



Evaluating Adaptive Peacebuilding Through Developmental Evaluation: Lessons on Cohesion and Inclusion from Fragile Somali Districts

RESEARCH ARTICLE

MD ABU HANIF 



ABSTRACT

This practice note presents an evaluation of the Peace Reconciliation Activity (PRA) implemented by Catholic Relief Services in Somalia. Data was gathered through 216 household surveys, 24 focus group discussions, and 16 key informant interviews. We used an embedded Developmental Evaluation framework, conducted within a convergent mixed-methods design. This framework enabled us to capture iterative learning, stakeholder feedback, and adopt and document adaptive changes throughout the implementation process. The PRA sought to rebuild trust, inclusion, and social cohesion across four fragile and conflict-affected districts — Barawe, Afgoye, Jowhar, and Warsheikh — where decades of recurring inter-clan violence, displacement, and trauma had fractured civic life, undermined resilience and created intergroup mistrust. We examined whether the PRA had strengthened pathways to peacebuilding, social cohesion, and inclusion. Community members developed practical peacebuilding competencies — learning negotiation, empathy, and respect for diverse clans — while engaging in collective reconciliation efforts. Connector projects such as water preservation were co-created to address shared resource conflicts. Village-level Natural Resource Management and Disaster Risk Reduction committees, along with hybrid peace platforms at the district level, played pivotal roles in preventing disputes, resolving grievances, and promoting equitable access to land and resources. The Social Capital Index increased, although bridging ties remained weaker than bonding ties, particularly among older adults and men. Mutual trust and empathy improved while grievance resolution improved considerably from the previous year. Community-based grievance systems, intergenerational dialogue, and gender inclusion emerged as key enablers of peace outcomes. In conclusion, trauma-informed, inclusive peacebuilding, when rooted in real-time data and local agency, can reinforce cohesion in fragile environments.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Md Abu Hanif, PhD

Independent Researcher
and Development
Practitioner, Dhaka,
Bangladesh

hanif0077@yahoo.com

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This practice note presents the findings of a Developmental Evaluation (DE) of the Peace Reconciliation Activity (PRA) implemented by Catholic Relief Services (CRS) across four conflict-affected districts in Somalia. This note first looks at the aims of the project, then at the results of our evaluation. It explores how adaptive peacebuilding, guided by Developmental Evaluation principles, contributed to measurable shifts in cohesion and inclusion, emphasizing that evaluation is not a post-hoc exercise but rather a learning process that needs to take place alongside the process of implementation.

THE PEACE RECONCILIATION ACTIVITY

Somalia's sociopolitical environment remains deeply fragile, shaped by protracted conflict, displacement, environmental shocks, and fractured governance. The PRA was implemented from 2022 to 2024 in Barawe, Afgoye, Jowhar, and Warsheikh, districts long affected by these problems, and at a time when inter-clan violence, land competition, and weakened civic institutions had eroded local trust. It aimed to advance peace, inclusion, and social cohesion through a locally led and trauma-informed methodology. Its objectives were to rebuild social ties across clans, enhance empathy and negotiation capacity, and expand inclusive civic platforms. By focusing on community-led learning, it sought to transform entrenched attitudes toward coexistence, empowering participants to become active agents of reconciliation.

The PRA was built on CRS's 3B/4D framework. The 3Bs are Bonding (strengthening intra-group solidarity), Binding (addressing personal and collective trauma), and Bridging (fostering inter-group empathy and collaboration). This is coupled with the Discover, Dream, Design, and Deliver stages adopted from Appreciative Inquiry methodology, which facilitates visioning and co-creation among diverse participants ([Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005](#)). This integrated model provided a structured yet adaptive pathway for communities to process trauma, envision peaceful coexistence, and co-create solutions. The PRA intervention ensured intersectional inclusion by ensuring that youth, women, elders, persons with disabilities, and internally displaced persons participated in designing and monitoring peace actions, reinforcing inclusivity and ownership. The PRA's design responded to the erosion of traditional mediation mechanisms and the exclusion of marginalized groups from governance. It aimed to restore trust through participatory reconciliation forums, trauma-healing initiatives, peaceful masculinities activities for young men, and inclusive livelihood cooperation.

