



Building Citizen Participation: The Role of Public Awareness in Decentralized Governance.

EVENT REPORT

Date: 13 August
2026

Venue: Safari Hotel,
Borama, Somaliland

Executive Summary

Under DAWLAD-KAAB Project, ISIR Institute conducted a one-day discussion forum on “**Building Citizen Participation: The Role of Public Awareness in Decentralized Governance**” on 13 August 2026 at Safari Hotel in Borama, Somaliland.

The forum brought together approximately 40 participants representing different sectors and stakeholder groups with an interest in governance, civic participation, public awareness, community development, and accountability.

The event provided a platform for participants to exchange perspectives, examine challenges affecting citizen participation, and identify practical approaches for strengthening public awareness and inclusive engagement in decentralized governance.

A central component of the programme was a **Panel Discussion**, which provided an opportunity to examine the relationship between public awareness and meaningful citizen participation from multiple perspectives.

The panel discussion addressed 15 key areas, including public awareness strategies, inclusion of marginalized groups, mechanisms for transforming awareness into action, public trust, culturally relevant communication, the digital divide, transparency, accountability, the role of civil society, measurement of impact, misinformation, power dynamics, quality of participation, youth engagement, and sustainability.



The discussion highlighted that public awareness should not be understood simply as the dissemination of information. Effective awareness should enable citizens to understand governance processes, know their rights and responsibilities, access relevant information, engage with institutions, contribute to decisions, and hold decision-makers accountable.

Participants emphasized the importance of creating practical pathways through which information can translate into meaningful civic action.

The forum also emphasized that citizen participation must be inclusive. Women, youth, persons with disabilities, rural communities, and other groups that may face barriers to participation need accessible and culturally appropriate opportunities to engage in governance processes.

The discussion further recognized that digital platforms can expand civic engagement but should complement rather than replace offline mechanisms, particularly where internet access and digital literacy remain uneven.

Overall, the forum created an important space for dialogue on strengthening the relationship between citizens and governance institutions.

It generated practical areas for further engagement, including civic education, community dialogue, accessible public information, participatory planning, stronger accountability mechanisms, inclusive communication, and sustained collaboration between government, civil society, communities, and other stakeholders.

Background

The Institute for Strategic Insights & Research (ISIR) is an independent, non-partisan think tank registered as a non-governmental organization in Somaliland. The organization seeks to promote policy-relevant research and support the formulation of sound public policies that contribute to positive outcomes in areas including peace and security, governance and democracy, and climate change.

ISIR also works to engage citizens and create spaces for dialogue through the **ISIR Civic Forum**, a platform designed to bring citizens' voices, experiences, and perspectives into public discussions.

The event was organized under the **DAWLAD-KAAB (Strengthening Inclusive Governance)** project. The project seeks to promote accountable, transparent, participatory, and inclusive governance in Somaliland. It responds to the need to strengthen relationships between public institutions and citizens and to create opportunities for citizens to participate more effectively in governance processes.

Effective governance requires more than functioning institutions. Citizens need to understand how governance systems work, where decisions are made, how public resources are managed, and how they can contribute to decisions that affect their communities.

In this context, public awareness and civic education are important foundations for meaningful citizen participation.

Citizens who have access to relevant information and understand their roles and responsibilities are better positioned to engage in public dialogue, participate in development planning, monitor public commitments, and contribute to accountability processes.

The Borama forum was therefore designed as a platform to explore the relationship between public awareness and citizen participation and to identify practical approaches for strengthening inclusive and responsive decentralized governance.

Problem Statement

Decentralization is intended to bring governance and decision-making closer to communities. However, decentralization can only become meaningful when citizens are able and willing to participate in the processes that affect their lives.

A major challenge is limited public awareness of governance structures, responsibilities, decision-making processes, public resources, development plans, and available participation mechanisms.

Where citizens do not have sufficient information, they may find it difficult to engage with local institutions, contribute to development priorities, monitor commitments, or demand accountability.

