



# Civic Space Participation Policy Brief – Somalia

## A Human Rights–Based Approach

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## Executive Summary

Civic space—the ability of individuals and civil society organizations (CSOs) to freely associate, assemble, and express views—is a cornerstone of constitutional governance and human rights protection in Somalia. While Somalia has made progress in political transition, federalism, and peacebuilding, civic space remains fragile due to insecurity, restrictive practices, weak institutions, and social exclusion.

This **policy brief**, developed by the **Center for Research and Professional Studies (CRPS)**, localizes civic space participation within the **Somali constitutional framework**, aligns it with **international human rights obligations**, and situates it within the **National Development Plan (NDP)** and UN cooperation priorities. It is designed to support a **UN Joint Programme or donor-funded initiative** focused on strengthening civic space as a driver of human rights, accountability, peace, and inclusive development.

The brief positions civic participation as a **legal right and governance necessity**, and proposes practical, context-sensitive policy actions for the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS), Federal Member States (FMS), civil society, and international partners.

## 1. Civic Space and Human Rights in the Somalia Context

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## 1.1 Constitutional and Legal Foundations

Somalia's **Provisional Constitution (2012)** provides a strong normative basis for civic space:

- **Article 16** – Freedom of association
- **Article 18** – Freedom of expression and opinion
- **Article 20** – Freedom of peaceful assembly and demonstration
- **Article 21** – Right to participate in public affairs

These provisions are reinforced by Somalia's international commitments, including:

- **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)**
- **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)**
- **African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights**

From a human rights perspective, civic space in Somalia is not discretionary—it is a **constitutional obligation** and a prerequisite for state legitimacy, reconciliation, and durable peace.

## 1.2 Current Human Rights and Civic Space Trends

Despite constitutional guarantees, civic space in Somalia faces persistent constraints:

- Harassment, intimidation, and arrest of journalists, activists, and CSOs
- Limited access of CSOs to formal decision-making processes
- Insecurity and threats from non-state armed actors
- Gender, clan, and geographic barriers to participation
- Weak enforcement of protections for human rights defenders

These challenges directly affect **human rights monitoring, accountability, and public trust in governance**.

## 2. Alignment with National Development Plan and UN Frameworks

### 2.1 National Development Plan (NDP) Alignment

Strengthening civic space directly supports Somalia's **National Development Plan (NDP)** priorities, particularly:

- **Pillar on Inclusive Politics and Governance** – promoting citizen participation and accountability
- **Rule of Law and Human Rights** – strengthening justice institutions and oversight
- **Social Cohesion and State Legitimacy** – rebuilding trust between state and society



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Civic participation enhances NDP implementation by ensuring policies are **locally informed, inclusive, and conflict-sensitive**.

## 2.2 UN Cooperation and Joint Programming Relevance

This policy brief aligns with key UN priorities in Somalia, including:

- **UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF)**
- **Human Rights Joint Programme**
- **Peacebuilding and State-Building Goals**
- **SDG 16 – Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions**

A **UN Joint Programme on Civic Space and Human Rights** would provide a coordinated platform linking governance, protection, gender, youth, and peacebuilding interventions.

## 3. Civic Space as a Human Rights and Protection Tool

### 3.1 Why Civic Space Matters for Human Rights

An open civic space enables:

- Early warning and documentation of human rights violations
- Community-based protection and advocacy
- Inclusion of women, youth, minorities, IDPs, and persons with disabilities
- Non-violent dialogue and conflict prevention
- Accountability of state and non-state actors

Restricting civic space, by contrast, increases impunity and weakens social cohesion.

### 3.2 Protection of Human Rights Defenders

Human rights defenders in Somalia face significant risks. A rights-based civic space policy must:

- Recognize defenders as legitimate actors
- Establish protection and referral mechanisms
- Address gender-specific risks faced by women human rights defenders
- Combat impunity for attacks and threats

## 4. Policy Objectives and Strategic Outcomes

### 4.1 Policy Objectives

This policy brief proposes the following objectives:

1. Safeguard constitutional freedoms of association, expression, and assembly
2. Institutionalize civil society participation in governance and policy processes



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3. Strengthen human rights monitoring and reporting capacities
4. Promote inclusive participation of marginalized groups
5. Enhance trust, accountability, and state legitimacy

## 4.2 Expected Outcomes (UN Joint Programme–Ready)

- Improved legal and operational environment for CSOs
- Increased civic engagement in national and local decision-making
- Reduced violations against activists and journalists
- Stronger collaboration between government, CSOs, and UN actors
- Enhanced implementation of NDP and SDG 16 commitments

## 5. Key Policy Recommendations

### For Government Institutions (FGS & FMS)

- Align laws, regulations, and practices with constitutional and international standards
- Establish formal, regular civic consultation mechanisms
- Ensure protection of journalists and human rights defenders
- Strengthen independent oversight and judicial remedies

### For Civil Society and CRPS

- Build coordinated civic space and human rights coalitions
- Document and report violations using rights-based methodologies
- Promote civic education and grassroots participation
- Engage constructively with government and UN mechanisms

### For UN and Donor Partners

- Support a UN Joint Programme on Civic Space and Human Rights
- Provide flexible, long-term funding to Somali CSOs
- Integrate civic space indicators into governance and protection programmes
- Facilitate dialogue platforms at national and federal member state levels

## Conclusion

Protecting and expanding civic space is essential to Somalia’s constitutional order, human rights obligations, and development trajectory. As Somalia advances its state-building and peace agendas, civic participation must be recognized not as a threat, but as a **strategic asset for protection, accountability, and inclusive governance**.

CRPS stands ready to partner with government institutions, the United Nations, and development partners to advance a rights-based civic space agenda that contributes to peace, dignity, and sustainable development in Somalia.



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