A new offensive against Al-Shabaab has been ongoing in central Somalia since August 2022. Local clan militias, known as Ma’awisley, have supported the Somali National Army (SNA) in efforts to liberate their clan settlements from Al-Shabaab control. The offensive is categorised into two main stages: liberation (xoreyn) and stabilisation (xasillin). The stabilisation stage involves a series of interventions outlined in the federal government’s National Stabilisation Strategy (NSS), 2022–2026. Yet these stabilisation efforts face a major challenge: competition for resources among key stakeholders has led to power struggles over access to and control over funds. In this policy brief, we argue that the interconnected challenges of resource and power struggle create coordination problems, undermining the effectiveness and success of stabilisation efforts.

Brief Points

- To implement stabilisation initiatives, Somalia relies on international donors who provide approximately US$50 million for stabilisation efforts.
- The stabilisation interventions involve numerous actors, including donors, international private companies managing donor funds, INGOs, UN agencies, LNOGs and various levels of government, creating coordination challenges.
- Regular coordination meetings among Somali leaders, partners and donors focus on project updates and logistics, often missing the critical issue of resource competition.
- The interconnected problems of resource competition and power struggles undermine stabilisation initiatives, as well as Somalia’s state-building process in general.

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Introduction

For over 15 years, the federal government of Somalia, in collaboration with regional governments and international allies, has been engaged in a battle against Al-Shabaab. While Al-Shabaab has lost control of major urban centres, it has entrenched itself in rural and peri-urban areas in South and central Somalia. From these strongholds, the group has orchestrated covert operations, including sieges, suicide bombings and assassinations. Al-Shabaab also collects substantial revenues within urban centres outside its control, including the capital, Mogadishu.

Elected for a second term in May 2022, Somalia’s president, Hassan Sheikh Mohamoud, declared a ‘total war’ against Al-Shabaab in June 2022. His new strategy involves a military offensive, an ideological counter-campaign, and measures to disrupt Al-Shabaab’s financial network. As preparations were underway for this total war, Al-Shabaab’s ‘aggressive’ tactics led to a confrontation with local communities in Hiran region in Hirshabelle state in central Somalia, who mobilised themselves in the form of local militias to fight against Al-Shabaab. In response, the government provided military backing to the clan militias, marking the inception of a new offensive that combined the forces of local militias, known as Ma’awash, and the Somali National Army (SNA). Somalia’s international security partners offered logistical and resource support, including occasional aerial support extended to the SNA and local militias during the liberation.

This new offensive has yielded the most territorial gains since the mid-2010s. Given the relative success of the SNA and local militias, there emerged an immediate need for stabilisation in the ‘newly liberated’ areas. Stabilisation is not a novel concept in Somalia’s battle against Al-Shabaab. It has been in practice since 2012. An Al-Shabaab ‘aggressive’ tactic led to a confrontation with local communities in Hiran region in Hirshabelle state in central Somalia, who mobilised themselves in the form of local militias to fight against Al-Shabaab. In response, the government provided military backing to the clan militias, marking the inception of a new offensive that combined the forces of local militias, known as Ma’awash, and the Somali National Army (SNA). Somalia’s international security partners offered logistical and resource support, including occasional aerial support extended to the SNA and local militias during the liberation.

Numerous stakeholders, ranging from donors, international NGOs, multinational corporations, the federal government, and federal member states, are actively involved in this stabilisation phase. Moreover, certain stabilisation activities, like forming interim administrations and managing and allocating stabilisation resources, have proven not to be immune to power dynamics and vested interests. These contestations sometimes trigger new tensions, posing potential risks to the overall stabilisation goal and the fight against Al-Shabaab. Somalia operates under three administrative tiers (local, state and federal) that play overlapping and sometimes competing roles in the stabilisation process. Additionally, international partners, such as donors, the multinational companies that implement donor projects, the UN, and INGOs and LNGOs, play a significant role in the stabilisation. We examine the manifestations of power and resource competition across various levels that could potentially undermine stabilisation goals in the short-term and Somalia’s stability in the long-term.

During fieldwork for this study, continuous discussions and efforts aimed to enhance coordination were ongoing. We argue that what is behind these coordination challenges are unspoken power struggles and resource competition among various stakeholders, including local, national and international actors. The coordination challenges are an outward manifestation of this underlying resource competition.

In this policy brief, we analyse competition for resources and power struggles within the landscape of stabilisation initiatives in South-Central Somalia. Our objective is to provide valuable insights for stakeholders involved in Somalia’s stabilisation initiatives. We draw insights from 21 days of fieldwork in Mogadishu, from 31 May to 20 June 2023, involving interviews with 14 key informants. We argue that competition over stabilisation resources and resulting power struggles have significant impacts on the coordination of key stakeholders. Recognising and addressing these challenges is imperative; failure to do so jeopardises the effectiveness and success of stabilisation efforts and Somalia’s state building.

