their use.

B: Building linkages between culture sector actors

B1 Collaborate for Culture

In the early stages, donor activities should focus on encouraging collaboration and coordination between organisations wherever possible. This could entail investing in *partnership ventures* that organise recurring cultural events, to provide regular focal points for culture sector actors (see also D2). Here the mode of collaboration is at least as important as the content of the programme. Collaboration between different types of organisations – for example a university, a local youth group, local authorities, a private local company and an INGO specialising in training; or between a cultural group, a local media partner and a women’s development LINGO - is particularly promising in terms of long-term sustainability as they help to build a *cultural economy*. Encouraging the establishment of links between such partners around a commonly funded project serves to consolidate cross-linkages in the cultural sector, instead of creating multiple dependencies on external donors.

As these activities become more established within the local area, and as word spreads throughout the creative community, funding could be scaled to facilitate expansion into other locations across the Somali region. In a multiyear program, the emphasis can shift from year to year to attract new partner organisations, instead of building up a few donor-dependent ones only. For example, one year the focus can be on health issues, the next on elections, the third year on the environment, etc. This will allow donors to

²⁴ Note that the review team was unable to engage with ‘non-culture’ line ministries due to time constraints. As noted previously, the focus remained firmly on those government departments directly responsible for culture.

spread funding while mainstreaming culture into other areas of development.

Cultural activities can help increase exposure of non-Somalis in Ethiopia and Kenya to Somali culture and vice-versa, to avoid marginalisation or ghettoization. The participation of Somali artists in national festivals can be funded through *mobility grants*. These can also be used to invite Somali artists abroad to the region and to foster research exchange.

Mogadishu is the place where the necessity to connect artists, cultural producers, disseminators and audiences, is most pressing. Given the current security situation, large-scale events are not desirable or feasible in Mogadishu, so *small-scale interventions* will be the norm; at least in the first years, as the security situation will hopefully improve. Some of Mogadishu's busy restaurants and the beach are good places for artists to engage with audiences, even though advertised live events may still be problematic. Willing media partners can be easily found. Events could include pop-up fashion shows, movie evenings, photography and art exhibitions, theatre performances, open-mic sessions, moderated debates about cultural issues and eventually concerts. These discrete events must be managed by a third party, which as mentioned (A2) still needs to be found or nurtured.

C: Mapping cultural heritage

Mapping cultural heritage creates opportunities for multi-partner collaborations between NGOs, creatives and academia. Whether a highly technical archaeological investigation, or a community-led folk music anthology, such mapping activities have a pan-regional application.

C1 Mitigate cultural entropy

An *Oral History* project focusing on disappearing culture could be undertaken by a combination of young students trained in oral history collection and local artists and creatives, who have the technical knowhow to absorb skills transfer from elderly Somalis. Musicians, dancers, craftsmen, singers, writers and poets could each 'map' the cultural heritage in their field, alongside students, under the supervision of a lead organisation with proven capacity to manage such a vast undertaking.

Diaspora specialists could be invited through mobility grants to participate or lead such efforts. The creative industry more widely could also be involved to create engaging media and learning content (videographers, filmmakers, photographers etc.). A professional music label may be helpful in the recording of audio. The digitisation of local radio archives could be part of a general mapping exercise feeding into a large open-access digital museum. Leveraging online platforms for knowledge sharing may also open the door to long-term sustainable funding from diaspora organisations.

C2 Strengthen culture through academic analysis

Within this mapping exercise, research into the *Somali language* is a priority. As noted previously, while Somali ethnicity, nationality and religion could be flash points for conflict in some parts of the region, the Somali language is significantly less contentious. Many informants expressed a concern that the Somali language is becoming impoverished through the loss of regional dialects (belonging to marginalised minority groups), the lack of proper standardisation and the gradual erosion of traditional linguistic forms through slang and online usage. The Academy of Sciences and Art, Jigjiga University, which hosts the Somali Language Institute and other universities would be natural partners in this project too, as well as individual Somali scholars who have already published academic level research. Foreign universities with Somali language departments (Roma III, Uppsala, SOAS...) could be requested to partner on this project too, with the eventual extra outcome of improving research capabilities in Somali universities.

C3 Cultural awareness-raising

Several of the informants' organisations are already engaged in mapping and preserving Somalia's physical cultural heritage, but their activities are generally small-scale

Donors should not disregard the importance of outreach and educational activities to build awareness of Somalia's rich built and archaeological cultural heritage. This work could focus on young people in the towns of the

more stable and peaceful regions, and make use of well-established youth civil society organisations, several of which have been mentioned above. Here again, the cooperation of universities should be sought, including those in Addis Ababa and/or Nairobi.

