

Occasional Paper

# Mired in Mogadishu: An Appraisal of UK Engagement in Somalia

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# Executive Summary

Since 2016, successive UK governments have spoken of an outward-looking, collaborative and influential post-Brexit Britain. A series of speeches and policy statements emphasised the need to pursue future prosperity through overseas engagements, building on investments in diplomacy, trade, defence and development aid. In March 2021, the UK government published its Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy, reiterating similar themes and referencing Eastern Africa as a theatre where the UK should increase its focus.

Against this backdrop, a RUSI research team examined how the UK has deployed its development, defence and diplomacy toolkit across the region since 2015. The project, entitled ‘Furthering Global Britain? Reviewing the Foreign Policy Effect of UK Engagement in East Africa’, identified factors helping or hindering the UK in its pursuit of a ‘Global Britain’ agenda across four countries in the region: Kenya; Ethiopia; Somalia; and Sudan. It tested common assertions about the effects of Brexit, reductions in the UK aid budget, and the merger of two government departments – the Department for International Development (DFID) and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) – alongside any wider enablers and constraints.

This paper sets out findings on the UK’s intervention within one of these countries, Somalia, from 2015 to 2022. Beneath an (erstwhile) ‘Global Britain’ rebrand, the aims and scope of UK activities appeared largely unchanged, with an emphasis on mitigating successive humanitarian crises and containing the regional threat of Al-Shabaab. Sharing links to conflict, violence and poor governance, these objectives have been integrated into a broader state-building approach to help improve Somali self-sufficiency, military capabilities and, by extension, stability.

From the low baseline of 2012, when the Federal Government of Somalia was first established, progress has clearly been achieved. Alongside other external partners, the UK supported the development of a new political framework, a national security architecture and the trappings of a modern administrative system. It has co-chaired key international conferences, championed the federal agenda and contributed to the formation and function of Federal Member States. The flexibility of UK programming, relationships at the subnational level, convening power and widely recognised expertise, especially in the humanitarian sector, have also allowed stakeholders to carve strategic niches in an otherwise congested donor landscape.

Similarly, the longevity and breadth of its coverage and permanent in-country presence afford the UK credibility and influence, and position its embassy as an information hub for international and local parties. Among other examples, this has fed into progress on debt relief and improvements in public financial management, acted as a catalyst for stabilisation processes, and proved critical in mobilising outside engagement during the 2017 drought.

Recent shifts within the UK have, of course, had an impact. Leaving the EU caused disruption, as did the creation of a new Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), although the benefits of greater synchronicity of diplomacy and development is evident given the politicised realities of operating across the Horn. A larger problem was the reduction of Whitehall's aid budget, which damaged the scope and reliability of interventions and the confidence of partners and local recipients. Perhaps most obvious is in humanitarian delivery, where inadequate levels of UK funding detracted from an already-lacklustre response, various workstreams faced cuts to activities and lags in follow-on programming occurred. Exacerbated by a preoccupation with the 2021/22 presidential election campaign, this confusion interrupted forward planning, sapped momentum for long-term structural reform and diminished the UK's ability to translate influence into tangible change, whether multilaterally or at the national level. Should the fall in aid spending continue – as it is forecast to do – this trend will likely persist, making it difficult to rapidly upscale engagement later down the line as the UK's networks, access and reserves of goodwill steadily diminish.

However, it is important to recognise that the main impediments to UK strategic goals predate these changes. Aside from the contextual difficulties of operating in Somalia, such issues are tied to disparities between donor expectations and capabilities, which stem from broader questions over the feasibility of Western state-building. Technical fixes and capacity-building have a limited shelf-life if there is little Somali agreement over fundamental issues of governance and authority. As illustrated by the UK's stabilisation efforts, successes can be achieved at the local level, but sustainability and scalability depend on whether they can plug into legitimate, sufficiently resourced domestic infrastructure. Incremental advances have been made, but they are neither sufficient nor commensurate with the timelines imposed by weary donors. At the same time, external contributions are often enmeshed (deliberately or incidentally) in a political economy that incentivises and reproduces instability. As a result, the 'Global Britain' agenda remains subject to the same critiques of international state-building that have framed UK policymaking in Somalia for the past decade.

# Introduction

Following the June 2016 Brexit vote, then UK Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson repeatedly referred to the concept of ‘Global Britain’. While the phrase attracted widespread commentary, much of it quizzical or critical, it was an attempt to frame the UK as a proactive, outward-facing country.<sup>1</sup>

In March 2021, the UK government published the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy. Within an increasingly competitive international environment, the document reiterated familiar ‘Global Britain’ themes, heralding a proactive role in global affairs; work in partnership with others; and better integration of foreign policy, defence, trade and international development efforts. In Africa, the UK would forge relationships and pursue shared goals such as prosperity, democracy and security, and in Somalia specifically, focus on conflict resolution, stabilisation and support for the African Union Mission (AMISOM) and its successor, the African Transition Mission (ATMIS).

Two years later, the Integrated Review Refresh provided an update of the government’s policy priorities amid a fast-changing global context.<sup>2</sup> Although no longer using the language of ‘Global Britain’, the key themes remained consistent, with Africa flagged as an arena for deepening relationships and engagement, and greater emphasis placed on leveraging international development alongside ‘the full range of UK strengths and expertise’.<sup>3</sup>

Against this backdrop, the RUSI project ‘Furthering Global Britain? Reviewing the Foreign Policy Effect of UK Engagement in East Africa’ examined how the UK has used development, defence and diplomacy to pursue the ‘Global Britain’ agenda in Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia and Sudan. It explores how far UK engagement contributed towards positive change in recipient countries, and whether this helped advance the national interest at a time of domestic and international change. The project considers whether structural shifts – including a reduced UK aid budget, Brexit and the creation of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) – have proved a help or a hindrance, and identifies wider factors enabling or constraining UK influence and impact.

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1. See, for example, HM Government, ‘Beyond Brexit: A Global Britain’, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/beyond-brex-it-a-global-britain>>, accessed 23 February 2023; Mara Budgen, ‘Theresa May Launches a Global Britain: Her Brexit Speech in Full’, LifeGate, 17 January 2017.
  2. Cabinet Office, ‘Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a More Contested and Volatile World’, policy paper page, 13 March 2023, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/integrated-review-refresh-2023-responding-to-a-more-contested-and-volatile-world>>, accessed 25 May 2023.
  3. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

The research methodology entailed a review of selected academic and policy literature and, in the case of this paper, 61 semi-structured expert interviews conducted between November 2021 and December 2022, featuring a range of current and former government officials, staff from multilateral organisations, academics, and civil society and business figures (see Table 1). The intention was to provide an overview of UK engagement in each country over the six-year period and to diagnose factors salient in driving significant outcomes, with particular reference to ‘positive’ areas where British agency was considered to be important. While references to interviews have been omitted to maintain anonymity, quotations from interviews are used in this paper to demonstrate the complexities of the UK–Somalia bilateral relations and politics without referring to any individual person.

**Table 1:** Interview Breakdown

Interview Type	Number
<b>Civil Society</b>	
Academic	18
NGO/think tanks	18
Media	1
Independent analysts	3
<b>Multilateral Organisations</b>	3
<b>Government</b>	
UK	12
Other	6

Source: Author generated.

This paper is composed of three chapters. Chapter I provides background on UK–Somalia relations and summarises the UK’s major policy interests and main development, humanitarian, diplomatic and defence investments in recent years. Within this broad portfolio of work, Chapter II highlights examples of UK contributions to positive outcome areas, before identifying key factors that have constrained or enabled UK action, which are unpacked further in Chapter III. Due to limited space, the paper focuses exclusively on the Federal Republic of Somalia, rather than Somaliland.

The analysis forms part of a series of publications, including a capping paper that lays out the project methodology and greater detail on UK investments

across the region,<sup>4</sup> four country case studies focusing on the UK's work in Ethiopia,<sup>5</sup> Sudan,<sup>6</sup> Somalia and Kenya<sup>7</sup> and a further publication that synthesises the overall findings and recommendations of this project.

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4. Simon Rynn and Michael Jones with Elijah Glantz, 'Furthering Global Britain? An Overview of UK Development, Defence and Diplomatic Engagement in Eastern Africa', RUSI, 1 November 2022.
  5. Simon Rynn, 'On Shifting Ground: An Appraisal of UK Engagement in Ethiopia', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (February 2023).
  6. Simon Rynn and Michael Jones, 'Deal or No Deal? An Appraisal of UK Engagement in Sudan', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (June 2023).
  7. Michael Jones, 'Bargaining with the Green City in the Sun: An Appraisal of UK Engagement in Kenya', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (July 2023).



# I. Background and Strategic Focus

UK links to the Horn of Africa are deep-rooted, with a suite of clan-level treaties along the coast eventually coalescing into a formal protectorate – British Somaliland – in 1884. Conflict with fascist Italy in 1940 led London to capture and govern neighbouring Italian Somaliland between 1941 and 1950, before transferring the territory to UN trusteeship (controversially under an Italian administration). Although the two Somalilands later merged to form an independent Somali Republic in 1960, the contours of this new polity were heavily shaped by British diplomacy, with the UK ‘returning’ disputed borderland areas such as the Ogaden to Ethiopia in 1948.<sup>8</sup> Administrative rights over Kenya’s Northern Frontier District (NFD) were likewise granted to Nairobi (1963) despite the preferences of NFD’s Somali majority, a decision conflicting with the irredentist notions of a ‘Greater Somalia’<sup>9</sup> championed by the Somali Youth League.<sup>10</sup> As a result, Mogadishu formally broke ties with London between 1963 and 1968. Relations were only restored after Major-General-turned-President Siad Barre’s coup in 1969.

UK engagement became increasingly securitised after outbreak of the Somali civil war in the late 1980s, leading to a protracted pattern of crisis management. Following the collapse of Barre’s ‘Democratic Republic’ – latterly a clan-centric autocracy – in 1991, Whitehall supplied limited political and logistical support to several short-lived peace conferences and international missions, including the US-led Unified Task Force (1992–93).<sup>11</sup> Having failed to revive a working state, the US and the UK withdrew, leaving the EU as the ‘main [Western] donor’ between 1995 and 2002.<sup>12</sup> In Somalia itself, a period of ‘not-war-not-peace’ gave rise to informal systems of adaptation and security provision, with eclectic experiments in ‘governance without government’ often lapsing into violent competition.<sup>13</sup> Amid instability and ‘clan cleansing’, various iterations of Islamism

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8. Tobias Hagmann, *Talking Peace in the Ogaden: The Search for an End to Conflict in the Somali Regional State in Ethiopia* (London: Rift Valley Institute, 2014).

9. The goal of unifying all Somali-speaking lands into a single entity.

10. Somalia’s first major political party.

11. Other interventions included UNOSOM I (1992–93) and UNOSOM II (1993–95).

12. Ken Menkhaus, ‘Elite Bargains and Political Deals Project: Somalia Case Study’, Stabilisation Unit, February 2018, <[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/766049/Somalia\\_case\\_study.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/766049/Somalia_case_study.pdf)>, accessed 6 January 2023.

13. Ken Menkhaus, ‘Governance Without Government in Somalia: Spoilers, State-building, and the Politics of Coping’, *International Security* (Vol. 31, No. 3, 2006), pp. 74–106.

found purchase, supplementing coercion with what A H Salam and Alex de Waal dub ‘little solutions’ – justice, predictability and basic welfare – to satisfy the ‘real day-to-day needs’ of local communities.<sup>14</sup> While a tenuous elite bargain<sup>15</sup> was brokered in 2004,<sup>16</sup> the ensuing Transitional Federal Government (TFG) remained confined to Baidoa, the former capital of South-West State.<sup>17</sup> In contrast, a loose coalition of Sharia authorities and Islamist organisations – the Supreme Council of Islamic Courts (SCIC) – consolidated hold of Mogadishu in 2006 with the backing of domestic businessmen, extending their control over vast tracts of southern and central Somalia within several months.<sup>18</sup>

Despite becoming a ‘broad mosque’ of political and ideological affiliations,<sup>19</sup> the SCIC’s territorial ambitions and alleged connections with Osama Bin Laden led an informal ‘contact group’, including the US and the UK, to increasingly homogenise local political dynamics through the lens of counterterrorism.<sup>20</sup> This culminated in varying degrees of support for Ethiopia’s unilateral invasion of Somalia in 2006, under the auspices of the War on Terror. Although the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) ostensibly helped to prop up the TFG,

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14. A H Salam and Alex de Waal, ‘Africa, Islamism, and America’s “War on Terror” After September 11’, in Alex de Waal (ed.), *Islamism and its Enemies in the Horn of Africa* (London: Hurst, 2004), p. 256.
  15. Menkhaus, ‘Elite Bargains and Political Deals Project’.
  16. With the Transitional National Government – a cartel of businessmen and clan bosses colloquially dubbed the ‘Mogadishu mafia’ – becoming increasingly defunct after the 2000 Arta peace process, there was a push for renewed negotiation between different stakeholders. (See Andre Le Sage, ‘Somalia: Sovereign Disguise for a Mogadishu Mafia’, *Review of African Political Economy* (Vol. 29, No. 91, 2002), pp. 132–38). Led by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) with support from the EU and Kenya, a series of consultations were launched in 2002, featuring more than 300 ‘Somali faction leaders, traditional and religious leaders, politicians, and civil society representatives’, followed by technical committees and working groups. (Ken Menkhaus et al., ‘A History of Mediation in Somalia Since 1988’, Interpeace, Search for Peace series, May 2009). Culminating in an agreement signed by around ‘forty warlords and politicians’ in 2004, the ‘Mbagathi peace process’ created a new transitional charter for establishing a national assembly and provided the basis of a Transitional Federal Government. (Ibrahim Farah, ‘Somalia: No More Missed Opportunities’, Life and Peace Institute, February 2013).
  17. As a result, its authority was nominal at best, with Harun Maruf and Dan Joseph dismissing the TFG as a ‘bloated, crippled creature, weighed down by internal rivalries, an ungovernable cabinet of 80 ministers, and a president, Abdullahi Yusuf, who many observers saw as lacking in political skills and mainly concerned with advancing the interests of his Darod clan’. See Harun Maruf and Dan Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab: The Secret History of Al-Qaeda’s Most Powerful Ally* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2018), p. 41.
  18. By 2006, an estimated 70% of Somalia’s ‘business community had rallied behind the Islamic courts’, reflecting collective perceptions of the SCIC as a ‘low-cost, high-return investment’, at least initially. See Aisha Ahmad, ‘The Long Jihad: The Boom–Bust Cycle Behind Jihadist Durability’, *Journal of Global Security Studies* (Vol. 6, No. 4, December 2021), p. 8; Aisha Ahmed, *Jihad and Co: Black Markets and Islamist Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
  19. Cedric Barnes and Harun Hassan, ‘The Rise and Fall of Mogadishu’s Islamic Courts’, Briefing Paper, Chatham House, April 2007, p. 4 .
  20. As Akbar Ahmed argues, the War on Terror had a propensity to impose ‘prefabricated ideological frame[s] on different cultures and societies’, diminishing the relevance of anthropological specificity, contextual fluidity, sociological nuance, or history, in favour of a fixed set of universalising binaries. See Akbar Ahmed, *The Thistle and the Drone: How America’s War on Terror Became a Global War on Tribal Islam* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2013), p. 301.

its occupation proved unpopular.<sup>21</sup> Over time, Al-Shabaab – a radical SCIC offshoot and belated franchise of Al-Qa’ida<sup>22</sup> – emerged as an effective resistance movement, blending extremist discourse with pan-Somali demagoguery to mobilise recruitment.<sup>23</sup> To stabilise the situation and facilitate an exit for Ethiopian troops, the US, the EU, the UK and numerous other stakeholders supplied financial support, logistics, strategic communications and pre-deployment training to a multilateral African Union mission<sup>24</sup> authorised by the UN in 2007.<sup>25</sup> Al-Shabaab was nevertheless able to seize much of southern Somalia when the ENDF withdrew in 2009, due in part to AMISOM’s chronic lack of resourcing.