There may also be barriers affecting specific groups, including women, youth, persons with disabilities, rural communities, and other marginalized populations. These barriers can include limited access to information, social norms, lack of confidence, limited representation, geographical distance, inadequate communication channels, and unequal access to digital technologies.

At the institutional level, local authorities may face challenges related to resources, capacity, communication, transparency, coordination, and public engagement. These challenges can contribute to weak communication between institutions and communities and may negatively affect public confidence.

The forum therefore sought to examine how public awareness can be transformed from simple information dissemination into a practical mechanism for strengthening citizen participation, accountability, inclusion, and trust.

Purpose of the Forum

The main purpose of the forum was to provide an inclusive platform for stakeholders to discuss how public awareness can contribute to stronger citizen participation in decentralized governance.

The discussion sought to connect public awareness with practical forms of participation, including community meetings, development planning, public consultations, monitoring of public commitments, access to information, and engagement with local institutions.

General Objective

To strengthen citizen participation in decentralized governance by increasing public awareness, promoting civic engagement, and enhancing collaboration between citizens, local authorities, and other stakeholders to support transparent, accountable, and inclusive decision-making processes.



Specific Objectives

The forum aimed to:

- Increase understanding of decentralization policies, local governance structures, and citizens' roles and responsibilities.
- Examine the role of public awareness and civic education in promoting citizen participation.
- Identify barriers that limit meaningful participation, particularly among women, youth, persons with disabilities, rural communities, and other marginalized groups.
- Explore mechanisms for strengthening transparency, accountability, and communication between institutions and communities.
- Provide a platform for government, civil society, community representatives, youth, women, academics, and other stakeholders to exchange perspectives.
- Identify practical approaches for transforming public awareness into meaningful civic action.
- Generate recommendations for strengthening inclusive and responsive decentralized governance.



Inclusion of Marginalized Groups

The second area focused on how awareness campaigns can ensure that marginalized groups are not excluded.

The discussion emphasized that equal access to information does not automatically result in equal participation. Some groups may face additional social, economic, physical, geographical, or technological barriers.

Particular attention was given to:

- Women;
- Youth;
- Persons with disabilities;
- Rural communities;
- Low-income communities; and
- Other groups with limited access to decision-making spaces.

Effective inclusion requires deliberate outreach and accessible communication mechanisms.

The discussion highlighted the importance of ensuring that awareness initiatives are understandable, accessible, culturally appropriate, and available through multiple channels.

From Awareness to Action

A major theme of the panel discussion was the gap between knowing and doing.

Public awareness has limited impact if citizens gain information but do not have practical opportunities to use that information.

The discussion therefore explored mechanisms that can connect awareness with concrete citizen action, including:

- Attending community meetings;
- Participating in local consultations;
- Contributing to development priorities;
- Submitting proposals or concerns;
- Monitoring public commitments;
- Participating in community planning;
- Following public budgets and plans; and
- Providing feedback to institutions.

The discussion suggested that awareness programmes should clearly communicate not only what citizens need to know, but also what citizens can do, where they can do it, and how their participation can influence decisions.



Trust and Legitimacy

Trust between citizens and public institutions was identified as an important factor influencing participation.

Where citizens believe that their views are ignored, participation can decline. Public awareness can contribute to trust by making information more accessible and increasing transparency around decisions and public processes.

However, where distrust is already high, communication alone may not be sufficient.

The discussion therefore pointed toward the importance of combining awareness with:

- Transparency;
- Responsiveness;
- Open dialogue;
- Feedback mechanisms;
- Follow-up on citizen concerns;
- Visible institutional action; and
- Accountability.

This highlights an important principle: citizens are more likely to participate when they can see that participation has meaning and consequences.



Local Relevance and Cultural Context

The panel also explored the importance of making awareness messages locally relevant.

Generic communication approaches may fail to address the actual concerns, language, experiences, and priorities of communities.

Effective communication should therefore consider:

- Local priorities;
- Community realities;
- Cultural context;
- Appropriate language;
- Existing communication practices;
- Community leadership structures; and
- Local governance concerns.

Messages should be designed in ways that communities can understand and relate to rather than simply transferring standardized messages from other contexts.