Each Somali town and region has a distinct identity, and many of them have their own dialects. It would be possible to capture this diversity by the publication of books which are collectively produced by the local cultural and intellectual community. A book could be produced discretely and need not draw the attention of Al Shabaab or other conservative local groups, creating opportunities to conduct this work in south and central Somalia. In places with more freedom like Baidoa and Kismayo awareness-raising events could also be live, such as singing, concerts, dancing and poetry recitals, or exhibitions.

C4 Communities preserve their culture

In some cases – notably in Puntland and Somaliland – local communities or local authorities desire to embark on heritage conservation and development efforts. This is technical work which may depend on an external party willing to provide an expert in conservation to supervise conservation works and train local staff. Laas Geel and Aw Barkhadle in Somaliland, and Darbi Balanbal in the Ethiopian Somali Region, are sites where such conservation activities involve local communities; many others can be easily identified (such as Taleex in the disputed area between Somaliland and Puntland, and Eyl in Puntland) which have an obvious (domestic) tourism potential. Community-led cultural preservation projects could involve the local line ministry, an external expert agency, local photographers, a youth group willing to train its members in heritage conservation, a university department interested in cultural research and private hospitality companies.

The activities above could contribute to a regional digital archive, providing an important learning and teaching resource for scholars, students, practitioners and policy makers.

D: Promoting contemporary and traditional culture

Although many of the recommendations below have a localised application, these activities should be seen as pilots, which, if successful, could be reproduced elsewhere or scaled up to a regional level.

D1 Grass-roots culture

Besides the obvious advantage of disbursing funds within a long-term strategic framework for supporting Somali culture, we recommend that funds also be set aside for a non-steered small-grants award programme aimed at supporting organisations and artists in the culture sector. This approach provides significant flexibility, allowing donors to recalibrate their strategic focus each year. While these types of award scheme do require intensive oversight and management, they provide space for the creative sector to design diverse and interesting projects and encourage community-led initiatives. The grants could support anything from events funding to equipment purchase to transportation. Limits could be set for each type of grant. For example, event grants could be maximum 5,000 USD and mobility grants maximum 1500 USD for flights and accommodation. Larger grant values could be considered on an ad hoc basis depending on the scale of the initiative. It is important to leave some leeway for non-donor-steered artistic and cultural development.

D2 Culture is fun

Our informants also insisted that people simply need **entertainment, particularly the young**. A roving ‘Got Talent’ (or ‘Idols’) show would provide an outlet for Somali youth self-expression, further social integration and cohesion between Somali and host communities and help build up a local entertainment market. This would require a central partner with proven media production capacity, local youth groups, local broadcast media, A/V production studios and local authorities to provide venues and authorisations. Somali refugees or IDPs, minorities and young women could be encouraged to participate.

We encountered several theatre, dance, music, circus and mobile cinema groups in the Ethiopia Somali Region, Somaliland and Puntland who could entertain local audiences with *mobile projects*. Eventually the same groups could be involved in a mapping and research project as mentioned under C1, which also serves the awareness-raising objective. We strongly recommend funding such groups.

D3 Income through art

Art and culture have always played a role in local and national economies, and one could easily argue that the Somali cultural sector is currently sub-performing, even given low expectations about the national economy. In the following we suggest some income-generating activities, but we recommend conducting further research to understand local market dynamics for the creative industries. This should identify specific barriers to economic growth and opportunities for job creation for women and young people²⁵. Value chains in the creative industries are nebulous and complex and should be carefully mapped out to identify potential areas for targeted support, and to identify the potential domestic (and foreign) consumer markets. A thorough market study could also identify opportunities to pivot traditional skillsets towards modern consumer demands, while at the same time identifying outlets for traditional items (tourist shops, museums, cultural centres etc.) to ensure that traditional artforms are continued. Inclusive and participatory ‘citizen research’ could be encouraged by engaging with local producers and sellers of artworks and handicrafts. This would serve the twin purposes of generating direct income for local actors, and creating a strong evidence base for future investment.

Pending the outcomes of this research, donors can fund existing efforts to generate income through culture, such as the Somali Heritage Week in Nairobi. The organising agency, Awjama, has proven its capacity in this regard and could be asked to consider either up-scaling the event, or holding it in Puntland where they have a strong presence. They may be

²⁵ For example see [DFID’s 2013 study of Kenya’s creative economy](#).

asked, also, to partner with Somali refugee organisations and other cultural organisations to expand their impact.

Other income-generating cultural activities which were suggested by informants include setting up handicrafts shops in airports and international hotels (as in Kenya and Ethiopia), connecting with Western markets through idealistically motivated business ventures²⁶; and external to the handicrafts sector, training photo-journalists and graphic designers (for whom there is a market) and supporting Somali fashion designers, who cater to a population of modern urban-based residents or diaspora returnees.



Photo and poem by the contemporary poet Hadraawi in Mogadishu airport departure lounge

²⁶ such as ISHKAR ([link](#)), which works with vulnerable communities in conflict and post-conflict countries to sell their products overseas.

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