With a gradual increase in manpower – a trend that saw AMISOM progressively morph into a broad-based peace-enforcement mission,<sup>26</sup> peaking at 22,000 personnel<sup>27</sup> – Mogadishu was largely reclaimed by early 2012. Pressure from external funders encouraged the uptake of a provisional constitution, and the TFG was eventually replaced by a new Federal Government of Somalia (FGS).<sup>28</sup> Having partially facilitated these negotiations during the 2012 London Conference, the UK followed Turkey in reopening its Somali embassy in 2013, becoming the first Western country to do so. Much of this involvement was framed in humanitarian and security terms, with British officials referencing a direct threat from piracy and terrorism.<sup>29</sup> The clearance of Al-Shabaab from most major cities took until 2015, with AMISOM relying on formal or de facto participation from frontline states, including Kenya and Ethiopia, to boost its capacity. At the same time, advances were made building up ‘rudimentary

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21. Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, p. 47. Within the first two years, approximately 80,000 Somalis had died and nearly one million were displaced. Ahmed, *The Thistle and the Drone*, p. 268.
  22. Although cooperation has been ‘limited and irregular’ since Al-Shabaab’s formal affiliation with Al-Qa’ida in 2012, it remained durable ‘despite the loss of leaders on both sides and the emergence of Islamic State in north-eastern Somalia’. See Tricia Bacon and Daisy Muibu, ‘Al-Qaida and Al-Shabaab: A Resilient Alliance’, in Michael Keating and Matt Waldman (eds), *War and Peace in Somalia: National Grievances, Local Conflict and Al-Shabaab* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 391–400.
  23. Stig Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia: The History and Ideology of a Militant Islamist Group, 2005–2012* (London: Hurst, 2013).
  24. Initially involving Uganda and Burundi as troop contributing countries, followed by Djibouti in 2011. Kenya was incorporated into AMISOM in 2012, a year after the unilateral launch of Operation Linda Nchi (‘Protect the Country’), Sierra Leone joined in 2013 (until 2015), and Ethiopian forces formally integrated in 2014.
  25. Paul Williams, ‘Lessons for Partnership Peacekeeping from the African Union Mission in Somalia’, International Peace Institute, 2019.
  26. Najum Mushtaq, ‘AMISOM: Challenges of Influence, Impartiality and Disengagement’, in Keating and Waldman (eds), *War and Peace in Somalia*.
  27. Michael Jones, ‘Taking Stock in Somalia’, *RUSI Commentary*, 8 March 2022.
  28. Paul D Williams, *Fighting for Peace in Somalia: A History and Analysis of the African Union Mission (AMISOM), 2007–2017* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 124.
  29. For instance, see Matt Baugh, ‘Why a Stable Somalia is in our Interest’, Prime Minister’s Office, 21 February 2012, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/why-a-stable-somalia-is-in-our-interests>>, accessed 22 February 2023.

security structures’,<sup>30</sup> establishing Federal Member States (FMSs),<sup>31</sup> and assisting relatively peaceful electoral transitions (2012, 2017 and 2022).<sup>32</sup> As Penholder for Somalia in the UN Security Council, the UK contributed towards a series of transnationally mediated deals – including the Somali Compact (2013)<sup>33</sup> and the Somalia Security Pact (2017)<sup>34</sup> – to support these processes: fleshing out the country’s institutional arrangements and pressing for agreement among political elites over the distribution of military forces.<sup>35</sup>

However, progress was slow. For instance, while a national security architecture plan was endorsed at the Second London Conference in 2017, a lack of inclusivity and local ownership, and rivalries between FMS leaders and President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed ‘Farmaajo’ (elected in 2017), led to the framework lapsing within a year.<sup>36</sup>

Blame lies in part with Farmaajo’s push for greater centralisation, but studies also reference long-running problems endogenous to external state-building. Often considered an ‘internationally driven political project’, Somalia’s federal system has been cast by some as a ‘division of spoils ... held together by a combination of a common threat posed by Al-Shabaab, copious levels of security driven ... aid, and protection afforded by AMISOM peacekeepers’.<sup>37</sup> Akin to a ‘donor-security cartel’, where the FGS is one player among many, governance does not depend on popular legitimacy so much as the sufficient distribution of rent and power to ‘buy in everyone except those designated as terrorists or pirates’.<sup>38</sup> Resulting in a highly extraverted political economy, where Somali powerbrokers and gatekeepers can leverage participation in government as a ‘resource appropriation tactic’, state-building has arguably become ‘an end in itself, rather than the outcome of a more profound process of actual state

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30. Mushtaq, ‘AMISOM’, p. 169.

31. Aside from the already-self-sufficient administration in Puntland and the self-declared republic in Somaliland.

32. Hassan Sheikh Mohamud (HSM) won Somalia’s 2012 election, replacing Acting President Mohamed Osman Jawari. He later conceded defeat to former Prime Minister Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed ‘Farmaajo’, in 2017. Mushtaq, ‘AMISOM’, p. 169.

33. ‘A New Deal for Somalia, Brussels Conference’, communique, 16 September 2013, <<https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/new-deal-for-somalia-conference/home.html>>, accessed 14 December 2022.

34. Security Pact, London Conference Somalia, 11 May 2017, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/london-somalia-conference-2017-security-pact>>, accessed 14 December 2022.

35. Alex de Waal, ‘Somalia’s Disassembled State: Clan Unit Formation and the Political Marketplace’, *Conflict, Security and Development* (Vol. 20, No. 5, 2020), pp. 561–85.

36. Somali Dialogue Platform, ‘Revisiting the 2017 National Security Architecture: Key Options and Considerations’, Rift Valley Institute, 5 September 2022, <[https://riftvalley.net/sites/default/files/publication-documents/SDP%E2%80%A6Policy%E2%80%A6NationalSecurity%E2%80%94EN%E2%80%94A01\\_0.pdf](https://riftvalley.net/sites/default/files/publication-documents/SDP%E2%80%A6Policy%E2%80%A6NationalSecurity%E2%80%94EN%E2%80%94A01_0.pdf)>, accessed 10 January 2023.

37. Menkhaus, ‘Elite Bargains and Political Deals Project’, p. 23. Emphasis in original.

38. Alex de Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War and the Business of Power* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), p. 124.

formation'.<sup>39</sup> In turn, the failure to regulate 'regional and international patronage competition'<sup>40</sup> across a fragmented network of external parties reproduces transactional, exclusionary and violent politics, with elites vying for recognition and funding. In contrast to 'locally initiated, funded, and implemented' peace-making evident across Somaliland, research therefore suggests Western state-centric stabilisation may paradoxically reward or perpetuate conflict.<sup>41</sup>

With a stalled Security Pact, mounting donor fatigue and the conclusion of AMISOM scheduled for 2021 (pushed back to April 2022), international stakeholders, including the UK, gradually refocused towards supporting the 2018 Somali Transition Plan (STP)<sup>42</sup> (updated in 2022), a roadmap for the phased transfer of security responsibilities to national forces by late 2023. A complete withdrawal of AU peacekeepers (now working under the Transitional Mission, ATMIS) is slated for 2024. However, the feasibility of these timeline is questionable given how much of the country is still beset by conflict.<sup>43</sup> Understaffed ministries are limited to a string of isolated 'city states' and have little capacity to deliver a plausible social contract.<sup>44</sup> Centre-periphery tensions are similarly pronounced, accentuated by links to 'rentier systems' in the Gulf: competition between the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar in 2017-18, for example, quickly found expression in the Horn, with Doha backing the FGS, Abu Dhabi supporting rival FMSs, and Farmaajo exploiting alleged transnational connections as a pretext for quashing domestic opposition.<sup>45</sup> The 2022 reselection of President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud – who previously served from 2012 to 2017 – raised the possibility of a political 'reset', but delays, corruption and violence marred the electoral process itself,<sup>46</sup>

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39. Tobias Haggmann, *Stabilisation, Extraversion, and Political Settlements in Somalia* (London and Kenya: Rift Valley Institute, 2016), p. 6.
40. De Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa*, p. 124.
41. Haggmann, *Stabilisation, Extraversion, and Political Settlements in Somalia*, p. 58. Of course, Somaliland experienced its own difficulties, as outlined in Claire Elder, 'Somaliland's Authoritarian Turn: Oligarchic-Corporate Power and the Political Economy of De Facto States', *International Affairs* (Vol. 97, No. 6, November 2021), pp. 1749-65.
42. Letter dated 5 July 2018 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council, S/2018/674, <[https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_2018\\_674.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2018_674.pdf)>, accessed 11 January 2023; Somali Dialogue Platform, 'Revisiting the 2017 National Security Architecture'.
43. At least 60 different 'warring parties' were active across the country in 2018. See Vanda Felbab-Brown, 'Developments in Somalia', Testimony, Brookings, 14 November 2018, <<https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/developments-in-somalia/>>, accessed 23 February 2023.
44. Jones, 'Taking Stock in Somalia'.
45. International Crisis Group, 'Somalia and the Gulf Crisis', Report No. 260, 5 June 2018, <<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/somalia/260-somalia-and-gulf-crisis>>, accessed 6 June 2022.
46. Omar Mahmood, 'A Welcome Chance for a Reset in Somalia', International Crisis Group, 31 May 2022, <<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/somalia/welcome-chance-reset-somalia>>, accessed 23 February 2023.

and clan tensions have reportedly left relations with new Prime Minister Hamza Abdi Barre ‘fraught’.<sup>47</sup>

At the same time, the Somali National Army (SNA) remains more a ‘strategically deployed brand’ than a coherent institution.<sup>48</sup> Despite significant investment from the likes of Turkey, the UK, the US and the EU, poor donor coordination and nascent capacity within Somalia’s Ministry of Defence to absorb and organise external assistance led to inconsistencies in doctrine, capabilities and equipment.<sup>49</sup> Rent-seeking, clannism, a pervasive distrust of formal state structures and widespread dependence on the conflict economy have also impeded progress,<sup>50</sup> creating ‘interest asymmetries’ between host authorities and foreign partners.<sup>51</sup> In contrast, Al-Shabaab perseveres as a robust insurgent force, conducting a steady tempo of operations, maintaining control over rural and peri-urban areas (approximately 20% of Somali territory), and collecting almost double the FGS tax intake.<sup>52</sup> Demands made by its extortion system may ‘outstrip’ any public services on offer,<sup>53</sup> but the group’s (mobile) courts are generally a preferred mechanism of civil arbitration, even among some members of the Somali police.<sup>54</sup> While a new offensive against Al-Shabaab has gained ground across Hirshabelle and Galmudug since August 2022,<sup>55</sup> an ongoing reliance on local clan militia –

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47. Vanda Felbab-Brown, ‘Somalia’s Challenges in 2023’, Brookings, 27 January 2023, <<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2023/01/27/somalias-challenges-in-2023/>>, accessed 23 February 2023.
  48. Nisar Majid et al., ‘Somalia’s Politics: The Usual Business? A Synthesis Paper of the Conflict Research Programme’, LSE, 2021, p. 30.
  49. Williams, *Fighting for Peace in Somalia*.
  50. This is not only evident among those politicians and local strongmen associated with Somalia’s security industry, but also international private military companies. See Jethro Norman, ‘Private Military and Security Companies and the Political Marketplace in Mogadishu’, LSE, 13 August 2020, <<https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/Conflict-Research-Programme/crp-memos/Norman-private-military-mogadishu-final.pdf>>, accessed 12 December 2022.
  51. Paul D Williams, ‘Building the Somali National Army: Anatomy of Failure, 2008–2018’, *Journal of Strategic Studies* (Vol. 43, No. 3, 2020), p. 375.
  52. Aisha Ahmad, Tanya Bandula-Irwin and Mohamed Ibrahim, ‘Who Governs? State Versus Jihadist Political Order in Somalia’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* (Vol. 16, No. 1, 2022), p. 11; Mohamed Mubarak, ‘A Losing Game: Countering Al-Shabaab’s Financial System’, Hiraal Institute, October 2020, <<https://hiraalinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/A-Losing-Game.pdf>>, accessed 7 January 2023.
  53. Tricia Bacon, ‘Inside the Minds of Somalia’s Ascendant Insurgents: An Identity, Mind, Emotions and Perceptions Analysis of Al-Shabaab’, GW Program on Extremism, George Washington University, 7 March 2022, p. 85.
  54. Michael Jones, ‘Ballots, Bullets and Building Blocks: State Formation in Somalia’, *RUSI Commentary*, 10 June 2022.
  55. Whether the organic outcome of resentment against Al-Shabaab, or a pre-planned strategy nurtured by the new HSM administration, clan militia and the SNA have made significant advances against the group, although the ability of these forces to consolidate and hold recaptured territory, and provide a sufficiently attractive peace dividend for enticing popular buy-in, remains unclear.

particularly the ‘Macawiisleey’<sup>56</sup> – also exposes the latent tensions and limitations defining contemporary state-building.<sup>57</sup>

Alongside these political and security challenges, a combination of conflict, climatic stresses and structural weaknesses have left Somalia susceptible to large-scale humanitarian emergencies. Donors were widely criticised for their lacklustre response to major famines in 1992–93 and 2011–12, with the latter resulting in 260,000 deaths.<sup>58</sup> Although improvements were evident as stakeholders, including the UK, worked to mitigate famine-like conditions in 2017 (explored below),<sup>59</sup> Somalia now faces its worst drought in 40 years.<sup>60</sup> Amid a ‘perfect storm’ of failed rainfalls, locust plagues, the economic legacies of Covid-19, and inflationary pressures on global grain prices from the war in Ukraine,<sup>61</sup> an IPC report in spring 2023 projected that around 6.6 million people across the country would experience crisis levels of food insecurity by the middle of the year.<sup>62</sup>

## UK Priorities

UK policymakers have long framed Somalia as a strategic priority,<sup>63</sup> particularly in relation to tackling ‘radicalisation, terrorism, piracy, and unregulated migration’.<sup>64</sup> As a corollary of Al-Shabaab’s resilience and the country’s ongoing