Peace in fragile states depends on more than institutional arrangements: it requires psychological recovery, adaptive learning, and inclusive social infrastructure. Prolonged exposure to violence and displacement has psychological and relational consequences that undermine peacebuilding ([Hammond, 2013](#); [True, 2020](#)). Research by Betancourt et al. (2013), True (2020), and OECD (2019) show that gendered expectations of masculinity in fragile and conflict-affected settings shape conflict and peacebuilding dynamics, and that engaging men and boys can foster empathy, reduce violence, and support more inclusive social relations. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee's (IASC) 2007 guidelines emphasize psychosocial care as a prerequisite for reconciliation. Integrating trauma healing into civic life helps participants reframe identity narratives from victimhood to agency, reinforcing resilience and belonging.

Social cohesion, defined by trust, belonging, and cooperation, is also vital for recovery in post-conflict societies (Putnam, 2000). Somalia's clan-based divisions illustrate how bonding capital can reinforce internal solidarity while hindering cross-clan collaboration. Studies emphasize that inclusive civic dialogue strengthens both vertical and horizontal trust (vertical trust being between leaders and community members, and horizontal trust between peers) (OECD, 2021; Saferworld, 2021). Within Somalia's fragmented context, bonding networks often sustain immediate survival, but bridging relationships determine prospects for lasting peace. Evidence suggests that youth and women often act as bridging agents due to their flexible trust networks (Elmi et al., 2023). However, persistent marginalization undermines their full participation in community governance and peace processes. Programs that create safe, inclusive spaces for dialogue are shown to enhance both bonding and bridging outcomes (Saferworld, 2021).

Transformation of gender relations was another critical outcome. A central innovation of the PRA was the Peaceful Masculinities Component, which encouraged men and boys to adopt non-violent, empathetic, and collaborative behaviors. Through community dialogues, peer-to-peer mentorship, and youth leadership clubs, male participants reflected on gender norms, practised positive role modeling, and contributed to safer, more respectful community relations. Football tournaments, drama, and cultural events provided non-confrontational spaces for cross-clan interaction and redefined masculinity around care, cooperation, and civic responsibility. These efforts complemented women's leadership initiatives, ensuring that gender role transformation was relational rather than unilateral. This cultural shift reduced gender-based tensions and encouraged men to act as allies in promoting respectful, equitable relationships. However, sustaining it will require continued investment in positive male role models and institutional support for gender equality.

The PRA also established and provided capacity-building to community-level Natural Resource Management (NRM) and Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) committees to address disputes over governance of water points, use of fallow and grazing land, farmland allocation, and forest resource management. It revitalized district-level hybrid peace platforms by connecting elders, women leaders, and officials in order to mediate grievances. These mechanisms improved accountability and fostered transparent conflict resolution, particularly for vulnerable farmers and displaced groups.

By linking peacebuilding to livelihoods, transformation of gender relations, and inclusive governance, the PRA moved beyond dialogue to tangible social change. Community participants collectively identified connector projects, such as water-management schemes and market-rehabilitation initiatives, that reduced competition over scarce resources and strengthened shared ownership, interdependence, and long-term stability.

The findings laid out in this Practice Note form part of the September 2024 Pivot Assessment, the project's bi-annual outcome progress review mechanism. I worked on this as the Deputy Chief of Party Developmental Evaluator and reviewed program performance, outcomes, and emerging results that could be attributed to the project intervention. The aim was to capture learning and document the emergent and evidence-based adaptive changes adopted throughout implementation to see if further changes were needed. This study contributes empirical evidence from Somalia on how Developmental Evaluation operationalized these principles, translating adaptive learning into locally owned peace outcomes. While numerous peacebuilding programs exist, few have integrated real-time evaluation frameworks to explore the relationship

between trauma, social cohesion, and inclusion in such fluid settings. Traditional evaluations measure outcomes retrospectively, missing real-time adaptations essential in fragile environments. The PRA addressed this gap by embedding a Developmental Evaluation (DE) framework from inception to ensure continuous reflection and adaptive learning, linking evidence directly to decision-making in the field. DE, introduced by Patton (2011), suits non-linear, evolving processes like peacebuilding, where change is iterative (de Coning, 2018; Gamble, 2008). It also embeds evaluators within program teams to enable learning through action. By positioning evaluators as facilitators rather than auditors, DE transforms evaluation into a collective learning mechanism that enhances responsiveness to complex social realities. Field-based studies have demonstrated how DE has supported programming in contexts like South Sudan and Syria by embedding evaluators within implementation teams to facilitate course correction and stakeholder engagement (CRS, 2022).

DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION

METHODS

Our study combined the DE framework of real-time learning and context responsiveness with a convergent mixed-methods design that used both quantitative measurement and qualitative depth. We conducted 216 household surveys via mobile devices using KoboToolbox, following stratified purposive sampling to ensure inclusion across gender, age, disability, and displacement status. Indicators reflected the PRA's Theory of Change: bonding and bridging social capital, inclusion, grievance resolution, and livelihood access. The Social Capital Index and Social Barometer, using five-point Likert scales, captured perceptions of trust, empathy, and collective efficacy. Data was analyzed using SPSS version 26. We conducted 24 focus group discussions (FGDs) and 16 key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with community actors, elders, youth, women, and persons with disabilities. These dialogue sessions touched on emotional narratives of trauma, reconciliation, and belonging, providing crucial insight into peacebuilding dynamics. Two multi-stakeholder reflection workshops validated findings and informed adaptive decisions. The DE process produced evidence for continuous learning and informed adaptive real-time decision-making through practices such as community validation dialogues, district-level pause-and-reflect workshops, the co-creation of participatory Option Memos, and regular strategy huddles with program teams. For example, the identification of low bridging social capital in Jowhar led to the redesign of peer-facilitated dialogue sessions to enhance cross-group interaction. Similarly, challenges in grievance redress mechanisms in Barawe prompted the inclusion of justice sector actors in psychosocial support forums to improve responsiveness and trust.

Our district selection was informed by an assessment of a blend of strategic vulnerability, partner presence, and stakeholder demand. Each district offered distinct learning opportunities, for example, high youth unemployment and grievance clustering in Jowhar, or strong but fragmented civil society structures in Warsheikh. The DE approach enabled comparative analysis and peer learning across these varied district contexts. That said, the purposive sampling approach limits the generalizability of findings beyond the four districts. Insecurity restricted access to remote or high-risk areas. Although mixed methods strengthened validity through triangulation, the absence of a formal control group precludes definitive causal inference. Additionally, self-reported perceptions may introduce bias. Despite these constraints, we found that the DE approach provided reliable, iterative insights for adaptive decision-making.

All research tools and protocols underwent internal ethical review and were approved by the CRS Somalia Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) oversight board. Participants were fully informed of their rights, including the voluntary nature of participation, anonymity, and the right to withdraw without consequence. Participant safety and dignity were prioritized through gender-sensitive teams and referral mechanisms for psychosocial support. Special safeguards were instituted for youth, women, and persons with disabilities, including adapted consent procedures and the presence of same-gender facilitators during sensitive discussions. Trauma sensitivity was prioritized, particularly given the high prevalence of psychosocial distress and exposure to conflict or displacement. Enumerators received intensive training on trauma sensitivity, consent, and data protection aligned with IASC Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings and were equipped to provide referrals to local support structures when needed. Data confidentiality and integrity were maintained through password-protected devices, GPS verification, encrypted backups, and daily quality checks by supervisors. No personally identifiable information was recorded during FGDs or KIIs, and all digital data was anonymized during analysis and reporting. Overall, the evaluation upheld core principles of do no harm, informed consent, and respect for dignity, ensuring the process remained inclusive, transparent, and responsive to the needs and vulnerabilities of participants. Data quality was ensured through supervisor checks, triangulation, and iterative coding of qualitative material. The DE process transformed these analyses into adaptive learning loops, feeding real-time findings back into program design.

FINDINGS

This section presents the evaluation's major findings. The results are organized thematically across trust and social capital, inclusion, grievance redress, empathy, resilience, and access to livelihoods and services.

TRUST AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

The findings reveal a nuanced balance between bonding and bridging social capital. The Social Capital Index (SCI) rose from 52% to 58%, reflecting measurable improvement in social cohesion across the four target districts. Bonding ties (63%) remained stronger than bridging ties (54%), suggesting that while intra-group solidarity is deeply embedded in Somali communities, inter-group trust requires deliberate facilitation. Women (61%) and youth (57%) reported higher cohesion than men (56%), highlighting how structured program engagement helped marginalized groups expand trust networks (see [Table 1](#)). Qualitative narratives reinforced these patterns. The bonding index among women peaked at 66%, likely due to strong informal networks such as female-led groups, Zakat practices, and mutual aid structures. Female-led support groups and youth dialogue clubs proved to be crucial for fostering bridging capital, helping participants connect across clan lines. The program's trauma-healing sessions created safe spaces for trust-building, particularly for survivors of displacement. Dialogue forums, joint livelihoods, and cultural exchanges were particularly effective in bridging divides and cultivating empathy among previously estranged groups.