Resource and Power Struggles at the Federal and Member State Levels

As stated in the federal government’s National Stabilisation Strategy (NSS) 2022–2026, the goal of stabilisation efforts is to strengthen the social contract between the Somali people and the government, with the understanding that a process of stabilisation can further help to achieve sustainable peace, stability, and development. The interventions outlined in the NSS are community recovery; social cohesion and reconciliation; local governance; and rule of law. Primarily, stabilisation in Somalia is donor-driven, and historically, the Somali elite have tapped into donor resources for personal gains. This elite group comprises not only federal and member state leaders and power holders, but also heads of NGOs who are well-versed in capitalising on donor funds, adeptly crafting programmes, interventions, and reports to tap these resources.

The competition among the Somali political elite for stabilisation resources hampers coordination efforts. At both the federal and federal member state levels, multiple line ministries vie for authority over the stabilisation resources. This includes the Ministries of Interior, Internal Security, Education, Health, Sports, and Water and Energy, among others, leading to an environment of overlapping mandates and competition for resources. This competition over stabilisation resources within the government led the office of the President and the Prime Minister to express keen interest in coordinating stabilisation. In April 2023, the Federal President appointed the former Hirshabelle President, Mohamed Abdi Waare, as the Special Envoy for Stabilisation and Civil Protection. Nonetheless, this appointment did not bring about a solution to the coordination challenges. During our fieldwork, rumours surfaced suggesting that the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister might soon lead stabilisation coordination. Reflecting on these developments, a former Hirshabelle official noted:

“A common misconception surrounding stabilisation is that many stakeholders perceive it as a pool of resources to tap into. This perspective distracts from the core goal of stabilisation. True stabilisation should be viewed and approached as an integral part of state-building, offering a glimmer of hope to the citizens that have suffered under Al-Shabaab’s control for more than ten years.”

Competition for stabilisation resources causes tensions between the federal and federal
member states, as well as within the institutions of the federal government and federal member states. While state leaders urge the federal government to decentralise stabilisation resources, they do not consistently apply this principle within their own states. This inconsistency poses a challenge for stabilisation partners in determining which level to engage with and support. As one interviewed donor mentioned,

“We initiated a stabilisation project in one of the federal member states. Our decision to launch the programme at the federal state level was an attempt to allocate resources directly to those federal member states who feel that the central government does not adequately represent their interests.”

Donor-Driven Stabilisation and Coordination Challenges

The support of donors and international partners is crucial in the stabilisation phase. It is fair to assert that the current stabilisation in Somalia is predominantly donor-driven. As expressed by a former Hirshabelle official:

“Without the backing of donors and international partners, stabilisation in Somalia would essentially be non-existent. During my tenure with Hirshabelle state, I visited several liberated areas such as Mahaas, Adan Yabaal. All my expenditures, including flights, were covered by the donors, and they additionally provided technical support, such as needs assessment.”

The federal government has financial constraints, generating less than 30% of its national budget, with the rest expected to come from donors through project and budget support, thus compelling donors to support most stabilisation interventions. This contributes to the power asymmetry between donors and Somali political leaders. From various levels, Somali political leaders often seek out donors at Halane compound to discuss their stabilisation needs. However, this approach does not sit well with some donors. As an interviewed donor representative remarked:

“Typically, during stabilisation coordination meetings, both donors and Somali leaders identify needs. Yet, after these meetings, some Somali leaders – whether from states or federal government ministries – reapproach the donors, lobbying for their share of the funds.”

Donors hold the financial resources, and Somali political leaders vie for access, often using the term ‘stabilisation’ as a buzzword to get a share from those funds. As a result, stabilisation intervention in Somalia tends to follow a top-down direction rather than a bottom-up one. Furthermore, sometimes donor resources play a role in creating political tensions among Somali political leaders, with disagreements arising over who should influence, coordinate, or oversee these resources.

Halane base, a heavily fortified camp that stretches for kilometres and houses diplomats, foreign aid workers and other non-Somalis, has become a focal point for Somali political elites and leaders. Halane base is where the resources and networking opportunities are. Reflecting on this phenomenon, a security expert shared an anecdote from a recent meeting with three key ministers: “they engaged in a conversation about the challenges encountered since taking office. One minister expressed frustration over the frequent trips made to Halane base without any tangible advantages from these trips”. The security expert wondered why a minister should frequent the Halane base.

Stabilisation resource politics is not exclusive to Somali political leaders; donors are also involved in the fray. Various donors direct their stabilisation funds through international companies responsible for administering these funds and through implementing organisations primarily affiliated with or registered in the donor’s home country or region. This leads to a proliferation of international actors engaged in stabilisation, raising operational costs and coordination challenges. A former Hirshabelle state official, who was active in stabilisation efforts, remarked:

“The main donors, namely the EU, US, and UK, lack a strategy to coordinate stabilisation, such as a combined stabilisation fund. These donors work with international companies registered within their own regions, effectively breastfeeding their companies and organisations. This donor approach has financial implications. For instance, a company may have $5 million allocated for Somalia’s stabilisation, yet its annual operational expenses amount to $2 million or even higher.”