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56. Named after the ‘long sarong-like skirts of its members’, Macawiisleey is an amalgam of local militia outfits – largely composed of pastoralists and farmers – that have violently resisted Al-Shabaab taxation across pockets of Lower Shabelle. See Vanda Felbab-Brown, ‘The Problem with Militias in Somalia: Almost Everyone Wants Them Despite Their Dangers’, in Adam Day (ed.), *Hybrid Conflict, Hybrid Peace: How Militias and Paramilitary Groups Shape Post-Conflict Transitions* (New York, NY: United Nations University, 2020).
  57. Stig Jarle Hansen, ‘Can Somalia’s New Offensive Defeat Al-Shabaab?’, *CTC Sentinel* (Vol. 16, No. 1, 2023), pp. 19–24.
  58. *BBC News*, ‘Somalia Famine “Killed 260,000 People”’, 2 May 2013.
  59. Reports describe the response as ‘much better organised in 2017 than in 2011’, although gaps remained evident, not least delays, a lack of scale and the need to ensure gains were ‘consolidated and systemic’. See Maxine Clayton, Ahmed Abdi Ibrahim and Badra Yusuf, ‘The 2017 Pre-Famine Response in Somalia: Progress on Reform?’, Overseas Development Institute, Humanitarian Policy Group Commissioned Report, January 2019, p. vii.
  60. International Rescue Committee, ‘Crisis in Somalia: Catastrophic Hunger Amid Drought and Conflict’, 13 December 2022, <<https://www.rescue.org/article/crisis-somalia-catastrophic-hunger-amid-drought-and-conflict>>, accessed 9 January 2023.
  61. Rynn and Jones with Glantz, ‘Furthering Global Britain?’, p. 38. Notably Ukraine itself accounted for around 90% of Somalia’s wheat imports before the conflict. *The Economist*, ‘Drought Killed 43,000 People in Somalia Last Year’, 25 March 2023.
  62. Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, ‘Somalia: IPC Acute Food Insecurity and Malnutrition Snapshot’, March–June 2023 update, 25 April 2023, <[https://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC\\_Somalia\\_Acute\\_Food\\_Insecurity\\_Malnutrition\\_MarJun2023\\_Snapshot.pdf](https://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC_Somalia_Acute_Food_Insecurity_Malnutrition_MarJun2023_Snapshot.pdf)>, accessed 5 May 2023.
  63. Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI), ‘UK Aid in a Conflict-Affected Country: Reducing Conflict and Fragility in Somalia’, June 2017.
  64. DFID, ‘DFID Somalia Profile: July 2017’.

insecurity, the basic premise of British engagement has not changed for much of the past decade.<sup>65</sup> References to stabilisation and conflict resolution in the 2021 Integrated Review reflected similar themes to those shared across the UK Government Strategy – Somalia (including Somaliland) (2014–17),<sup>66</sup> UK Somalia Strategy (2017–22),<sup>67</sup> and an unpublished country action plan. In each case, security and development programming was nested within a wider state-building approach designed to ‘reduce the threat ... posed to UK national interests by building a more stable, peaceful, and prosperous Somalia’.<sup>68</sup>

Broadly spread across the focus areas listed below,<sup>69</sup> these aims essentially conflated upstream threat prevention – seen as a ‘core hook’ for British decision-makers – with the need for a durable federal system:

1. Reducing risk to UK interests and regional partners.
2. Diminishing Al-Shabaab’s reach, territory and resources.
3. Improving political stability and predictability.
4. Poverty alleviation and boosting economic growth.

While the funding pattern has shifted to accommodate contextual changes and institutional learning – for example, Whitehall gradually prioritised support for local authorities to compensate for FGS weaknesses – the overarching objective remains consistent – developing a ‘good enough’ state capable of out-competing Al-Shabaab functionally and militarily. This goal may now be increasingly tied to an updated STP,<sup>70</sup> but interviewees considered the scope to be much the same, as the Plan aligns with the UK’s long-term push for Somalia’s self-sufficiency, and received British resourcing and technical support in its design.

## Development and Humanitarian Aid

As the second-largest Development Assistance Committee (DAC) donor country to Somalia between 2011 and 2020,<sup>71</sup> a significant proportion of UK bilateral

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65. The one exception was piracy, which was de-prioritised following a fall in attacks from 2016.

66. UK Government Strategy – Somalia (including Somaliland) (2014–17), unpublished.

67. UK Somalia Strategy (2017–22), unpublished. Also referenced in Somalia Security Sector Reform programme, CSSF Programme Summary, Development Tracker, CSSF-03-000027.

68. ICAI, ‘UK Aid in a Conflict-Affected Country’.

69. *Ibid.*

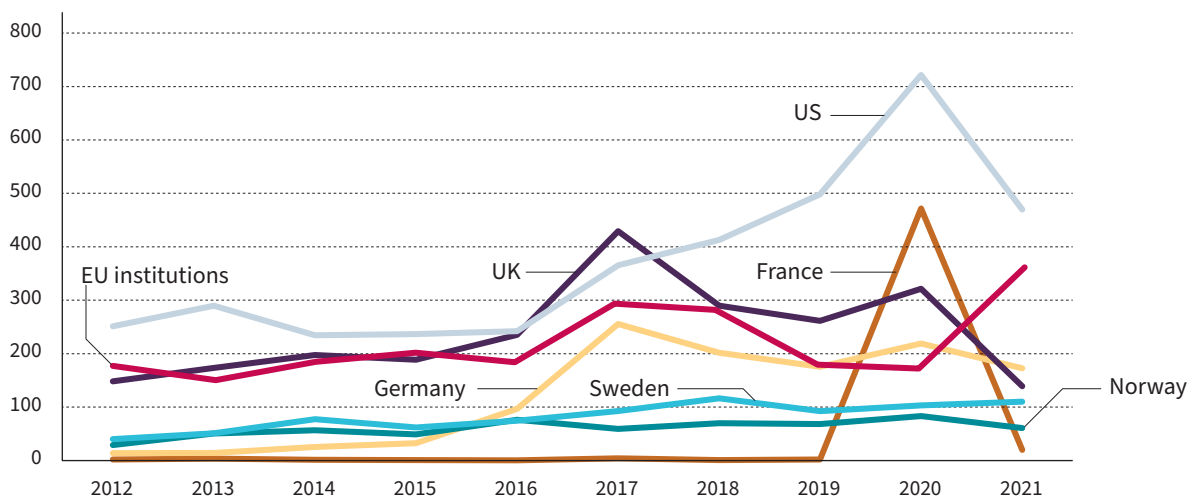
70. For example, see British Embassy Mogadishu, ‘New UK Support to Somalia’s Security Transition’, 18 August 2022; Somalia Stabilisation Programme, CSSF Programme Summary, Development Tracker, CSSF-03-000028.

71. With the exception of 2017, when the UK outspent the US. This data is drawn from OECD, ‘Creditor Reporting System’, accessed 27 June 2023. The OECD’s Creditor Reporting System provides a ‘set of readily available basic data that enables analysis on where aid goes, what purpose it serves and what policies it aims to implement’ across individual projects and programmes. The CRS figures used in this paper reflect gross disbursements (rather than commitments) across all channels using constant (rather than current) prices to control for fluctuations in exchange rates and inflation levels.



official development assistance (ODA) has been devoted to social infrastructure.<sup>72</sup> Specifically, this includes government assistance, public sector policy and administrative reform, public financial management (PFM) and support for subnational governance. Successive versions of the Somalia Stability Fund (SSF), a multi-donor instrument led by the Department for International Development (DFID), for instance, were paramount in the formation of second- and third-generation FMSs.<sup>73</sup> The UK has similarly worked to strengthen the building blocks for FGS legitimacy and accountability in line with successive National Development Plans, from judicial efficacy and service provision to encouraging inclusive commercial growth.<sup>74</sup> Additionally, long-running investments have been made in security sector reform and enabling law enforcement, with UK personnel leading the policing strand of Somalia’s Comprehensive Approach to Security framework,<sup>75</sup> and supporting related projects on stabilisation and countering violent extremism/deradicalisation.<sup>76</sup> Efforts continue to find a sustainable political settlement at the federal level.<sup>77</sup>

**Figure 1: Top DAC Country (and EU) Bilateral Donors to Somalia (\$ Millions)**



Source: OECD, ‘Creditor Reporting System’, <<https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=crs1>>, accessed 27 June 2023.

72. Rynn and Jones with Glantz, ‘Furthering Global Britain?’.

73. Ed Laws, ‘Thinking and Working Politically in Somalia: A Case Study on the Somalia Stability Fund’, ODI, 1 May 2018.

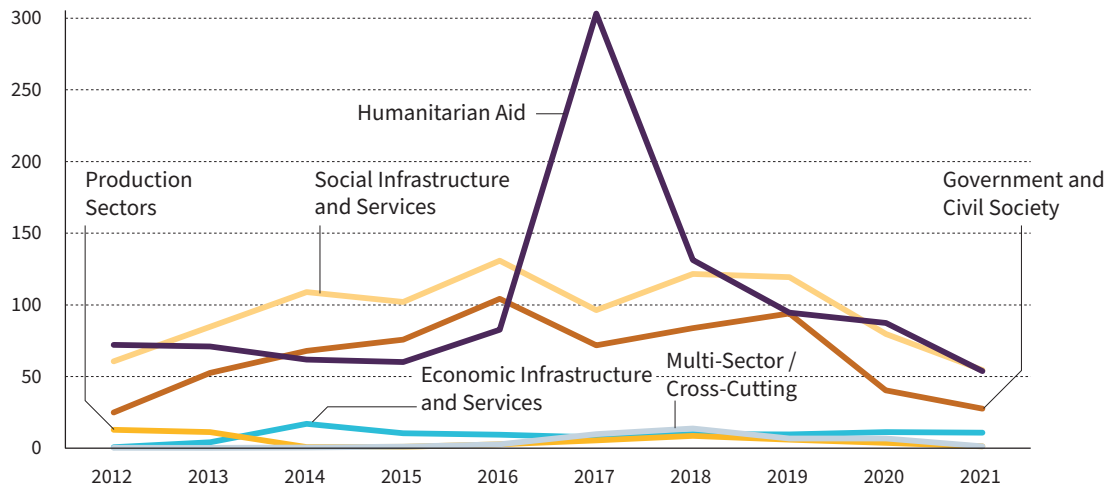
74. See Rynn and Jones with Glantz, ‘Furthering Global Britain?’, pp. 37–47.

75. Report of the Secretary-General on Somalia, United Nations Security Council, 2 May 2018, pp. 8–11.

76. For example, see UK Aid, ‘Supporting Counter-Extremism in Somalia’, Programme Summary, Development Tracker, <<https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/projects/GB-GOV-52-CSSF-03-000026/summary>> accessed 10 January 2023; UK Aid, ‘CSSF Somalia Stabilisation Programme’, Annual Review Summary Sheet, Development Tracker, <<https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/projects/GB-GOV-3-CSSF-03-000028/documents>>, accessed 10 January 2023.

77. See UK Aid, ‘Somalia Forward: Fair Power and Stable Settlement’, Annual Review, Development Tracker, <<https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/projects/GB-GOV-1-300490/documents>>, accessed 30 January 2023.

**Figure 2:** UK Bilateral ODA Spending Across a Selection of Sectors in Somalia (\$ Millions)



Source: OECD, 'Creditor Reporting System', accessed 27 June 2023.

The bulk of aid funding has often been allocated to humanitarian assistance, although this was folded within the same state-building strategy on the basis that 'conflict, poverty and famine in Somalia have their roots in the lack of a viable political settlement'.<sup>78</sup> Attention fluctuated over time, with resources peaking in famine or near-famine years (2011/12 and 2017/18), but food security (as a sub-stream of 'humanitarian preparedness and response') was re-emphasised as a thematic priority in the Integrated Review.<sup>79</sup> Under the associated Call to Action to Prevent Famine, a £119-million aid package was announced in 2020 to mitigate the 'combined threat of coronavirus and famine' across select African countries, including Somalia.<sup>80</sup> This supplemented a historical focus on resilience programming to improve early warning systems, coping mechanisms, local self-reliance and access to healthcare services.

With the decision of Boris Johnson's government to lower ODA allocations from 0.7% to 0.5% of gross national income (GNI), framed as a 'temporary' measure following the financial impact of Covid-19,<sup>81</sup> UK funding in Somalia experienced a 56% contraction between 2020 and 2021,<sup>82</sup> taking it below Germany's bilateral aid spending for the first time (as shown in Figure 1). Somalia is still within the top 10 recipients of UK ODA, but having previously experienced a depreciation

78. See ICAI, 'UK Aid in a Conflict-Affected Country', p. 11.

79. HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy* (London: The Stationery Office, 2021), p. 46.

80. FCDO, 'New Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office Will Lead Global Action to Ensure World's Poorest are Protected from Ravages of Coronavirus and Famine', press release, 2 September 2020.

81. *Reuters*, 'UK Plans Temporary Aid Cut to Pay for Coronavirus Crisis – The Times', 16 November 2020.

82. Based on data in Philip Loft and Philip Brien, 'Reducing the UK's Aid Spend in 2021 and 2022', House of Commons Library, 13 December 2022.

of sterling (sapping British purchasing power in dollarised economies), and further reallocations and disruption during the pandemic, interviewees felt the latest budgetary reductions amounted to a third real-term cut in six years. While the distribution of financing remained broadly similar, the overall decrease was dramatic, with funds for public sector policy and administrative management falling from \$13.1 million in 2019 to \$0.8 million in 2021, and support for subnational governance dropping from \$14.5 million to around \$1 million over the same period.<sup>83</sup> An additional freeze on ‘non-essential’ aid was introduced in August 2022, leading to confusion over ill-defined thresholds and eligibility criteria,<sup>84</sup> and by November, officials were warning of a further 30% aggregate cut to bilateral spending in 2023.<sup>85</sup>

## Diplomacy

UK diplomacy has generally focused on supporting, and occasionally steering, multilateral efforts to build up the FGS’s political anatomy, authority and capacity. Having co-hosted or facilitated several international conferences to formalise the federal structure and provisional constitution, the UK’s attention increasingly shifted towards developing a basic security framework (agreed in 2017) and delivering the 2018/2022 Transition Plan. As explored below, pressure was applied from London and Washington to kickstart the World Bank’s Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) debt relief process in 2016 and, after achieving the decision-point in 2020, to mobilise external financial assistance for reducing Somalia’s arrears. Participation in several coordination mechanisms, including the S6,<sup>86</sup> Core Security Partners Group (CSPG),<sup>87</sup> Quad, Quint,<sup>88</sup> and the World Bank’s Multi-Partner Fund (MPF),<sup>89</sup> also enabled the UK to rally diplomatic pressure, discuss common objectives and alignment of activities and, in some cases, shape messaging on behalf of international allies. This became evident in the run-up

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83. OECD, ‘Creditor Reporting System’, accessed 27 June 2023.

84. For example, the minister for international development, Andrew Mitchell, claimed the ‘FCDO did not deem responding to the drought in Somalia as “essential” aid’ in 2022. See William Worley, ‘Mitchell: UK Must Restructure FCDO to Regain Aid Superpower Status’, *Devex*, 7 December 2022.

85. William Worley and David Ainsworth, ‘UK Aid Faces Third Major Cut in 3 Years, with £1.7B to be Cut’, *Devex*, 23 November 2022.

86. A forum established by the UN Special Representative for Somalia, featuring the UN, the EU, the UK, the US, the UAE and Turkey.

87. Involving the FGS and key security partners: ATMIS, Turkey, and the EU, the UN, the UK, and the US.

88. Including Qatar, Turkey, the UAE, the UK and the US.

89. The Multi-Partner Fund was established under the delivery framework for the Somali Compact to coordinate financial support for Somalia’s core state functions. See World Bank, ‘The Somalia Multi-Partner Fund (MPF)’, <<https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/somalia/brief/the-somalia-multi-partner-fund-mpf>>, accessed 23 February 2023.

to the 2022 election, with Western donors aligning their condemnation of delays and concurrent clan clashes in Mogadishu.<sup>90</sup>

As UN Penholder, the UK also mediated debate over ATMIS, negotiating language around the new mission's budget, scope, aims and complexion. Although resistant to AU demands for 'predictable and sustainable' funding via UN-assessed contributions, interviewees credited London for managing an 'acrimonious situation', defusing blockages and helping to support the finalisation of a new mandate and eventual concept of operations. However, questions were raised over the practical implications of these arrangements, with some dismissing ATMIS's goals as either unrealistic or recycled.