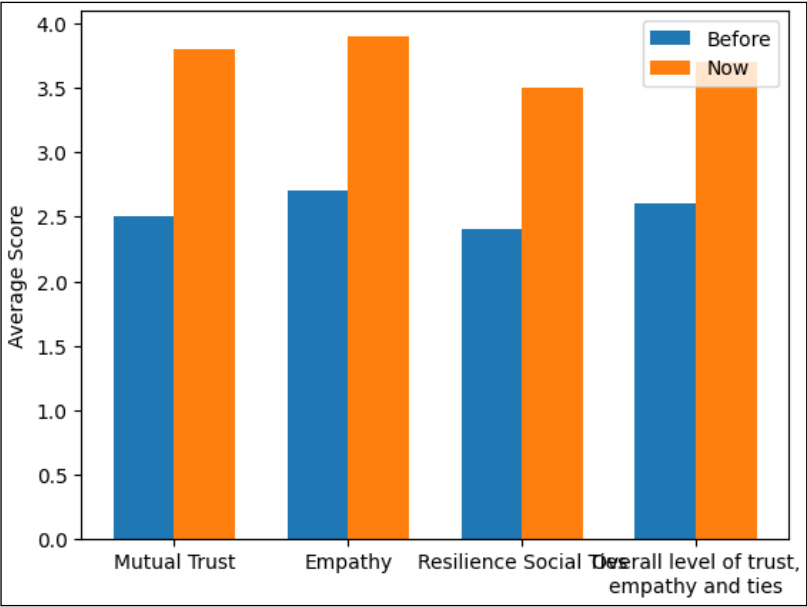
DESCRIPTION	MALE	FEMALE	15–29 YEARS	30+ YEARS	OVERALL
Overall Social Capital Index	56	61	57	58	58
Bonding Index	61	66	61	63	63
Bridging Index	54	56	51	54	54

INCLUSION AND SOCIAL BELONGING

Perceptions of inclusion in mixed social spaces increased from 25% to 33%. Youth (44%) and women (43%) reported stronger belonging than men (39%) or older adults (39%), indicating that younger and female participants felt more welcome in diverse settings (see Table 2).

DESCRIPTION	MALE	FEMALE	15–29 YEARS	30+ YEARS	OVERALL
% Feeling Welcomed	39	43	44	39	33

Community dialogue, Peaceful Masculinities activities, and cultural events, such as football tournaments, theatre, and music, helped normalize cooperation between clans and provided safe, non-political spaces for interaction among men, women, and youth from different identity groups. These activities encouraged minority-clan members to participate more confidently in community life and attend public gatherings, such as weddings hosted by majority clans. By combining sports, art, and reflection on gender norms, the PRA fostered empathy, social inclusion, and a shared sense of belonging across clan lines (see Figure 1).



GRIEVANCE REDRESS AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

District-level hybrid peace platforms and village-level NRM and DRR committees helped prevent and mediate disputes over land, water, and grazing access. Grievance

Table 1 Social Capital Index by Gender and Age Group.
Source: Author’s field survey data.

Table 2 Respondents Feeling Welcomed in Mixed Communities.
Source: Author’s field survey data.

Figure 1 Changes in Mutual Trust, Empathy, and Resilient Social Ties.
Source: Author’s Field Survey Data.

reporting reached 62% across districts, and 77% of those cases were resolved, representing a 37-percentage-point increase compared with the prior year. These inclusive mechanisms allowed diverse clan representatives to address resource-related grievances collectively (see [Figure 2](#)). These peace platforms improved grievance-resolution rates, but participation remained uneven. Men (57%) and adults (65%) had higher resolution rates than women (43%) and youth (35%) (see [Table 3](#)). The latter still faced barriers linked to social stigma and limited decision-making authority. Addressing these asymmetries requires embedding gender-responsive mechanisms and youth-inclusive representation within local governance structures.