The Digital Divide

The discussion examined the opportunities and limitations associated with digital engagement.

Digital platforms can make information available quickly and provide new opportunities for interaction. However, unequal access to internet services, smartphones, electricity, digital skills, and reliable connectivity can create new forms of exclusion.

The discussion therefore emphasized the importance of combining digital and offline approaches.

Possible complementary mechanisms include:

- Community meetings;
- Radio;
- Public announcements;
- Printed materials;
- Local information sessions;
- Direct engagement with community leaders; and
- Digital platforms where appropriate.

The key principle is that digital engagement should expand participation rather than unintentionally exclude citizens who have limited access to technology.

Transparency and Access to Information

The panel discussion examined what information citizens need in order to participate effectively.

Participants' attention was directed toward the importance of accessible information concerning:

- Development plans;
- Local priorities;
- Public budgets;
- Public services;
- Service standards;
- Implementation timelines;
- Institutional responsibilities;
- Public commitments; and
- Opportunities for citizen participation.

Information should be provided in a form that ordinary citizens can understand.

Transparency therefore requires more than publishing information. Information should be accessible, understandable, timely, and relevant.



Accountability

The discussion connected public awareness with social accountability.

Citizens cannot effectively hold institutions accountable if they do not know what institutions have promised, what resources are available, what activities are planned, and what standards should be expected.

Public awareness can therefore support accountability by enabling citizens to:

- Track commitments;
- Ask informed questions;
- Monitor implementation;
- Raise concerns;
- Provide feedback;
- Request clarification; and
- Engage institutions through appropriate channels.

This creates a relationship between information, participation, monitoring, and accountability.

Role of Civil Society and Community Actors

The panel explored the role of NGOs, community-based organizations, traditional leaders, youth groups, women's organizations, and other community actors.

Civil society can contribute by:

- Conducting civic education;
- Facilitating community dialogues;
- Connecting communities with institutions;
- Supporting marginalized groups;
- Producing accessible information;
- Monitoring governance processes;
- Documenting community concerns; and
- Creating spaces for constructive dialogue.

Community and traditional leaders can also help communicate information and mobilize participation when their engagement is inclusive and supportive of citizen voice.

The discussion emphasized that citizen participation should not be the responsibility of government alone. It requires collaboration among institutions, civil society, communities, media, youth, women, and other stakeholders.

Measuring the Impact of Awareness

The panel also considered how organizations can determine whether awareness activities are actually improving participation.

Measuring the number of people reached is useful but insufficient.

More meaningful indicators can include:

- Number of citizens participating in governance forums;
- Diversity of participants;
- Level of knowledge before and after awareness activities;
- Number of citizen proposals submitted;
- Number of community concerns raised;
- Institutional responses to citizen feedback;
- Participation of women and youth;
- Number of public consultations conducted;
- Changes in citizen confidence and understanding; and
- Evidence that citizen input influenced decisions.

This approach shifts monitoring from simply measuring reach to measuring participation and influence.

Managing Misinformation

The panel discussed misinformation as a potential challenge to public understanding and participation.

Misinformation can create confusion, undermine trust, distort public perceptions, and discourage constructive engagement.

The discussion highlighted the importance of:

- Timely communication;
- Reliable public information;
- Clear institutional messaging;
- Media literacy;
- Community-level communication;
- Fact-checking mechanisms; and
- Rapid clarification of inaccurate information.

Building public trust through consistent and transparent communication is particularly important when misinformation begins to spread.

Power Dynamics and Citizen Voice

Another important issue was the influence of power relationships on participation.

Not every citizen has the same ability to speak, influence decisions, or access decision-making spaces.

Women, youth, persons with disabilities, poorer households, rural communities, and other groups may experience barriers that prevent them from expressing their views.

Meaningful participation therefore requires creating spaces where different voices can be heard safely and respectfully.

Participation mechanisms should avoid situations where consultation becomes dominated by a small number of influential individuals.

Meaningful Participation versus Tokenistic Participation

The panel examined the distinction between meaningful participation and participation that is merely symbolic.