## Defence

The need to develop a self-sufficient security apparatus capable of degrading Al-Shabaab – as formally prescribed by the 2018 STP – was referenced in both the 2015 National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence Review<sup>91</sup> and 2021 Defence Command Paper.<sup>92</sup> In recent years, the British Army has facilitated infrastructural projects, including the construction or refurbishment of police stations and local barracks, and delivered training and staff officer courses to Somali military units under Operation *Tangham*.<sup>93</sup> More than 2,500 troops from Sector/Division 60 of the SNA (based in Baidoa) graduated from these schemes between 2017 and 2022.<sup>94</sup> While loosely modelled on US engagement with Danab, a prototypical cross-clan commando brigade, the UK was nevertheless described by some as only offering a 'partial package' of support – monthly stipends and non-lethal equipment – rather than supplying mentorship in the field.<sup>95</sup>

At a strategic level, respondents cited the embedding of UK advisers across most of Somalia's federal institutions, including the ministries of defence and internal security, to improve bureaucratic bandwidth, policy development and coordination. Similar support was provided for the development of a new National Security

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90. Outlined by interviewees and noted in Omar Mahmood, 'Why Somalia's Electoral Crisis Has Tipped into Violence', Q&A, International Crisis Group, 27 April 2021.

91. HM Government, *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015* (London: The Stationery Office, 2015), p. 57.

92. Ministry of Defence, *Defence in a Competitive Age*, CP 411 (London: The Stationery Office, 2021), p. 31.

93. British Embassy Mogadishu, 'British Military Train Somali Army in Baidoa', 2 June 2021.

94. Author correspondence with the Ministry of Defence, May 2023.

95. After the UK first pledged to offset stipends in 2015, approximately 3,000 SNA personnel received monthly salaries of \$100 in Sector 60, and equipment was provided to those participating in 'collective company training'. First aid kits, uniforms, boots, 'communications gear, tents and vehicles' were supplied to each 'completed battalion'. See Paul D Williams and Afyare Elmi, 'Security Sector Reform in Somalia: Challenges and Opportunities', Heritage Institute, January 2023; *Goobjoog News*, 'UK Pledges to Pay Stipends of Sector 60 of SNA', 2 November 2015, <<https://goobjoog.com/english/sna-chief-commends-uk-for-supporting-sna/>>, accessed 20 January 2023.

Architecture, although progress stalled after the National Security Council – the apex of Somalia’s 2017 Security Pact – was effectively suspended in 2018.<sup>96</sup>

Alongside the deployment of liaison officers to AMISOM and then ATMIS, the UK also offers bilateral pre-deployment training to troop-contributing countries via the British Peace Support Team (BPST-A),<sup>97</sup> the British Army Training Unit Kenya (BATUK)<sup>98</sup> and the International Peace Support Training Centre.<sup>99</sup> Efforts continue to strengthen AMISOM/ATMIS’s civil–military components, and London persists as a major financial backer,<sup>100</sup> channelling resources into the UN Office for Project Services, the UNSOS Trust Fund,<sup>101</sup> and, since September 2021, a Mogadishu Joint Operations Coordination Centre used by AMISOM/ATMIS and the SNA.<sup>102</sup>

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96. UN Security Council, ‘Report of the Secretary-General on Somalia’, S/2018/1149, 21 December 2018, p. 5. The National Consultative Council eventually decided to accelerate implementation of the National Security Architecture in October 2022, agreeing to form a series of technical committees to review the process two months later. See United Nations Security Council, ‘Situation in Somalia: Report of the Secretary-General’, S/2021/154, 17 February 2023.
  97. East Africa Security, CSSF Programme Summary, Development Tracker, CSSF-03-000021.
  98. Fiona Weir, ‘BATUK: Britain’s Base in Kenya’, Forces.Net, 26 February 2016, <<https://www.forces.net/services/army/batuk-britains-base-kenya>>, accessed 1 February 2023.
  99. Marco Jowell, ‘The Unintended Consequences of Foreign Military Assistance in Africa: An Analysis of Peacekeeping Training in Kenya’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* (Vol. 12, No. 1, 2018); Marco Jowell, *Peacekeeping in Africa: Politics, Security and the Failure of Foreign Military Assistance* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018).
  100. Since 2022, the UK has reportedly committed £47.5 million of bilateral voluntary contributions to ATMIS. Data based on author correspondence with the FCDO, May 2023.
  101. This included more than £8 million in voluntary contributions in 2022.
  102. Williams and Elmi, ‘Security Sector Reform in Somalia’.

# II. Overview of Selected Focus Areas

This chapter draws on a selection of interview data to explore selected examples of ‘successful’ UK contributions and outcomes as outlined by various respondents. While not necessarily comprehensive in scope,<sup>103</sup> each area reflects an important dimension of UK engagement in Somalia: early recovery (stabilisation); debt relief and PFM (state-building); and famine response (humanitarian assistance). These examples are used to identify and analyse key factors enabling or constraining the ‘Global Britain’ agenda, from leadership, flexibility, and cultivating partnerships, to leveraging politically smart interventions and adopting a more joined-up, strategic approach.

## Early Recovery and Stabilisation

There is increasing recognition that violent extremism is often enmeshed in, and enabled by, Somalia’s wider conflict systems, emerging more as a symptom and propellant of insecurity than as its underlying cause.<sup>104</sup> Al-Shabaab, in particular, has proven adept at manipulating social tensions and state weaknesses: leveraging grievances, clan rivalries and comparatively effective forms of governance to consolidate territorial or ‘semi-territorial control’.<sup>105</sup> Areas re-captured by AMISOM or the SNA often lapse back into violence, with local competition over newly available land, resources and administrative positions creating space for the group to re-infiltrate and continue operating.<sup>106</sup> Depending on the complexion of ‘liberated’ communities, federal forces may even be perceived as a greater threat than Al-Shabaab itself.<sup>107</sup> Stabilisation efforts were therefore described as gradually shifting away from the basic output-oriented models employed in Afghanistan – often reliant on infrastructure projects – to

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103. For further details of the methodology and limitations of this report, see Rynn and Jones with Glantz, ‘Furthering Global Britain?’, pp. 3–4.

104. See Joanne Crouch, ‘Counter-Terror and the Logic of Violence in Somalia’s Civil War’, Saferworld, 2018.

105. Stig Jarle Hansen, *Horn, Sahel and Rift: Fault-lines of the African Jihad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

106. Crouch, ‘Counter-Terror and the Logic of Violence in Somalia’s Civil War’; Hansen, *Horn, Sahel and Rift*.

107. This was cited by interviewees and referenced in the literature, in part because ‘many local SNA units display greater loyalty to their own clan and community interests; they use the SNA to abuse and exploit rival clans. In response, clan elders and local communities have bolstered their own clan militias as protection – not only against al-Shabaab, but also against the SNA’. Felbab-Brown, ‘The Problem with Militias in Somalia’.

a more politically sensitive methodology, tying the reimposition of government authority to local discussion and negotiation.<sup>108</sup>

Respondents generally viewed the UK as a critical driver of this transition, especially as much of its stabilisation portfolio centres on grassroots reconciliation via ‘inclusive dispute resolution mechanisms’.<sup>109</sup> Conducted alongside service delivery, these dialogues try to ensure approaches are contextually appropriate and strengthen trust and confidence in state legitimacy. Although often small in scale, they were deemed highly strategic, ‘laying the groundwork’ for other donors<sup>110</sup> and linking stabilisation with wider political processes.

This was particularly evident during and after Operation *Badbaado*,<sup>111</sup> an SNA-led offensive concentrated around Lower Shabelle in 2019–20, where the UK’s activities were framed as contributing towards ‘changes in the attitudes of communities towards security forces and government, changes in the behaviour of security forces, and increasing cooperation between the FGS and FMS’.<sup>112</sup>

A key ingredient was the ‘Early Recovery Initiative’ (ERI), a dynamic project that focused on conflict resolution with the aim of encouraging ‘reconciliation [and] enabling government outreach’ in reclaimed villages. Efforts were made to create ‘vertical and horizontal linkages at the local and sub-national levels’,<sup>113</sup> deploying Somali liaison officers to engage with district authorities – a typically neglected tier of the country’s federal framework – and improve their capacity and coordination with FMS and military stakeholders. Similarly, ERI-facilitated communication between clan elders, state officials and the SNA generated momentum for peace committees and recovery operations, building familiarity and setting realistic and manageable expectations.<sup>114</sup> For instance, public consultations were credited with helping the South-West Ministry of the Interior and the governor of Lower Shabelle to ‘establish early positive relationships with communities’, and boosted confidence in regional security forces across Jubbaland.<sup>115</sup> Building up a detailed understanding of local conflict dynamics likewise identified ‘quick wins’ for expediting residential buy-in, such as the

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108. Isadora Gotts et al., ‘International Conflict Stabilisation: Assessing Progress and Future Prospects’, *RUSI Occasional Papers* (September 2022).

109. Itad/Altai CSSF Africa MEL Partner, Thematic Evaluation on Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding: Somalia Case Study, 2021, unpublished.

110. *Ibid.*

111. Conducted in collaboration with AMISOM, the operation sought to reclaim a cluster of Al-Shabaab-held bridge towns south of Mogadishu. See Samira Gaid, ‘The 2022 Somali Offensive Against Al-Shabaab: Making Enduring Gains will Require Learning from Previous Failures’, *CTC Sentinel* (Vol. 15, No. 11, November/December 2022).

112. Itad/Altai CSSF Africa MEL Partner, Thematic Evaluation on Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding.

113. *Ibid.*

114. As referenced by interviewees and documented in Itad/Altai CSSF Africa MEL Partner, Thematic Evaluation on Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding.

115. *Ibid.* Also noted by various respondents.

removal of thornbushes, and the UK's 'low profile' throughout the project enabled ERI to encourage a 'strong sense' of domestic ownership.<sup>116</sup>

These inputs were seen as 'significant and influential' on their own terms, but they also plugged a clear gap in international programming.<sup>117</sup> Given ERI's flexibility, local staffing, risk tolerance and networking across the SNA, AMISOM/ATMIS and national and state-level line ministries, interviewees viewed the project as uniquely able to 'leap-frog' bureaucratic and logistical barriers hampering access across pre- or recently recovered areas. In contrast, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) enjoyed a comparatively large budget but was reportedly constrained from working directly with the Somali army, and other donors lacked the agility to mobilise around an ad hoc campaign that only received low-level military planning. As a 'first responder', ERI was therefore considered an essential source of information for stakeholders once Operation *Badbaado* was underway, supplementing community dialogues with real-time atmospherics,<sup>118</sup> perception surveys and assessments to guide security operations and government programming. Community feedback and footage of relief activities similarly offered opportunities for 'viral marketing', supporting a UK-backed communications strategy to maximise impact.

Additionally, participants explained how greater awareness of context, political dynamics and local power structures influenced the composition of frontline SNA battalions, helping ensure they were more congruent with the demographics of communities about to be recovered. This represented a clear departure from previous operations, where the army's clan-centric disposition routinely led to accusations of partisanship or predatory behaviour.<sup>119</sup> While the offensive did not feature Sector 60 – clearance efforts mainly involved the Danab Brigade and Turkish-backed Gorgor (Eagle) commandos – interviewees also referenced UK guidance on human rights and gender sensitivities supplied to 'holding forces', content that was eventually scaled into a train-the-trainer scheme for the Ministry of Defence. As a result, evaluators link at least some improvement in SNA behaviour to ERI contributions,<sup>120</sup> even if the bulk of Somali security services remained heavily politicised militiamen.<sup>121</sup>

That said, there were inevitable limitations given Farmaajo's preoccupation with internal political tensions and reluctance to prioritise stabilisation. Operation *Badbaado* – one of the few major pushes against Al-Shabaab between 2017 and 2022 – quickly became snared in controlling an 'ill-supported and semi-isolated

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116. Itad/Altai CSSF Africa MEL Partner, Thematic Evaluation on Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding.

117. *Ibid.*

118. Including human geography, social attitudes and public opinion.

119. See Williams, 'Building the Somali National Army'.

120. Itad/Altai CSSF Africa MEL Partner, Thematic Evaluation on Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding.

121. Felbab-Brown, 'The Problem with Militias in Somalia'.



series of villages’ without supplementary police coverage or resourcing.<sup>122</sup> A secondary offensive was reduced to a ‘standstill’,<sup>123</sup> with nearly 40% of assigned SNA units ‘disappear[ing]’.<sup>124</sup> Collectively, these advances were confined to a ‘few miles outside Mogadishu’ and did not significantly affect Al-Shabaab’s capabilities or influence. While tactical successes were achieved,<sup>125</sup> they proved difficult to consolidate or expand in the absence of durable supply lines and longer-term development programming. In some cases, District Peace Committees apparently received little funding or support following their initial formation, leaving many unable to deliver planned activities. This in turn made it difficult to secure public confidence for a ‘peace dividend seen as superficial or unsustainable’.<sup>126</sup> Like much of the Conflict, Security and Stability Fund (CSSF) portfolio, interviewees also acknowledged that ERI had trouble aligning with larger DFID/FCDO-led interventions, such as Stability Fund II,<sup>127</sup> due to discrepancies in approach, objectives and sequencing, creating missed opportunities to backstop and scale local progress.

Despite these challenges, ERI staff and the wider UK embassy assumed a ‘coordinating function’ where possible. Although bilateral access to Somali institutions tended to reinforce donor silos, UK personnel were described as pulling a previously ‘sidelined’ UN into international working-group discussions and pressing for collective engagement. Similarly, after agreeing to a Memorandum of Understanding with CRESTA/A (Community Recovery and Extension of State Authority and Accountability), the UN stabilisation cell, ERI stakeholders were reportedly ‘instrumental’ in developing and updating Somalia’s National Stabilisation Strategy<sup>128</sup> (as a living document) alongside contextually specific, state-level action plans. While these frameworks remained somewhat nominal given the political dysfunction in Mogadishu and reliance on insolvent FMS structures, they were cast as a valuable reference point for external funders and

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122. Noted by interviewees and outlined in Colin D Robinson, ‘New Name but Little Sign of Change: The Revised Agreement on the African Union Mission in Somalia’, IPI Global Observatory, 27 January 2022.

123. A 2021 UN report explained: ‘State police units [were] expected to be deployed to Lower Shabelle to replace the Somali National Army as holding forces and move towards civil administration. However, only a few regional security forces (Darawish) and police recruits from South-West State (state police) have been trained, equipped and deployed to hold the liberated areas, but not in significant numbers as to take over from the [SNA]’. See Letter dated 5 October 2021 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolution 751 (1992) concerning Somalia addressed to the President of the Security Council, p. 14.

124. Felbab-Brown, ‘The Problem with Militias in Somalia’.

125. For example, preserving control over towns such as Janelle; disrupting Al-Shabaab logistics and VBIED (vehicle-borne improvised explosive device) supply routes into Mogadishu; and improving SNA–AMISOM coordination. See Hodan Hassan, ‘Lower Shabelle Stabilization: Lessons from Operation Badbaado 1 2019–2020, FGS MoIFAR and UNSOM’, pp. 12–13.

126. Jones, ‘Taking Stock in Somalia’.

127. Somalia Stability Fund II, Programme Completion Review, Development Tracker, December 2022.

128. Federal Government of Somalia, National Stabilization and Reconciliation Strategy 2022–2026, unpublished.

facilitated discussion between Somali powerbrokers, ‘setting the tone for collaboration’ along multiple axes. At the same time, UK investment supported the design and uptake of new tools such as the Fragility Index Maturity Model<sup>129</sup> and Stabilisation District Profiles, allowing partners and FGS officials to better target their investments and track impact.