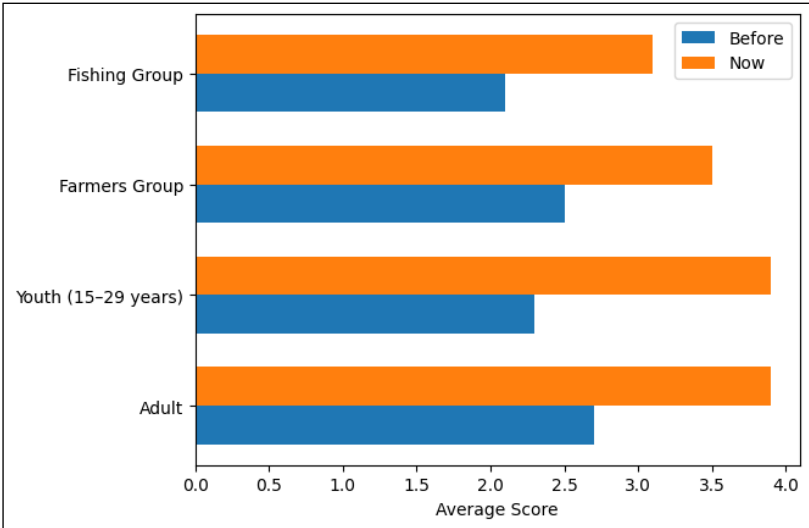


Figure 2 Changes in Grievance Resolution by Social Group.
Source: Author's Field Survey Data.

DESCRIPTION	MALE	FEMALE	15-29 YEARS	30+ YEARS	OVERALL
% Resolved	57	43	35	65	77

Table 3 Grievance Resolution by Demographics.
Source: Author's field survey data.

EMPATHY, TRUST, AND RESILIENCE

Overall average scores for mutual trust, empathy, and resilient social ties increased from 2.6 to 3.7 on a five-point Likert scale (see [Figure 1](#)). Youth and women demonstrated the greatest improvement, owing to consistent participation in trauma-healing circles and peer-led dialogues (see [Figure 3](#)). This underscores the transformative power of trauma-informed engagement. Healing circles and psychosocial dialogues not only mitigated the emotional impact of conflict but also redefined community narratives around forgiveness, belonging, and collective identity.

ACCESS TO LIVELIHOODS AND BASIC SERVICES

Inclusive livelihood initiatives emerged as powerful connectors across clans. Cooperative agriculture, market linkages, and Savings and Internal Lending Communities (SILC) reduced competition over resources and replaced suspicion with collaboration. SILCs increased household financial confidence and promoted inclusion. Shared livelihood activities, such as joint irrigation repairs and small enterprise training, brought together members of different clans, transforming economic collaboration into trust-building opportunities. Economic interdependence thus became both a peace dividend and a foundation for long-term resilience.

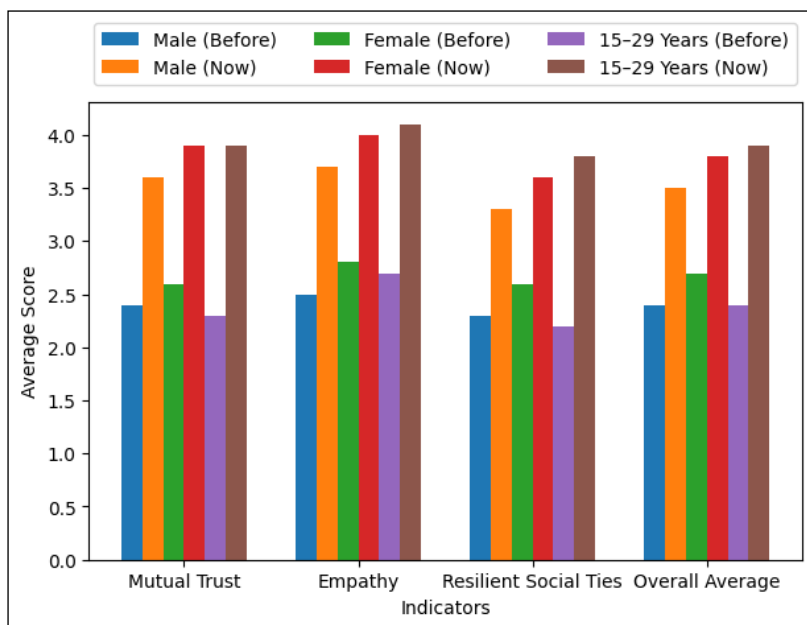


Figure 3 Changes in Mutual Trust, Empathy, and Resilient Social Ties by Gender and Age.

Source: Author’s Field Survey Data.

Access to basic services improved from 2.0 to 3.0 on a four-point scale, moving from “limited” to “moderate” access. Women, youth, and persons with disabilities experienced the largest gains, especially in health, education, and security services. In addition, the PRA integrated vocational skills training for youth boys and girls, as well as adult men and women, to enhance employability, diversify income opportunities, and strengthen local market participation. These training programs, covering trades such as tailoring, carpentry, mechanics, and small business management, expanded economic inclusion and built community resilience by reducing dependence on humanitarian aid. The combination of improved service access and vocational skills development reinforced participants’ confidence, self-reliance, and ability to contribute productively to peacebuilding processes (see Figure 4 & Table 4).