Tokenistic participation may occur when citizens are invited to meetings but their views are not seriously considered.

Meaningful participation requires:

1. Access to relevant information;
2. Opportunity to express views;
3. Genuine consideration of those views;
4. Feedback on how input was used;
5. Opportunities to influence decisions
6. Accountability for commitments.

This distinction is important because simply counting attendance at meetings does not necessarily demonstrate effective citizen participation.



Youth Engagement

Youth engagement was identified as an important component of citizen participation.

Young people represent an important part of the community and can contribute to local governance through civic initiatives, community organizations, digital platforms, volunteering, advocacy, research, and public dialogue.

However, youth participation should go beyond inviting young people to events.

Effective youth engagement requires:

- Meaningful leadership opportunities;
- Accessible information;
- Youth-friendly communication;
- Platforms for dialogue;
- Opportunities to contribute ideas;
- Recognition of youth-led initiatives; and
- Mechanisms through which youth recommendations can reach decision-makers.

Sustainability

The final panel question focused on how public awareness can be sustained beyond elections or short-term projects.

The discussion emphasized that sustainable citizen engagement requires continuous efforts rather than temporary campaigns.

Sustainability can be supported through:

- Institutionalized civic education;
- Regular community forums;
- Long-term public information mechanisms;
- Collaboration between government and civil society;
- Youth and women engagement structures;

- Continuous public communication;
- Community feedback mechanisms; and
- Monitoring of participation outcomes.

Sustained awareness can help establish participation as an ongoing feature of governance rather than an activity that occurs only during elections or externally funded projects.

Key Themes Emerging from the Panel Discussion

The panel discussion generated several overarching themes.

Awareness Must Lead to Participation

Information is only the first step. Citizens need practical mechanisms to translate knowledge into action.

Inclusion Must Be Intentional

Women, youth, persons with disabilities, rural communities, and other marginalized groups require deliberate inclusion strategies.

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Trust Depends on Institutional Responsiveness

Awareness can contribute to trust, but trust is strengthened when institutions respond to citizens and demonstrate accountability.

Digital and Offline Engagement Should Complement Each Other

Digital tools offer opportunities for wider engagement but should not replace traditional and community-based communication mechanisms.

Transparency Requires Accessible Information

Information should be timely, relevant, understandable, and accessible to ordinary citizens.

Civil Society has an Important Bridging Role

Civil society organizations can help connect communities and institutions through civic education, dialogue, advocacy, and monitoring.

Participation Must have Influence

Citizen participation becomes meaningful when citizen input can influence decisions and when institutions provide feedback on how public input has been considered.



Key Findings

Based on the discussions, the following key findings emerged:

- Public awareness is a foundation for effective citizen participation. Citizens require knowledge about governance structures, responsibilities, processes, and participation opportunities.
- Awareness alone is insufficient. Citizens need accessible mechanisms that enable them to convert knowledge into practical participation.
- Inclusive participation requires deliberate action. Marginalized groups may face additional barriers that require targeted approaches.
- Trust and accountability are interconnected. Transparent communication and institutional responsiveness can strengthen public confidence.
- Local context matters. Awareness strategies should reflect local priorities, language, culture, and community realities.
- The digital divide remains relevant. Digital engagement should be combined with offline mechanisms.
- Access to information supports accountability. Citizens need relevant information to monitor commitments and engage institutions effectively.
- Civil society can strengthen the connection between citizens and institutions.
- Participation quality matters more than attendance numbers. Successful engagement should demonstrate influence, feedback, and responsiveness.



Challenges Identified

The discussion highlighted several challenges that can affect citizen participation:

- Limited public understanding of governance processes;
- Weak communication between institutions and communities;
- Limited access to timely and understandable public information;
- Unequal participation among different social groups;
- Digital access and literacy gaps;
- Limited opportunities for continuous civic dialogue;
- Low confidence in the ability of citizens to influence decisions;
- Potential misinformation and information gaps;
- Power imbalances within community decision-making spaces;
- Limited mechanisms for providing feedback to citizens; and
- Short-term approaches to civic awareness.