As a result, the UK, and ERI specifically, was able to find traction due to its politically sensitive, flexible and participatory approaches, advancing the thinking around good practice in the stabilisation space, and addressing longstanding gaps in local capabilities and coverage. The project was likewise praised for ‘catalysing change’ and creating conducive ‘conditions for Somali institutions and donors to build on’,<sup>130</sup> with other funders, including the US, either trying to replicate the ERI template or use it as a ‘stepping-stone’ for their own activities.

However, it should be stressed that these outcomes were set against a very low baseline, with progress limited to ‘small pockets’ that had little bearing on Somalia’s overall levels of fragility or insecurity. Although interviewees noted the applicability and relevance of ERI in light of the recent offensives against Al-Shabaab,<sup>131</sup> many of the same concerns regarding the FGS’s ability to hold and govern territory have since resurfaced. Around 60% of SNA troops still lack ‘real military capacity’,<sup>132</sup> police resourcing is often dismissed as a ‘tick box exercise’,<sup>133</sup> and experts warn that ‘insufficient planning has gone into preventing renewed misgovernance by militias, clan elders, and state and national politicians and government officials in the liberated areas’, implying the structural and systemic problems undermining stabilisation continue to resonate.<sup>134</sup>

## HIPC Debt Relief and Public Financial Management Reform

Despite local demand for infrastructural projects in 2015, Western donors, including UK Aid, questioned the plausibility of large-scale external lending

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129. United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia, Community Recovery and Extension of State Authority and Accountability (CRESTA/A), <[www.unsom.unmissions.org/community-recovery-and-extension-state-authority-and-accountability-cresta#:~:text=The%20National%20Stabilization%20Strategy%20is,development%20of%20community%20recovery%20projects](http://www.unsom.unmissions.org/community-recovery-and-extension-state-authority-and-accountability-cresta#:~:text=The%20National%20Stabilization%20Strategy%20is,development%20of%20community%20recovery%20projects)>, accessed 16 January 2023.
  130. Itad/Altai CSSF Africa MEL Partner, Thematic Evaluation on Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding.
  131. Including Operation *Black Lion*, the highly anticipated ‘second phase’ of HSM’s offensive against Al-Shabaab, focusing on South-West State and Jubbaland.
  132. Felbab-Brown, ‘The Problem with Militias in Somalia’.
  133. Hansen, ‘Can Somalia’s New Offensive Defeat Al-Shabaab?’.
  134. Felbab-Brown, ‘Somalia’s Challenges in 2023’.

given the FGS's lack of domestic income.<sup>135</sup> A revenue base was considered necessary for accommodating such investments, which in turn required development funding and technical support from international financial institutions (IFIs), and the clearance of outstanding Somali arrears – around \$5.2 billion – to normalise relations with the World Bank, the IMF and the African Development Bank.<sup>136</sup> At the same time, stakeholders assumed the prospect of debt relief could incentivise greater accountability and transparency – key elements of contemporary state-building<sup>137</sup> – and contribute towards 'some kind of social contract' for bolstering government authority and grounding an eventual political settlement.<sup>138</sup>

Alongside the World Bank, British diplomats, including the ambassador and head of mission, therefore encouraged the FGS to develop an administrative framework for tax collection.<sup>139</sup> UK, US and EU policymakers likewise lobbied the IMF to prepare the first in a series of Staff Monitored Programmes (SMP)<sup>140</sup> that would condition the HIPC process. Although the decision was aided by the appointment of credible ministers of finance and planning in Mogadishu, research describes 'political intervention by the UK and US' as critical in finalising the SMP's launch in 2016.<sup>141</sup>

The requirements themselves were fairly streamlined: prioritising revenue increases and improvements in budgetary design and execution; basic accountability; resource sharing; and a new Poverty Reduction Strategy.<sup>142</sup> However, international buy-in was mixed, with 'some within the donor community' querying their feasibility.<sup>143</sup> Against this backdrop, interviewees explained how the UK leveraged its convening power as UN Penholder, and diplomatic and financial heft in the MPF (as the second-largest contributor after the EU), to enable, expedite and champion proceedings. Helped in part by DFID's prominence across development circles, the clout of British stakeholders also benefited from the small number of external parties actually involved in discussions compared with Somalia's congested security space. A lack of interest from the Gulf states, among others, allowed the UK to share information, rally support and coordinate

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135. Joakim Gundel, 'Debt Relief and the Political Marketplace in Somalia', Conflict Research Programme memo, LSE, 2 November 2020.

136. Joakim Gundel and Nisar Majid, 'Speculation and Accountability? Debt, Oil and Gas and the Political Marketplace in Somalia', London School of Economics and Political Science, 2 November 2022

137. Gundel, 'Debt Relief and the Political Marketplace in Somalia'.

138. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

139. Noted both by interviewees and in *ibid.*

140. An 'agreement between country authorities and Fund staff to monitor the implementation of the authorities' economic program'. Gundel, 'Debt Relief and the Political Marketplace in Somalia', p. 3.

141. *Ibid.*

142. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

143. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

multilateral meetings far more easily, especially as it was working with Western partners (broadly) aligned over outcome and procedure.<sup>144</sup>

In programmatic terms, much of the heavy lifting was fronted by the World Bank Group, using pre-arrears clearance grants<sup>145</sup> to boost public financial management and strengthen the FGS's capacity (and motivation) to achieve financial normalisation. This integrated a raft of projects under the MPF umbrella (Table 2), including a series of Recurrent Cost Reform Financing schemes (RCRF I and II) operating (primarily) at the national level to create and sustain a credible government payroll and 'establish the foundation for efficient budget execution'.<sup>146</sup>

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144. These included Denmark, the EU, Finland, Germany, Italy, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the State and Peacebuilding Fund, the UK and the US.
  145. International Development Assistance (IDA) grants available from the World Bank before clearance of the arrears owed to the World Bank and full re-engagement.
  146. British Embassy Mogadishu, 'Recurrent Cost Reform Financing Programme Launched by the Government of Somalia', 6 October 2015, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/recurrent-cost-reform-financing-programme-launched-by-the-government-of-somalia>>, accessed 6 January 2023.

**Table 2:** Largest Programmes in the MPF Portfolio

Pillar	Project	MPF Grant (\$ Millions)	Date	Overview
Effective, accountable government	RCRF I RCRF II	14.8 88	2015–21	To support the FGS and eligible FMS strengthen resource management systems, the inter-governmental fiscal framework and service delivery systems in health and education.
	Domestic Revenue Mobilisation and Public Financial Management Capacity Strengthening Project	30.1	2015–22	To bolster systems of domestic revenue mobilisation, expenditure control and accountability to the FGS, Puntland State of Somalia and Somaliland.
	Capacity Injection Modality (CIM)	20.3	2015–20	To increase the staffing and institutional capacity of selected line ministries and central agencies to perform core government functions.
Enabling economic growth	Somali Core Economic Institutions and Opportunities (SCORE)	28.1	2015–20	To improve the enabling environment for private and financial sector development and catalyse private investment and job creation.

Source: Adapted from Aleph Strategies, MPF Mid-Term Review, Final Report, 2019, <<https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/638261591382785804-0010022020/original/SomaliaMPFMidTermReviewSeptember2019.pdf>>, accessed 10 January 2023.

As a significant donor in the MPF, the UK not only supported these efforts indirectly but supplemented the process with parallel interventions to plug longstanding gaps in PFM coverage. For example, the £37.8-million Public Resource Management in Somalia (PREMIS) project (2015–22),<sup>147</sup> a multi-stream intervention (Table 3), was developed to improve ‘tax, spend, and civil service management’ at various tiers of the federal framework.<sup>148</sup> Advances were particularly pronounced sub-nationally, with practitioners building up local systems and structures – essentially ‘from scratch’ – over a five-year period. By leveraging comparative advantage in access and influence among FMSs – an outcome of the Stability Fund’s early interaction with state authorities – DFID was able to extend public financial management programming to recipients previously out of the World Bank’s reach. Interviewees also considered ‘dynamic’

147. While the UK was the largest financial backer of PREMIS, it received support from the EU (£5.8 million) and USAID (£3.9 million).

148. UK Aid, ‘Public Resource Management in Somalia: Annual Review’, Development Tracker, last updated 27 October 2017, <<https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/projects/GB-1-205065/documents>>, accessed 16 November 2022.

interventions by UK embassy staff essential, with senior responsible owners not only participating in quarterly steering committees but supplying ad hoc support and advocacy in meetings with FMS officials – efforts reflecting a ‘politically savvy’ and comparatively erudite understanding of federalism that helped mobilise local engagement.

On a practical level, participants acknowledged the convenience of SSF I and II and PREMIS being managed by the same implementing partner, which afforded stakeholders the benefit of pre-established relationships, trust and political capital for delivering a suite of technical reforms otherwise at odds with the patrimonial logic of incipient state institutions. Progress was quickly achieved, with participating FMSs creating budgets within a year of their formation. Respondents also stressed the effort taken to ensure ‘capacity building’ did not lapse into ‘capacity substitution’. Although initially reliant on Nairobi-based expats, PREMIS gradually opted to embed national advisers across FMS ministries as a means of boosting operational policies and procedures. So-called ‘super users’ were likewise identified from the Somali civil service – directors and bureaucrats rather than itinerant political appointees – and integrated in a train-the-trainer arrangement to better systematise and cascade learning. While these methods clearly benefited from the UK’s standalone role at the state level, their design consciously avoided the ‘mess’ unfolding in FGS departments, which quickly became over-saturated by consultants working at cross-purposes for different donors.

**Table 3: PREMIS Components**

Component	Overview
Improve FGS macroeconomic policies and statistics and strengthen revenue generation	CRATES (Customs Reform and Trade Enhancement in Somalia) was the main mechanism for international cooperation on customs administration reforms with the FGS.
Strengthen public finance management and revenue collection in FMSs	PREMIS provided technical assistance to newly established federal states, building on the initial work initiated through the SSF.
Public Sector Reform	PREMIS provided support to the UN SIP (Strengthening Institutional Performance) programme, which was a continuation of previous commitments under the Core State Functions Programme. In 2018, resources budget for this component were reallocated to support reforms to financial management and accountability in the security sector.
Support to World Bank Somalia Governance Programme	This component was implemented through two externally financed output arrangements with the World Bank. The first focused on the development of civil service policy and legislative framework and an audit of the federal civil service. The second prioritised strengthening public financial management in the security sector.
Support to Strengthening Local Government Policy and Capacity	PREMIS gave a grant to the UN Joint Programme for Local Governance (JPLG) to re-establish local governance and service delivery in major districts in the south and help to implement decentralisation in Somaliland and Puntland. This eventually shifted to another UN programme in 2018 and was closed down in 2019.
Strengthening Revenue Policy and Administration in Somaliland	PROFR (Prosperity from Revenue) was the second and final phase of UK support of revenue policy and administrative reforms to Somaliland.

Source: Adapted from PREMIS, Programme Completion Review, Development Tracker, 2022, <[https://iati.fcdo.gov.uk/iati\\_documents/D0001264.odt](https://iati.fcdo.gov.uk/iati_documents/D0001264.odt)>, accessed 10 January 2023.

Of course, there were limits to how much could be achieved by a single project, especially given the low technical baselines, shell structures and ‘ghost ministries’ characterising newer states such as Hirshabelle and Galmudug. Although ‘greenfield work’ evaded the legacy issues besetting similar interventions in Puntland, interviewees cited challenges from a ‘15-year lag’ in local FMS capabilities, with the reality of developing administrative skills and competencies from the ground up, working with state functionaries who often had little education,<sup>149</sup> appearing incommensurate with donor expectations and timelines.

149. Although acute in third-generation FMSs, this is a cross-cutting challenge for Somalia as a whole, with only 20% of staff in the FGS’s revenue department holding university degrees, more than half not

In some cases, this generated pressure to prioritise tangible outputs above the internalisation of processes and training. Perhaps as a result, quarterly reporting threatened to dry up within months of the project ending.<sup>150</sup>

Despite disparities in overall performance, Jubbaland, South-West, Hirshabelle and Galmudug nevertheless hosted their own ministries of finance, civil service commissions, and auditors general by 2020, replete with legislative frameworks, budgetary cycles, standardised procedures and internal audit mechanisms, at least on paper. Consequently, they satisfied policy benchmarks prescribed by both the IMF and the World Bank's 'recurrent-cost-financing' criteria,<sup>151</sup> and as a corollary increased the confidence of risk-averse IFIs to spread investment and development spending outside Mogadishu, providing FMSs with 'much needed fiscal space'.<sup>152</sup> From 2014 to 2019, MPF grant disbursements at the state level grew from 23% to 56% – a major goal of the Fund and key indicator for advancing HIPC more broadly.<sup>153</sup>

PREMIS therefore offered important complementarity to wider donor programming, the accumulated impact of which was slowly making progress by 2018. Following a positive interim assessment of the IMF's third SMP, the World Bank announced \$80 million in International Development Assistance (IDA) for the FGS, the first tranche of this type received by Mogadishu in 30 years.<sup>154</sup> Accompanied by a €100 million commitment in budgetary support from the EU,<sup>155</sup> both funders benefited the UK's work on customs modernisation and technical reform to manage and disperse payments at the state level.<sup>156</sup> At the same time, strategic inputs from other actors, such as a \$54.3-million contribution from Norway (via the MPF to bolster Somalia's cash-strapped financial system) and the conclusion of a fisheries licensing deal in December 2018 (framed as

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receiving anything beyond a secondary education, and 10% only completing primary education. World Bank Group, 'Domestic Resource Mobilisation in Somalia', February 2021, p. 22.

150. While several interviewees expressed concern, it should be acknowledged that FMS budgetary preparations continued through FY23, and only relied on limited external input at the end of the process, when their proposals were finalised for parliamentary approval. All four budgets were ultimately passed before the 31 December deadline.
151. As the project completion report notes, 'Jubbaland State was the only FMS that already met the benchmarks when the programme started in 2016'. See UK Aid, 'Public Resource Management in Somalia', Development Tracker, <<https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/projects/GB-1-205065/documents>>, accessed 6 January 2023.
152. *Ibid.*
153. Mark de Pulford, Camille Hennion and Patricia Stephenson, 'Multi Partner Fund for Somalia Mid Term Review: Final Report', Aleph Strategies, September 2019.
154. *Reuters*, 'World Bank Approves First Grants to Somalia in 30 Years', 26 September 2018.
155. European Union External Action, 'European Union Announces its First Ever Budget Support to Somalia', 27 September 2018, <[https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/51224\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/51224_en)>, accessed 6 January 2023.
156. UK Aid, 'Public Resource Management in Somalia, Annual Review, Development Tracker', June 2019, <<https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/projects/GB-1-205065/documents>>, accessed 10 January 2023.



demonstrative of the FGS's 'revenue collection capability') also accelerated the relief process.<sup>157</sup>

Somalia eventually achieved the HIPC Decision Point in 2020, unlocking new funding streams and development assistance to improve macroeconomic stability<sup>158</sup> and expediting much-needed legislative reform.<sup>159</sup> Outstanding IFI bills were cleared with the help of bridge financing from Norway, Italy, the EU and the UK,<sup>160</sup> with British diplomats offering roughly £133 million between 2020 and 2022<sup>161</sup> and reportedly encouraging Paris Club creditors to cancel \$1.4 billion in Somali debt. Should Mogadishu achieve the final HIPC milestone – the Completion Point – its remaining arrears could fall from 41% to 6% of GDP.<sup>162</sup> Crucially, interviewees also referenced a bundle of secondary benefits, with PREMIS, the Stability Fund and the MPF (indirectly) building up state capacities and laying much of the groundwork for intra-governmental negotiations over fiscal transfers between new FMS ministries of finance and their FGS counterparts. Although some way off full revenue-sharing arrangements, a joint commitment to de-link technical discussions from wider political issues (brokered by the World Bank, the EU and the IMF), and later support for shared data systems to harmonise Somalia's financial reporting, were described as incremental steps towards 'fiscal federalism', a sticking point for any sustainable national settlement.