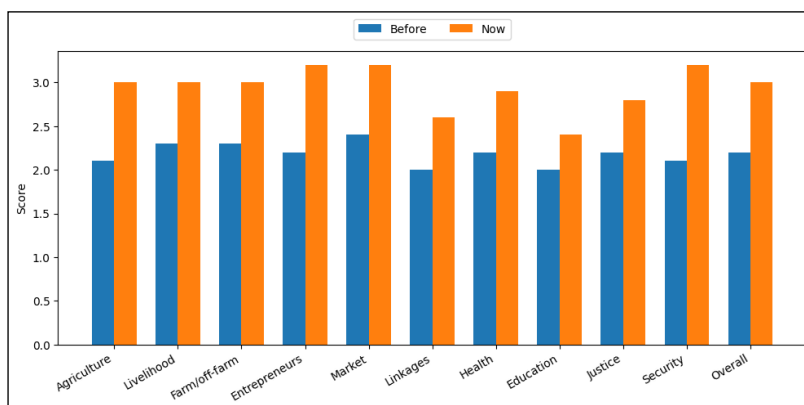


Figure 4 Community Experiences related to Access to Economic Resources and Services.

Source: Author’s Field Survey Data.

INDICATOR	12 MONTHS BEFORE	CURRENT	CHANGE
Social Capital Index	52%	58%	+6%
Inclusion in Mixed Communities	25%	33%	+8%
Grievances Resolved	40%	77%	+37%
Trust & Empathy (avg. score)	2.6	3.7	+1.1
Access to Services & Livelihoods	2.0	3.0	+1.0

Table 4 Key Indicator Progress Over 12 Months.

Source: Author’s Field Survey Data.

CONCLUSIONS

We can summarise the lessons learned about the impact of the PRA through the DE process as follows. Bridging ties require intentional design and cross-clan trust develops only when deliberately cultivated through inclusive platforms and shared projects. True inclusion requires psychological safety and belonging. Healing enables cohesion: trauma-sensitive facilitation strengthens empathy and resilience. Trauma-informed practices should be used to integrate psychosocial healing into governance, justice, and development systems. In addition, community mechanisms are most effective when accessible and inclusive: hybrid peace committees must include women, youth, and people with disabilities in leadership roles, representing their own interests and views. Gender equity in particular needs role models and so transformative masculinity initiatives should highlight local champions. Livelihoods are also peace catalysts as joint economic ventures anchor reconciliation in tangible benefits. Such inclusive livelihood models need to be scaled up, by expanding SILC and cooperative enterprises that link economic security to reconciliation. Beyond that, sustainability requires systems thinking, which requires concern for local institutions and their future performance. Embedding DE practices within district governance structures ensures continuity.

The PRA demonstrates how DE can transform peacebuilding from a static, output-driven project into a responsive and dynamic learning system. DE can operationalize adaptive peacebuilding by embedding learning within action. Real-time feedback loops, trauma-informed facilitation, and inclusive livelihoods collectively strengthened social cohesion and trust among diverse clans. DE is not merely a monitoring approach but a participatory framework for adaptive peacebuilding. By integrating real-time data, reflection, and learning into implementation, the PRA helped local actors navigate uncertainty, transform relationships, and embed inclusion within peace processes. Continuous feedback loops allowed program teams and communities to adapt and innovate interventions in real time in complex environments. Embedding DE from the outset enabled implementers and community members to co-produce solutions through regular reflection and joint analysis. Adjustments, such as revising grievance-redress forums, introducing women mediators, and reconfiguring youth dialogues, emerged directly from participatory learning rather than top-down directives. These iterative adaptations ensured that the PRA remained relevant to local realities and capable of responding to shifting conflict dynamics.

Our experience suggests that donors and agencies should embed DE approaches in all peacebuilding cycles to ensure flexibility and responsiveness. Further studies should examine how DE-driven learning sustains long-term peace outcomes and how gender and age shape bridging capital over time. Peace in fragile contexts is not a one-time achievement but an evolving process of collective learning. When communities are equipped to analyze and adapt through evidence and empathy, reconciliation becomes not only possible but enduring. The Somali experience illustrates how locally grounded evidence, when translated through iterative learning, can inform broader strategies for sustainable and systemic peace.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Md Abu Hanif, PhD  orcid.org/0009-0001-6303-7631
Independent Researcher and Development Practitioner, Dhaka, Bangladesh

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Hanif
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