In addition, there is no consensus on what the term ‘stabilisation’ means and what approach it requires, which further contributes to the co-ordination problems among donors and Somali leaders. One interviewed security expert noted:

“The term ‘stabilisation’ appears to lack a clear definition among those involved in its implementation, often serving as a catchphrase for securing funds rather than as a term with a clear, actionable objective. Donors from Europe, the UK, and the US differ in their understanding, with some favouring the term ‘stabilisation’ while others prefer ‘recovery’, leading to a diversity of approaches. Somali policymakers and international aid organisations, in pursuit of funding and resources, adapt their language to align with the terminology familiar to donors. This leads to a messy situation.”

Liberated Areas: Fault Lines of Imperfect Coordination

Key pillars of stabilisation include community recovery; social cohesion and reconciliation; local governance; and rule of law. To prevent a resurgence of conflict, reconciliation should come before the formation of interim administrations in the liberated areas. However, challenges in coordination often manifest in liberated areas, where implementing partners with donor funds might not follow a sequential approach. For example, a partner with funding for an interim administration might bypass community reconciliation, rushing to establish the administration as a project milestone, sometimes leading to conflicts. Furthermore, federal and member states might vie for control over forming the interim administration or might deploy competing stabilisation forces in the liberated regions. This has been evident in the KM50 and Barawe settlements in...
Lower Shabelle region. As a university lecturer from SouthWest observed:

“The federal government deployed a federal stabilisation force to the KM50 and Barawe settlements, while the SouthWest Administration expressed a desire to bring its own state-level stabilisation force. Additionally, tensions have arisen between local clans in KM50, notably the Biyomal and Habargidir.”

During fieldwork conducted in June 2023, Barowe town in the Lower Shabelle region was the site of severe clashes. The conflict stemmed from a disagreement between federal forces and SouthWest local police – who were both deployed in the town as part of stabilisation efforts – over the administration of the area. At the time of fieldwork, the newly liberated areas had yet to see the formation of any district administrations. Reflecting on the lessons learned from areas liberated previously, it becomes evident that the establishment of interim administrations has sometimes been rushed, often to fulfil the requirements of donor-funded projects. This hasty approach has led to conflicts and the institution of administrations that are either disputable or non-functional. This poses a challenge to the very core of stabilisation efforts. The absence of effective (interim) district administrations, or the presence of ones that are contested, directly hinders the reconciliation process, and diminishes the perceived legitimacy of any authority intending to take over from Al-Shabaab. A local university lecturer from SouthWest said:

“There have been violent disputes in the formation of interim administrations, with lives lost in Barawe and Bardaale over hasty district administration formation.”

Conclusion and Recommendations

While regular stabilisation coordination meetings among Somali federal and state leaders, implementing partners, and donors are a positive step, these meetings tend to focus primarily on project updates and logistical details. This policy brief underscores that such meetings often overlook a significant underlying issue: the political economy of stabilisation, where the competition for resources and power undermines both coordination and the goal of stabilisation. Evidence suggests that donor funds have been exploited by political elites in Somalia for too long, serving as a ‘cash cow’. Now, stabilisation funds are emerging as a lucrative source for elites. However, as we argue in this brief, the implications of mismanaging stabilisation funds could be different to those of mismanaging humanitarian funds, due to the differing goals of these donor efforts. The mismanagement of stabilisation funds not only undermines the goal of stabilisation, which is an improved social contract and increased legitimacy for government institutions, but also jeopardises state-building efforts in Somalia by diminishing the state’s legitimacy and the public trust in federal and state leadership. Consequently, some people may begin to view Al-Shabaab as an alternative authority. Based on our analysis, we suggest the following measures to improve coordination in Somalia’s stabilisation:

- **Increase efforts to address the underlying power and resource competition:** The persistence of coordination challenges in Somalia’s stabilisation, despite regular meetings between stakeholders, highlights an urgent need for these stakeholders to address the ongoing resource and power competition at all levels.

- **Create a centralised stabilisation fund:** To address the coordination challenges and reduce the cost involved in the implementation and administration of stabilisation interventions, it is crucial to establish a Joint Programme for South Central Somalia Stabilisation.

- **Grant a central coordinating body authority over stabilisation efforts:** A central coordinating body should be responsible for overseeing all stabilisation efforts in South Central Somalia, ensuring that resources are distributed fairly and transparently, and that all actions align with the overarching goals of stabilisation.

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Notes

3. See official X channel for H.E President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud’s Office, @TheVillaSomalia, 1 April 2023: twitter.com/TheVillaSomalia/status/1442174771927326721.

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