However, respondents warned that these 'wins' should not be overstated. Many reforms were contingent on the idiosyncratic skills of Somalia's micromanaging minister of finance, and could be rendered cosmetic or short-lived by the government's inability to rein in executive excesses. For instance, reports document a 'gross lack of capacity around accountability mechanisms, such as the Parliamentary Financial Committee and the Auditor General's Office', with regulatory bodies and institutional safeguards such as the Justice and Anti-Corruption Commissions either becoming politicised or sidelined by Farmaajo.<sup>163</sup>

Crucially, several benchmarks were also diluted, removed or deferred by donors themselves in the run-up to the (then-scheduled) 2020/21 elections. Amid delays

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157. Gundel, 'Debt Relief and the Political Marketplace in Somalia', pp. 4–5.

158. This included IDA grants amounting to \$485.5 million, 'of which \$118 million scaled up existing MPF projects, \$100 million were delivered as budget support, and \$177.5 million supported the response to the various crises Somalia faces in 2020'. See World Bank, 'The Multi-Partner Fund Progress Report, January–June 2021', p. 15.

159. For example, PFM protocols, custom tariffs, a pending Audit Bill, a Telecommunication Act, and a Revenue Administration Law.

160. IMF, 'Somalia to Receive Debt Relief Under the Enhanced HIPC Initiative', Press Release No. 20/104, 25 March 2020.

161. UK Aid, 'Contribution to Somalia's IFI', Annual Review, Development Tracker, <<https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/projects/GB-GOV-1-300996/summary>>, accessed 30 January 2023.

162. The World Bank in Somalia, 'Overview', 30 March 2023, <<https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/somalia/overview>>, accessed 30 May 2023.

163. Gundel, 'Debt Relief and the Political Marketplace in Somalia', p. 7.

in the presidential vote and bouts of political violence, these measures were presented as necessary for keeping the Decision Point process on track and preserving the confidence of IFIs. However, analysis by Joakim Gundel blames the ‘short-term interests of incumbent politicians and bureaucrats in the Somali Government, IFIs, and donors’ for compromising HIPC’s fundamental purpose.<sup>164</sup> Lowering standards, compressing timeframes and ‘blindly’ accepting FGS data undermined the rigour of internal checks and balances, leaving technical improvements to domestic financial systems at risk of becoming superfluous or superficial. While the EU suspended its support in late 2020, and the World Bank postponed any further programming until a budget had been passed under a new government, the fast-tracked, ‘fudged’ nature of the Decision Point arguably exposed future grants and developmental assistance to the same risk of misappropriation and elite capture. As a result, interviewees criticised the preoccupation with a ‘nice checkpoint’ that may have come at the expense of genuine accountability, accentuating the extraversion of Somalia’s political economy and contradicting the long-term aims of state-building.<sup>165</sup>

This experience raises several issues. Although eased by a lack of international competition, the UK performed a key role in mobilising multilateral buy-in, using its diplomatic and financial muscle in donor forums such as the MPF to champion a process many saw as implausible. The longevity of its subnational programming, its relationships with state-powerbrokers and awareness of the political sensitivities around federalism also offered the UK comparative advantages when working at the FMS level. This allowed it to access spaces previously unavailable to foreign donors, carve a niche role in PFM, and act as a trusted broker, accelerating amendments integral to debt relief. However, HIPC – and adjacent interventions – also exposed a fundamental gap between the aspirations and realities of external state-building, especially when the trajectory of technocratic reforms and domestic political preferences started to diverge.<sup>166</sup>

## Famine Relief: 2017 and 2022

After two consecutive years of failed Deyr and Gu rainfalls, 6.2 million people were left in ‘dire need’ across Somalia by 2017, with 3.1 million falling into acute food insecurity.<sup>167</sup> Despite the scale of the problem, both interviewees and contemporary documentation cite the significant role DFID seemed to play in

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164. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

165. *Ibid.*; Jones, ‘Ballots, Bullets and Building Blocks’.

166. Gundel, ‘Debt Relief and the Political Marketplace in Somalia’.

167. International Crisis Group, ‘Instruments of Pain (III): Conflict and Famine in Somalia’, Briefing No. 125, 9 May 2017.

averting mass mortality, and possibly famine, marking an improvement from responses in 2011.

Indications of a potential crisis were captured by the Food Security and Nutrition Assessment Unit in 2016. Benefiting from new metrics, indicators and data amalgamation tools developed in partnership with the Famine Early Warning Systems Network and various donors, including DFID, the forecasts contributed towards a ‘much earlier [reaction] than in 2011’.<sup>168</sup>

International aid amounted to roughly \$1.2 billion by October 2017, of which the UK government supplied £170 million in emergency relief, followed by £60 million for strengthening recovery work.<sup>169</sup> Much of this was mobilised quickly, with evaluators referencing ‘devolved decision making, relatively flexible internal mechanisms and an ability to leverage high-level interest across the UK government’ as key enablers.<sup>170</sup> Additionally, the DFID Somalia team turned to an Internal Risk Facility (IRF) – first recommended in 2012 as a means of streamlining and pre-approving financial decisions – to supplement a base spend of roughly £40 million with a further £100 million in immediate credit: ‘game-changing’ resources that ‘set the scene’ for the entire response. Although reliant on existing relationships that ‘clos[ed] off options for innovation’, the IRF ensured ‘early warning’ actually translated into ‘early action’, accelerating contracts and disbursements.<sup>171</sup> Tellingly, the UK was among the first parties to make major pledges to the 2017 UN appeal and rapidly became the second-largest bilateral donor, investing in food assistance, nutrition, healthcare and livestock vaccinations.<sup>172</sup>

DFID was also able to draw on pre-existing infrastructure and social capital to ramp up its response. Long-term resilience-building efforts such as the £339.5-million Multi-Year Humanitarian Programme (MYHP, 2013–17) offered ready-made channels for the dissemination of emergency aid, having already developed local networks and community-backed cash transfer schemes.<sup>173</sup>

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168. Noted by study respondents and outlined in Daniel Maxwell and Peter Hailey, ‘The Politics of Information and Analysis in Famines and Extreme Emergencies: Synthesis of Findings from Six Case Studies’, Boston: Feinstein International Centre, Tufts University, 2020, p. 13.

169. Rynn and Jones with Glantz, ‘Furthering Global Britain?’.

170. Marc DuBois, Paul Harvey and Glyn Taylor, ‘Rapid Real-Time Review: DFID Somalia Drought Response’, UK Aid, January 2018, p. 7.

171. *Ibid.*, pp. 8, 34.

172. By late October 2017, DFID had supplied emergency food assistance to over 1.5 million people, emergency healthcare for more than 704,000 people, and vaccinations for around four million animals. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

173. Multi-Year Humanitarian Programme 2013–2017, Project Completion Review, Development Tracker, 30 June 2018, <[https://iati.fcdo.gov.uk/iati\\_documents/33130156.odt](https://iati.fcdo.gov.uk/iati_documents/33130156.odt)>, accessed 22 November 2022. The Building Resilient Communities in Somalia (BRCiS) consortium, comprising international and local NGOs, was seen as particularly effective in this respect, ‘establishing systems and partnerships that centre on communities and adapt to the changing context’. Norwegian Refugee Council, ‘BRCiS

Interventions similarly benefited from extensive UK investment into monitoring and research,<sup>174</sup> reportedly leveraging feedback loops and adaptive engagement to improve approaches, and innovative measures to identify good practice. At the same time, resilience activities had a direct impact on their own terms, with reviews describing how MYHP participants ‘were [better] able to withstand the severe food security shock of 2017’ and quickly recover.<sup>175</sup>

In keeping with this logic of self-sufficiency, DFID promoted higher-level discussion of Grand Bargain<sup>176</sup> commitments around Somali ownership, leading to at least some practical change. For example, the UK government and United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs backed the nascent Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and a cluster of FMS disaster authorities and drought committees to help shift the ‘locus of coordination and leadership from Nairobi to Somalia’.<sup>177</sup> While local organisations did not benefit directly from UK sponsorship, many were subcontracted via recipients of British resourcing such as UN agencies and international non-governmental organisations, and DFID provided a further £10 million to the Somalia Humanitarian Fund in 2016/17, of which 37% was allocated to domestic actors.<sup>178</sup> Although interviewees conceded that the overall level of localisation remained somewhat ad hoc and disappointing,<sup>179</sup> it was viewed as a positive shift from the baselines set six years earlier.

Despite being stretched by concurrent crises across South Sudan, Yemen and Nigeria, the UK government therefore drew praise from evaluators for efficacy and disproportionate burden-sharing.<sup>180</sup> In turn, its flexibility and funding helped push DFID’s implementing partners into scaling up their own responses, and enabled UK diplomats to lobby for greater commitments from international stakeholders during coordination meetings, ‘parlay[ing] [their] timely action into timely action by others’.<sup>181</sup> Alongside technical discussions in London, high-profile advocacy by the foreign secretary, international development secretary and the DFID permanent secretary appeared to accelerate donor buy-in. Compared with 2011, when only 21% of total funds were received in the first six months, 44% was collected within the initial quarter of 2017, mitigating ‘potentially

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Consortium – Building Resilient Communities in Somalia’, 30 June 2022, <<https://www.nrc.no/what-we-do/brcis-consortium---building-resilient-communities-in-somalia/>>, accessed 6 January 2023.

174. For instance, the Monitoring and Evaluation in Somalia Programme (MESH). See ‘MESH-Somalia’, <<https://www.mesh-somalia.net/>>, accessed 6 December 2022.

175. Multi-Year Humanitarian Programme 2013–2017, Project Completion Review.

176. Launched in 2016, 18 donor countries and a variety of international organisations agreed 51 commitments to help strengthen the efficiency and effectiveness of humanitarian aid, including localisation and ownership. See Victoria Metcalfe-Hough et al., ‘The Grand Bargain in 2021: An Independent Review’, ODI, Humanitarian Policy Group commissioned report, June 2022.

177. DuBois, Harvey and Taylor, ‘Rapid Real-Time Review’, p. 10.

178. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

179. Also noted in *ibid.*

180. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

181. *Ibid.*

catastrophic levels of suffering and loss of life'.<sup>182</sup> As a result, respondents found the UK valuable in assisting multilateral engagement to become better organised and coordinated, and more commensurate with the severity of the crisis.

That said, several queried whether an 'extraordinary confluence' of variables conditioned the 2017 experience in ways difficult to replicate. Together with a conducive diplomatic climate linked to Farmaajo's election and the second London Conference, much of the UK's success was seen as contingent on, or influenced by, key individuals such as DFID's permanent secretary and in-country humanitarian advisers. These officials were credited with mobilising political support and strengthening international cooperation through their personal networks as well as with improving the mechanics of the response itself: championing lessons from 2011 around integrated, area-based programming, large-scale cash transfers and a 'no-regret' approach. With collaboration between the embassy, Whitehall and donors at the field level often criticised as 'personality dependent', the efficiency of cooperation and programme delivery was accordingly vulnerable to the rotation or loss of specific focal points.

The inadequacies of subsequent responses raised further questions around sustainability, particularly in relation to UK influence. Many of the same systems and structures from 2017 were still in place in 2022. Although their operational capacity was disrupted by the DFID/FCO merger – arguably generating additional layers of bureaucracy and unwieldy directorial portfolios – the FCDO team and humanitarian cadre were acknowledged as highly capable. But with a greater proportion of the population facing severe food insecurity compared with either 2011 or 2017, only £61 million in humanitarian aid, healthcare and nutritional support was committed during the financial year 2022/23.<sup>183</sup> Regional funding similarly lapsed, reaching a third of the levels achieved five years earlier.<sup>184</sup> Interviewees ascribed this, at least in part, to a lack of 'political will', leaving instruments such as the IRF little in the way of financial latitude to scale up emergency operations. Compounded by ODA spending cuts in 2021, and a series of reduced stop-gap measures to replace the (pre-scheduled) closure of UK Aid's £323-million Somalia Humanitarian and Resilience Programme (SHARP, 2018–

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182. *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.

183. As of December 2022. See FCDO, 'UK Announces Urgent Support to Somali People Facing Famine', press release, 2 December 2022, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-announces-urgent-support-to-somali-people-facing-famine>>, accessed 9 January 2023.

184. Oxfam, 'UK Government Must Act Now to Avert Famine in East Africa', April 2022.

22),<sup>185</sup> London was considered a ‘smaller player’ and explicitly criticised by Somali officials for neglecting its leadership role.<sup>186</sup>

Of course, diplomatic and financial capital are not always synonymous. The FCDO was still prominent in multilateral discussions, drawing on its expertise and institutional weight to exercise convening power and share technical knowledge. UK officials worked as interlocutors between the FGS and international aid agencies and continued to advocate for multi-sector approaches, pushing funders to prioritise cash transfers and area-based, ‘no-regret’ interventions rather than superficial, nationwide coverage. The response also benefited from the UK’s broader upstream engagement. Legacy effects of multi-year programmes combining emergency assistance, resilience and durable solutions, for instance, were believed to help recipient households withstand severe food insecurity, even if the projects themselves had concluded. Additionally, British stakeholders – alongside other external partners – supported Somalia’s revised National Development Plan and domestic roll-out of social protection schemes and safety nets, providing new systems for fast-tracking the disbursement of aid and possibly increasing federal attention on humanitarian issues, a pattern reflected by the appointment of Somalia’s first presidential envoy for drought response.<sup>187</sup>

Nevertheless, there remain significant constraints. Many policy frameworks are donor-dependent, generic or exist in name only, and domestic ministries regularly lack technical proficiency and territorial control. Crucially, preoccupations with the 2021/22 elections consumed time and political energy, disrupting Mogadishu’s emergency response and delaying the formation of a national drought committee until February 2022.<sup>188</sup> UK Aid was also among several bodies flagged for (sometimes) failing to include FGS authorities in their planning or programme design. Other interviewees claimed that a lack of independent financial clout limited how far the UK, as a ‘thinking donor’, could realistically influence international agendas or action ‘critical points’ of leverage, with uncertainties over budgets hampering efforts to establish a joint position with the Humanitarian Country Team and federal government. Similarly, respondents cited criticism of the FCDO by other funders for requesting resources while failing to front more of the costs itself (as of December 2022, the US had

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185. SHARP received a makeshift extension – SHARP Emergency (April–September 2022) – before immediately transitioning into an expedited version of the follow-up Humanitarian Assistance and Resilience Building in Somalia Programme (HARBS-Emergency) (£28 million, August 2022–March 2023). However, participants raised concerns over the delayed roll-out of a full HARBS project, suggesting any gap could undermine local resilience and efforts to develop a culture of adaptation and proactivity shared across participating NGOs.
186. Tracy McVeigh, ‘UK’s Lost Leadership Role Hurts Somalia’s Fight Against Famine, Says Drought Envoy’, *The Guardian*, 10 October 2022.
187. *UN News*, ‘Somalia: “Dire and Grim” Drought, Impacting More Than 7 Million’, 1 June 2022.
188. Amanda Sperber, ‘Raising Cash for Water: Why Somalis are Bypassing Aid Agencies in Drought Crisis’, *The Guardian*, 15 April 2022.

provided 66.4% of UN Response Plan funding, compared with the UK's 5.2%).<sup>189</sup> These disparities were similarly blamed for 'pull[ing] the rug out from under' the UK's erstwhile Special Envoy for Famine Prevention as he pushed for greater global commitments.