These challenges demonstrate the need for long-term, inclusive, and locally appropriate approaches to citizen engagement.



Recommendations

Based on the issues discussed during the forum, the recommendations were consolidated into the following key priorities:

Strengthen Civic Education and Public Awareness

Develop continuous civic education to improve citizens' understanding of governance structures, rights, responsibilities, participation, and accountability.

Strengthen Community Dialogue and Participatory Planning

Establish regular platforms where citizens can engage with local authorities, discuss community priorities, and contribute to development planning and decision-making.

Improve Public Communication and Access to Information

Ensure that information on public plans, budgets, services, decisions, and commitments is timely, clear, accessible, and locally relevant.



Promote Inclusive Participation

Ensure meaningful participation of women, youth, persons with disabilities, rural communities, and other marginalized groups in governance processes, including through youth-friendly participation mechanisms.

Combine Digital and Offline Engagement

Use digital platforms alongside radio, community meetings, civic forums, and other offline approaches to reach citizens with different levels of access to technology.

Strengthen Feedback and Accountability Mechanisms

Create accessible channels for citizens to submit concerns, proposals, complaints, and recommendations, while enabling them to monitor commitments and receive appropriate responses.

Strengthen Civil Society and Community Engagement

Encourage civil society organizations, community-based organizations, traditional leaders, and other community actors to support civic education, mobilization, dialogue, inclusion, and accountability.

Address Misinformation and Measure Participation

Strengthen reliable information channels, media literacy, fact-checking, and rapid clarification mechanisms, while developing indicators that measure whether awareness activities actually lead to increased and meaningful citizen participation.



Institutionalize Public Awareness

Integrate public awareness and citizen participation into long-term governance programmes and institutional practices, rather than treating them as short-term or project-based activities.

Lessons Learned

Several lessons can be drawn from the forum.

Lesson 1: Information should be actionable

Citizens need to know not only what is happening but also what they can do and where they can participate.

Lesson 2: Participation requires trust

Citizens are more likely to participate when institutions demonstrate responsiveness and transparency.

Lesson 3: One communication channel cannot reach everyone

A combination of digital, media, community-based, and face-to-face approaches is more appropriate for diverse communities.

Lesson 4: Inclusion should be designed from the beginning

Marginalized groups should not be treated as an afterthought. Their participation should be incorporated into the design of awareness and engagement activities.

Lesson 5: Participation should be measured by influence

Attendance and reach are important, but the stronger question is whether citizen engagement contributes to decisions and accountability.

Lesson 6: Sustainable engagement requires continuity

Citizen participation should be supported through continuous dialogue and institutional mechanisms rather than short-term campaigns.

Conclusion

The “**Building Citizen Participation: The Role of Public Awareness in Decentralized Governance**” forum provided an important platform for examining how informed and engaged citizens can contribute to stronger governance.

The discussions demonstrated that public awareness is closely connected to participation, transparency, accountability, and public trust. However, awareness should not be understood simply as providing information. For awareness to have a meaningful governance impact, citizens must have practical opportunities to use information, express their views, participate in decisions, monitor public commitments, and receive responses from institutions.

The Panel Discussion further demonstrated that citizen participation is influenced by multiple factors, including inclusion, access to information, communication channels, trust, digital access, power dynamics, institutional responsiveness, and the sustainability of engagement mechanisms.

The forum therefore reinforced the importance of creating continuous and inclusive spaces for dialogue between citizens and institutions. Strengthening civic education, improving public communication, supporting marginalized groups, expanding participatory mechanisms, and strengthening accountability can contribute to more responsive and inclusive governance.

The event also demonstrated the value of bringing together different stakeholders to discuss governance challenges from practical perspectives. Continued engagement among government institutions, civil society organizations, community representatives, youth, women, academics, and other stakeholders will be important for translating the recommendations and lessons from the forum into sustained action.







GOLE WATCH

Gole watch is a parliament monitoring initiative in Somaliland that bridges the gap between the parliament and citizens by providing accurate and visualized information.



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