To be clear, such problems were not unique to the UK. Apathy was widespread throughout 2022, leaving the UN Humanitarian Response Plan slow and underfunded: only 18% of the appeal was met between January and June.<sup>190</sup> Faced with contradictory forecast data and limited access to Al-Shabaab-controlled areas, donors were admonished for adopting a 'wait and see' attitude, exposing fundamental flaws in how they processed and responded to information. Disincentives, poor risk appetite and 'malaise'<sup>191</sup> across the aid industry likewise restricted the uptake of lessons from 2017, including the need for localisation. Without FGS oversight and coordination, a 'culture of humanitarian impunity' gradually calcified, diminishing collaboration with 'actors on the ground' and opportunities 'to achieve collective outcomes'.<sup>192</sup> Although the FCDO tried to alleviate these trends by – among other things – developing a help-desk facility to share and streamline evidence, and encouraging greater co-creation and connectivity with domestic stakeholders, funding cuts made it difficult to influence (or directly intervene) at the scale required.

Discrepancies between the UK's approach to famine relief in 2017 and 2022 therefore reveal the critical impact of resourcing. In both cases, DFID and the FCDO were considered a source of technical expertise and innovation, exercising convening power to improve the international response. But without the cash to back up their advocacy, UK personnel are now struggling to incentivise change across the humanitarian system. Although practitioners and diplomats are adjusting to this new reality by assuming more of an enabling role, they are increasingly susceptible to contextual constraints and lack the multiplier effects previously evident in 2017.

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189. Somali Humanitarian Response Plan 2022, <<https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/1063/summary>>, accessed 12 December 2022.

190. *Ibid.* This eventually increased to 55% by December 2022, in contrast to the 44% of funding collected in the first three months of the 2017 appeal.

191. Nisar Majid et al., 'Another Humanitarian (and Political) Crisis in Somalia in 2022', Feinstein International Centre, June 2022, p. 12.

192. Sperber, 'Raising Cash for Water'.

# III: Enablers and Constraints

The previous chapter reflects examples of the UK satisfying at least some of its ‘Global Britain’ agenda. Flexible programming, relationship-building and politically ‘smart’ approaches allowed stakeholders to carve niche roles in an otherwise crowded donor landscape, and diplomatic and developmental inputs have often proved mutually reinforcing. Where the UK did not lead international interventions, officials regularly used their credibility, expertise and influence to help coordinate and refine engagement. However, there were also limitations – endogenous to the UK and wider environment – that constrained these efforts. Building on this analysis, Chapter III explores the role of such factors and how they condition UK action in Somalia.

## Operating Context

Clearly, Somalia presents a highly challenging context, especially for the pursuit of long-term state-building. Important progress has been made since 2012 but much of the country remains ‘chronically insecure, corrupt, and under-developed’,<sup>193</sup> with 70% of the population living below the poverty line and vulnerability to famine extremely high.<sup>194</sup> Political in-fighting hampers service delivery and the formation of a professional bureaucracy. Beneath their Weberian aesthetic, government ministries are often hollow, leaving programmes dependent on the brokerage of specific individuals, typically political appointees, who are vulnerable to rotation or replacement.<sup>195</sup> Improvements may be discernible – the new prime minister defied convention by keeping most directors-general in post – but a lack of continuity, retention and institutional memory is an enduring problem. Nor have national elites found a lasting consensus over ‘how [the country] should be governed or by whom’, leaving technical and structural reforms to sputter out.<sup>196</sup>

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193. Alice Hills, ‘A Quick Guide to Somalia in 2026: Business as Usual’, *Journal of the Middle East and Africa* (Vol. 12, No. 3, 2021), p. 284.

194. World Bank, ‘Somalia Economic Update: Investing in Social Protection to Boost Resilience for Economic Growth’, Edition No. 7, November 2022, p. 22.

195. Jones, ‘Ballots, Bullets and Building Blocks’.

196. Williams, *Fighting for Peace in Somalia*, p. 334.



Against this backdrop, Somalia's security sector is still akin to a 'security arena', with multiple actors and shifting affiliations reflecting an 'underlying reality of decentralized coercive power',<sup>197</sup> defined by an 'informal economy of clans, conflict [and] entrepreneurialism'.<sup>198</sup> As a result, Al-Shabaab often exploits this fragmentation to outcompete the FGS as a security provider and governing force, offering the group a 'constant lease of life'.<sup>199</sup> Limited state territorial control in turn restricts international development and military coverage to major towns and cities, leaving at least 900,000 drought-affected Somalis inaccessible to aid workers (as of 2022).<sup>200</sup>

Despite these challenges, interviewees noted how delays in the electoral process tended to consume 'all the policy oxygen' of national and external stakeholders. Democratisation may be an inherent part of Western state-building, but the violence and uncertainty of the 2021/22 ballot repeatedly stalled other activities, arguably amounting to a 'lost year' in terms of strategic planning.<sup>201</sup> Donors consequently struggled to act with consistency and scale, and risk aversion continued to be widespread, hindering mobility, visibility and contextual awareness and leaving many reliant on local gatekeepers.<sup>202</sup> Given the length of engagement in Somalia, international fatigue is also becoming apparent, a trend compounded by Covid-19, the war in Ukraine and instability elsewhere in the region. Assessments of overall UK effectiveness and progress therefore need to be made against this unusually difficult backdrop.

## Resources

As noted, shifts in the UK's fiscal and political climate, driven at least partially by domestic populism and the lasting economic impacts of Covid-19, led to a 21% decrease in the overall aid budget by 2021.<sup>203</sup> In Somalia specifically, ODA levels fell from £232 million to £101 million, a contraction of 56%.<sup>204</sup> Faced with

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197. Majid et al., 'Somalia's Politics', p. 46.

198. Alice Hills, 'Somalia Works: Police Development as State-Building', *African Affairs* (Vol. 113, No. 450, 2014), p. 5.

199. Vanda Felbab-Brown, 'The Hard, Hot, Dusty Road to Accountability, Reconciliation, and Peace in Somalia: Amnesties, Defectors Programs, Traditional Justice, Informal Reconciliation Mechanisms, and Punitive Responses to Al-Shabab', Brookings, May 2018, <<https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-hard-hot-dusty-road-to-accountability-reconciliation-and-peace-in-somalia/>>, accessed 6 January 2023.

200. This figure is based on UN estimates, although aid workers themselves believe the number to be far higher. See Abdi Latif Dahir, 'We Buried Him and Kept Walking: Children Die as Somalis Flee Hunger', *New York Times*, 11 June 2022.

201. *Al-Jazeera*, 'Somalia Elects Hassan Sheikh Mohamud as New President', 15 May 2022.

202. Branded by many as *mukulel mathow* or 'black cats', these middlemen have a mixed reputation by often regulating aid flows to maintain their position. See Erik Bryld et al., 'Engaging the Gatekeepers: Using Informal Governance Resources in Mogadishu', Tana Copenhagen, UK Aid, March 2017.

203. Loft and Brien, 'Reducing the UK's Aid Spend in 2021 and 2022'.

204. Based on data in *ibid.*, p. 4.

growing commitments across Eastern Europe, prescribed reductions in multilateral funding,<sup>205</sup> and further cuts in bilateral spending planned for 2023/24,<sup>206</sup> UK development resourcing appears to be experiencing a systemic decline.

Interviewees almost unanimously described this trajectory as detrimental to the UK's capabilities and clout, especially given the transactional dynamics of Somalia's political economy. In a congested donor marketplace where the licence to operate is extremely high, any dip in financing could undermine efficacy. Even comparatively successful interventions such as PREMIS were disrupted by several rounds of funding cuts, reducing the leverage available to attract local buy-in, such as the Specific Purpose Grant.<sup>207</sup> Respondents also observed activities and workshops being scaled back or cancelled during the project's later years – damaging confidence in UK commitments from implementing partners and beneficiaries – and referenced mounting difficulties trying to sell or sustain long-term technical reforms. Additionally, ODA reductions and a subsequent aid freeze created lags in follow-up programming, which threatened to undermine momentum or atrophy what progress had already been made. Accentuated by several cases of poor communication and contingency planning, interviewees outlined an increasingly tense relationship with FGS and FMS recipients.

Similarly, there were knock-on effects for British influence at the donor level. The UK's expertise, reputation and in-country presence still affords significant convening power, but as evidenced by the 2022 famine response, (rapid) change across multilateral systems or host governments is difficult to instigate without accompanying investment. A lack of predictability, scaled-down outputs and delays in tendering or delivering multi-year programmes also disrupted the expectations and decision-making of other stakeholders, exacerbating gaps in international coverage. For example, the UK's original proposal for a seven-year PREMIS II project was eventually compressed to half the duration with a fraction of the budget.<sup>208</sup> In practical terms, this not only left little time or funding to

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205. HM Government, *The UK Government's Strategy for International Development*, CP 676 (London: The Stationery Office, 2022); Bond, 'Foreign Secretary Urged to Rethink Funding Cuts to the World Bank and UN Following New UK Aid Watchdog Report', Reliefweb, 30 May 2022, <<https://reliefweb.int/report/united-kingdom-great-britain-and-northern-ireland/foreign-secretary-urged-rethink-funding-cuts-world-bank-and-un-following-new-uk-aid-watchdog-report>>, accessed 6 January 2023.
206. Worley and Ainsworth, 'UK Aid Faces Third Major Cut in 3 Years, with £1.7B to be Cut'.
207. This was a funding source enabling FMSs to 'undertake certain capital expenditure' for their own plans and priorities, as noted in PREMIS, Programme Completion Review, Development Tracker, July 2022, p. 13, <[https://iati.fcdo.gov.uk/iati\\_documents/D0001264.odt](https://iati.fcdo.gov.uk/iati_documents/D0001264.odt)>, accessed 8 December 2022.
208. In contrast to PREMIS I, a £37.8 million project lasting from late 2015 to mid-2022, PREMIS II is a three-year follow-on programme worth around £10 million. See FCDO Somalia Network, 'Public Resource Management in Somalia Phase Two (PREMIS II): Business Case Summary Sheet', Development Tracker, September 2020, <[https://iati.fcdo.gov.uk/iati\\_documents/D0002630.odt](https://iati.fcdo.gov.uk/iati_documents/D0002630.odt)>, accessed 14 February 2023.

achieve structural change, but also reportedly compelled the World Bank to consider its own intervention instead: reducing the UK's relevance and neglecting the benefits of British brokerage among FMS officials. Whitehall was consequently seen by some to be at risk of becoming a 'B-player', with reduced bargaining power across areas in which it previously enjoyed comparative advantage, including PFM and humanitarian assistance.

Of course, funding is not always necessary to produce impact. Interviews for this research noted that low-cost programming could deliver meaningful outcomes if carefully designed and implemented. While there were obvious shortfalls in relation to emergency aid, targeted stabilisation activities proved cheap and relatively successful on their own terms, especially when drawing on good contextual analysis or occupying a strategic niche. The UK appears to be consciously adopting a similar enabler role in famine relief to offset these financial constraints.

Nor should it be assumed that development spending always translates into political capital. National policymakers were sometimes described as occupying 'elite enclaves' either insulated from, or apathetic to, wider public opinion, limiting the resonance of UK humanitarian efforts. Others suggested expectations of aid were routinely baked into Somali decision-making from the outset, leaving much of the UK's influence dependent on levels of security assistance that were far outstripped by those of other powers, including the US and Turkey.<sup>209</sup>

Nevertheless, contractions in UK aid spending seem to contradict the realities of state-building, with Whitehall pushing for the same outcomes at a reduced cost.<sup>210</sup> Although the examples above indicate some adaptation – a greater focus on facilitation, specialisation and coordination – this coincides with a broader decline in international funding. Of the top DAC contributors to Somalia, only Sweden and the EU managed to maintain or increase bilateral ODA spending between 2020 and 2021.<sup>211</sup> This could, therefore, restrict how far the UK, as an enabler, can generate impact if the donor system as a whole is refocusing elsewhere.

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209. This includes not only funding, but also offensive capabilities, with US President Joe Biden's administration restarting air strikes against Al-Shabaab from July 2021, and Turkey deploying Baykar Baykar TB2 drones. See Williams and Elmi, 'Security Sector Reform in Somalia'.

210. Jones, 'Taking Stock in Somalia'.

211. See Figure 1, 'Top DAC Country (and EU) Bilateral Donors to Somalia'. Data drawn from OECD, 'Creditor Reporting System'.

## Strategy

Endemic insecurity and state weaknesses in Somalia have led to a consistent set of UK strategic goals designed to bolster a ‘good enough’ federal government capable of containing Al-Shabaab. As a result, the ‘Global Britain’ rebrand was not seen as precipitating any clear change in the scope, logic or mechanics of engagement, with much of the focus wrapped up in the STP on the basis it can provide ‘guiding principles for future security assistance’<sup>212</sup> and increase Somali self-sufficiency. However, the plan’s plausibility is disputed, not least because it leans on ‘vague contours’ that lack operational detail<sup>213</sup> and prescribes timelines already in need of revision. While the argument could be made that these benchmarks and accountability metrics apply pressure to conform with the process, one research participant conceded: ‘everyone knows [the STP] is fiction’.

This speaks to wider discrepancies between donor presumptions, methods and objectives in relation to state-building. Interviewees cited a Western preference for top-down, ‘de-politicised’ measures that assume developing a ‘strong government with formal institutions is key to stability in Somalia’.<sup>214</sup> Although some success is evident – advances in PFM and core administrative functions correlated with improvement on the Fragile States Index<sup>215</sup> – there were concerns such approaches could place the ‘cart before the horse’. Finding little political agreement or social consensus to plug into, governing bodies often remained Potemkin structures starved of legitimacy or local relevance. In other cases, technical outputs appeared to exacerbate conflict, with efforts to improve the FGS’s prosecution tools and capabilities during Farmaajo’s tenure exposing the difficulty of consolidating basic bureaucratic processes without aggravating political tensions. Elsewhere, capacity-building lapsed into ‘isomorphic mimicry’, embedding outside systems incongruent with political or organisational realities on the ground, leaving them ineffective or unsustainable.<sup>216</sup> Even the federal model itself was widely seen as an external imposition.<sup>217</sup>

The UK was credited for its more flexible, politically sensitive and problem-driven programming, with interventions such as ERI, PREMIS and various iterations of the Stability Fund deliberately facilitating negotiations and reconciliation. Even so, most of the outcomes described in this paper were

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212. Crisis Group, ‘Reforming the AU Mission in Somalia’, Briefing No. 176, 15 November 2021.

213. *Ibid.*

214. Sahan, ‘The Somali Wire: Your Daily News Digest’, No. 305, 2022.

215. UK Aid, ‘Public Resource Management in Somalia’, Project Completion Review, Development Tracker, October 2022, <<https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/projects/GB-1-205065/documents>>, accessed 6 January 2023.

216. Matt Andrews, Lant Pritchett and Michael Woolcock, *Building State Capability: Evidence, Analysis, Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 29–52.

217. Abdinor Dahir, ‘Can Somalia Restore Faith in its Federal Agenda?’, LSE, 29 November 2021.

hampered by a fundamental lack of unanimity from Somalis themselves. As a consequence, progress was often incremental and difficult to expand on, leading respondents to claim ‘no amount of outside support could fix the problem’ without corresponding appetite at the national and subnational level.<sup>218</sup>

The underlying logic of Western state-building was also considered part of the issue, feeding an extraverted political economy that undercut incentives for self-reliance. Foreign actors and resources risked ‘shaping and financing the [political] marketplace’ in contradictory and destabilising ways,<sup>219</sup> leaving the country susceptible to exogenous shocks and dependencies. Although imperfect,<sup>220</sup> analogies have been drawn with Afghanistan, where easy access to external rents and aid money bred a ‘toxic and unproductive political bargain’ among national powerbrokers.<sup>221</sup> Once international support was withdrawn, the regime quickly collapsed. Similar dynamics were identified in Mogadishu, propping up a ‘hyper-corrupt’ government with limited ability or inclination to forge the ‘taxation-protection’<sup>222</sup> relationships necessary for a basic social contract.<sup>223</sup> Domestic revenues may have grown by 30% since 2017,<sup>224</sup> but research participants cast the increase as ‘negligible’ given Somalia’s low baselines, reliance on quick wins such as custom duties and port levies,<sup>225</sup> and the sheer volume of foreign investment. While donors did elicit some buy-in for institutional reform, their involvement appeared to simultaneously drive ‘business as usual’, with elites vying over international funding – roughly two-thirds of the federal budget<sup>226</sup> – at the expense of developing a ‘normal, self-sustaining government’.<sup>227</sup>

This paradox leaves Western partners in a bind. The success of British interventions is ultimately contingent on variables (for example, Somali political consensus) outside the UK’s control. Incremental progress has been made developing capabilities, strategies and civic systems, but it is often nominal, localised or generally incommensurate with donor aspirations. At the same time, foreign

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218. Studies attribute these problems in part to a cumulative elite-centric political culture built on institutionalised political clannism, instability and violence, ubiquitous corruption and foreign patronage. See Abdurahman Abdullahi, ‘The Somali Elite Political Culture: Conceptions, Structures and Historical Evolution’, Conference Paper, University of Mogadishu, October 2020, <<https://mu.edu.so/somali-elite-political-culture/>>, accessed 23 June 2023.
219. Majid et al., ‘Somalia’s Politics: The Usual Business?: A Synthesis Paper of the Conflict Research Programme’, LSE, 2021, p. 46.
220. See Omar Mahmood and Abdihakim Ainte, ‘Could Somalia Be the Next Afghanistan?’, Crisis Group, 2021.
221. Ahmad, Bandula-Irwin and Ibrahim, ‘Who Governs?’, pp. 68–91.
222. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
223. Research suggests that ‘the absence of [such] relationship[s] will result in poorer governance outcomes for citizens such as the provision of public goods like security, order, and justice’. Ahmad, Bandula-Irwin and Ibrahim, ‘Who Governs?’, p. 9. Also see Mick Moore, ‘Revenues, State Formation, and the Quality of Governance in Developing Countries’, *International Political Science Review* (Vol. 25, No. 3, 2004).
224. Williams and Elmi, ‘Security Sector Reform in Somalia’, p. 18.
225. World Bank Group, ‘Domestic Resource Mobilisation in Somalia’, February 2021.
226. Williams and Elmi, ‘Security Sector Reform in Somalia’, p. 18.
227. Ahmad, Bandula-Irwin and Ibrahim, ‘Who Governs?’.

engagement is essential for containing Al-Shabaab and yet generates externalities and perverse incentive structures that regularly contradict the longer-term aims of state-building. As such, there seems to be a gap between strategic ambitions and programmatic realities, especially when the UK's goals are at odds with the levels of elite profligacy inadvertently propelled by donors themselves. Beneath their broad-brush objectives, interviewees therefore queried the underlying assumptions of UK activity – and those of likeminded parties – amid new priorities in Ukraine, implausible strategic timelines, growing international fatigue, and the entrenched nature of Somalia's political and developmental challenges.

## Structures

There has been a long pattern of integration across different governmental workstreams due to the interdependent, politicised nature of UK engagement in Somalia. A clear example is the pairing of development inputs such as PREMIS with diplomatic pressure to expedite debt relief and financial accountability. This in turn supported concurrent security sector reform projects, enabling the eventual rollout of a biometric registration system to help reduce corruption in the SNA.<sup>228</sup> Even humanitarian stakeholders who did not necessarily require overt connections with other teams were 'plugged in' to the wider UK government approach, and occasionally benefited from UK engagement with AMISOM/ATMIS to coordinate and deconflict civil–military operations and arrange convoy protection. Other interviewees noted how high-level diplomatic access to presidential offices (federal and state) 'trickled down' to individual development projects, granting practitioners greater leverage in day-to-day operations.

Some conceded that internal collaboration was not always as comprehensive as it could have been, with strands of the development portfolio apparently receiving little ambassadorial attention until 2019. Although a comparative 'success story', PREMIS itself was only synched up to high-level diplomatic advocacy after several years of implementation, potentially missing opportunities to thread discussion around fiscal federalism into a broader push for political consensus. Stabilisation

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228. Estimates suggested that of approximately 29,000 individuals on the military payroll in 2018, 'some 12,000 may [have] actually [been] soldiers with some capacity to fight. The rest [were] ghost soldiers, widows and the elderly'. (Vanda Felbab-Brown, 'More Airstrikes, Less Aid Not Enough to Secure Somalia', *The Hill*, Brookings, January 2018). Concluding in March 2019, the two-year registration process allowed a better understanding of the SNA's structure, scale and composition, integrating personnel into the FGS's Financial Management Information System and enabling regular salary payments directly into personal bank accounts, including 'cash for fresh rations'. (Fiona Blyth, 'Transitioning to National Forces in Somalia: More Than an Exit for AMISOM', International Peace Institute, April 2019, p. 12). However, misappropriation and graft persist, with officials reportedly enrolling their 'personal bodyguards or relatives as SNA soldiers' to effectively cover their security and patronage costs with donor subsidies. (*Africa Confidential*, 'Out for the Count' (Vol. 60, No. 8), 19 April 2019).

projects likewise faced problems aligning with development and military activities outside the CSSF framework, despite their relevance and overlap. A number of research participants blamed this disconnect on the UK's dispersed coverage of Somalia, which spanned three separate sites: a subsidiary post in Hargeisa; the embassy in Mogadishu; and a (previously DFID-focused) remote platform in Nairobi. Although formal efforts were made to improve cooperation, administrative processes could not always compensate for the lack of proximity, especially during Covid-19, making it difficult to network, share information and build a 'common culture' organically. Despite local efforts to 'join the dots', there were also structural issues, with staff reporting back to different, often siloed departments in Whitehall and leaving the overall strategy fragmented.

Against this backdrop, Somalia was seen as generally benefiting from the DFID/FCO merger, with respondents stressing the value of the new FCDO East Africa desk in London. However, the reality of combining two huge bureaucracies, each with discrete modalities, philosophies and organisational cultures, on top of budget reductions and Covid-19, caused significant disruption. The (temporary) loss of DFID's Cabinet and National Security Council seat,<sup>229</sup> and a disproportionate number of former FCO personnel in the FCDO's new leadership led respondents to generally cast the merger process as more of a takeover than an integration. Several described a 'brain drain' threatening staff morale, development expertise and institutional knowledge. Coinciding with a high rate of ministerial turnover in London, structural changes also consumed internal bandwidth, hindering the ability of diplomats and civil servants to 'steer the ship' or commit to long-term strategic planning. Business processes were repeatedly revised and although the merger apparently attracted little interest from Somalis, the resulting confusion frustrated international donors and implementing partners, particularly when it overlapped with major aid cuts.

## Leadership and Relationships

Although unable to match the US's development or defence spending or Turkey's cultural, social and commercial ties and high-visibility infrastructural projects, the UK retains a significant voice in Somalia. This partially stems from its role as UN Penholder, membership of the Quint, CSPG, MPF and S6, and participation in or chairmanship of several coordination platforms. The UK also appears to leverage its permanent diplomatic presence, breadth of programming and

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229. 'Recently announced government changes' have since reversed this decision, providing the minister for development a seat at Cabinet and National Security Council. See Letter from Andrew Mitchell to Sarah Champion on 'The Future of the UK's Work on International Development', 11 May 2023, <<https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/40054/documents/195536/default/>>, accessed 23 June 2023.

networks at the state level to position its embassy as an information hub for other parties. Despite budget reductions and changes related to the merger, UK stakeholders still exercise convening power and are widely seen as development specialists, helping improve technical responses during the 2022 famine even if they were not necessarily at the scale required or backed by adequate UK Aid contributions. Additionally, accumulated relationships, access and goodwill from past interventions allowed Whitehall to find strategic niches for enabling and supporting the work of international partners, from facilitating World Bank PFM engagement with FMSs to early recovery stabilisation activities and humanitarian assistance.

Against this backdrop, Brexit was not considered a prominent issue, due perhaps to the longevity, scope and autonomy of UK bilateral engagement. Nevertheless, various respondents blamed the process for draining resources from the diplomatic service and fixing the UK's attention on Europe, with some citing the parallel transfer of the Somalia brief from Downing Street to the FCO as evidence of a broader refocus away from the Horn.

Concerns were similarly raised over the withdrawal of UK personnel seconded to the EU's Somalia Delegation or participating in Naval Force Operation *Atalanta* (an anti-piracy mission) and EU Training Mission Somalia (SNA capacity-building), which risked diminishing UK sway over important multilateral initiatives, even though informal coordination continued to take place.<sup>230</sup>

Formerly a leading voice on European policy in Somalia, the loss of UK influence may also have longer-running implications for EU priorities and funding. The majority of AMISOM's costs were previously covered by the EU's Africa Peace Facility, thanks in part to British advocacy in Brussels.<sup>231</sup> While a new €120-million funding package for ATMIS was agreed in 2022, there is a risk that support could eventually wane due to competing French priorities in the Sahel and Central African Republic.<sup>232</sup> The UK already covered a £25-million shortfall in stipends when the EU scaled back contributions by 10% in 2021, and financial pressures will only increase given the surge of European (and UK) obligations in Ukraine.<sup>233</sup>

More broadly, constraints on UK efficacy and agency reflect fundamental problems with an over-saturated, poorly organised donor landscape. The sheer volume of stakeholders in Somalia, each conditioned by their own interests, objectives and funding cycles, often left engagement a 'garbled mess', characterised by derivative working groups imposing bureaucracy with little direction or ownership. Amid

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230. Alex de Waal, 'Brexidiocy and Somalia', LSE, 15 November 2018.

231. *Ibid.*

232. Cited by interviewees and outlined in Crisis Group, 'Reforming the AU Mission in Somalia'; De Waal, 'Brexidiocy and Somalia'.

233. Crisis Group, 'Reforming the AU Mission in Somalia'.



the confusion, interviewees conceded the difficulty of achieving the catalytic impact prioritised by UK policymakers with any regularity.

Contradictory approaches between external actors complicate the picture. The UK, the US and the EU generally maintain close alignment during Somali elections, with a focus on procedural integrity and democratisation. However, various parties contravened this position by engaging in direct political interference. The UAE, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, for instance, repeatedly exploited patronage and rent-seeking in competition with one another for influence and access to ‘oil, port and airport development projects’.<sup>234</sup> Although tensions have lessened in recent years, the push to get their clients in power – often through unregulated cash payments – has exacerbated political paralysis, corruption and violent contestation in Somalia. By further monetising governance and working through informal power structures and personal transactions, these actors have also undermined Western efforts to improve accountability and institutionalisation.

Additionally, local relationship-building has been constrained by poor security conditions, compelling UK officials to ‘hunker down’ in provincial capitals or Mogadishu Airport. In contrast to the concerted ‘charm offensive’ of Turkish stakeholders, who regularly ‘walk the streets’ building public trust, Western donors are often seen as disconnected from Somali life. This has not only diluted the currency of UK soft power but has also made it difficult to monitor responsive programming or ‘speak to normal people’. Engagement opportunities were instead routinely confined to a small political class occupying FMS palaces or Villa Somalia (the FGS presidential complex), which in turn reproduced reductive, state-centric echo chambers, offering little insight into or connection with the religious, civic and business circles driving wider social development. For example, respondents referenced a long-running gap between external practitioners and the commercial entities and clan networks central to much of the local famine response in 2017 and 2022, rendering international humanitarian systems detached from those working on the frontlines.

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234. Majid et al., ‘Somalia’s Politics’.

# Conclusion

**B**eneath an (erstwhile) ‘Global Britain’ re-brand, the aims and scope of UK engagement in Somalia remained largely unchanged, with a focus on mitigating successive humanitarian crises and containing the regional threat of Al-Shabaab. With shared links to conflict, violence and poor governance, these objectives have been integrated into a broader state-building approach to help improve Somali self-sufficiency, military capabilities and, by extension, stability.

From the low baseline of 2012, when the FGS was first established, progress has clearly been achieved. Alongside other external partners, the UK supported the development of a new political framework, a national security architecture and the trappings of a modern administrative system. It has co-chaired key international conferences, championed the federal agenda and contributed to the formation and function of FMSs. The flexibility of UK programming, relationships at the subnational level, convening power and widely recognised expertise, especially in the humanitarian sector, have also allowed officials to carve strategic niches in an otherwise-crowded donor landscape.

Similarly, the longevity and breadth of coverage and permanent in-country presence afford the UK credibility and influence, and position the embassy as a critical information hub for donors and national stakeholders. Among other examples, this fed into progress on debt relief and improvements in public financial management, acted as a catalyst for stabilisation processes, and proved critical in mobilising international engagement during the 2017 drought.

Recent shifts within the UK have, of course, had an impact. Leaving the EU caused disruption, as did the creation of the FCDO, although the benefits of greater synchronicity of diplomacy and development are evident given the politicised realities of operating across the Horn. A larger problem was the reduction in the UK’s aid budget, which damaged the scale and reliability of interventions and the confidence of partners and local recipients. Perhaps most obvious in relation to humanitarian delivery, where inadequate levels of UK funding detracted from an already-lacklustre international response, various workstreams faced cuts to activities and lags with follow-on programming. Exacerbated by preoccupations with the 2021/22 presidential election campaign, this confusion has interrupted forward planning, sapped momentum for long-term structural reform and diminished the UK’s ability to translate influence into tangible change, whether multilaterally or at the national level. Should the

fall in aid spending continue – as it is forecast to do<sup>235</sup> – these trends will only continue as the UK's networks, access and reserves of goodwill steadily diminish, making it difficult to change course further down the line.

However, it is important to recognise that the main impediments to UK strategic goals predate these changes. Aside from the contextual difficulties of operating in Somalia, these issues are tied to disparities between donor expectations and capabilities, which stem from questions over the feasibility of Western state-building. Technical fixes and capacity-building have a limited shelf-life if there is little Somali agreement over fundamental questions of governance and authority. As illustrated by the UK's stabilisation efforts, successes can be achieved at the local level, but sustainability and scalability depend on whether they can plug into legitimate, sufficiently resourced domestic infrastructure. Incremental advances have been made, but they are neither sufficient nor commensurate with the timelines imposed by weary donors. At the same time, external contributions are often enmeshed (deliberately or incidentally) in a political economy that incentivises and reproduces instability. As a result, the 'Global Britain' agenda remains subject to the same critiques of international state-building that have framed UK policymaking in Somalia for the past decade.

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235. Worley and Ainsworth, 'UK Aid Faces Third Major Cut in 3 Years, with £1.7B to be Cut'.

# About the Author

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