Over the past 19 years Somalis have held many peace and reconciliation conferences and concluded many peace agreements, some between a few individuals and others between larger political alliances.

The majority of these agreements have not been implemented and many were barely worth the paper they were written on. At each successive reconciliation conference the number of factions taking part has increased, but all have failed to deliver peace in Somalia.

This article extends the discussion of multiple peace agreements that have been brokered since 1991 to establish a new national government in Somalia. It is written from a Somali standpoint, reflecting on why so many agreements have failed to deliver results.

Conferences, clans and factionalism
The clan system defines Somali social relationships and politics. But it has interacted with the structure of internationally-led Somali peace conferences in such a way as to promote factionalism.

Conflict in Somalia is characterized by complex and competing personal and clan interests. Reconciliation conferences have failed to address real grievances and have instead been vehicles for furthering these interests. As the number of factions grew in the 1990s, convening a new conference became a goal in itself, rather than consolidating what had already been agreed upon.

Anyone who has become a prominent leader through a reconciliation conference is seen first and foremost as a representative of his clan. Some have created a faction simply to generate support, thereby increasing the number of participants and prolonging negotiations. Others have participated with the sole aim of blocking the ambitions of a rival. Unfortunately, clan solidarity can be invoked by individuals to gain access to political power for private gain.

Despite an ever-expanding cast of participants, no reconciliation conference has achieved a lasting settlement. The late Mogadishu warlord General Mohamed Farah Aideed first coined the expression ‘looma dhamma’ – ‘not inclusive’. This phrase has been used time and again to dismiss peace agreements and justify a continuation of conflict, although it often means little more than the absence of certain individuals from the negotiating table.

Early reconciliation meetings
The first two international reconciliation meetings aimed at re-establishing a Somali government took place in Djibouti in June and July 1991. Six organizations participated, all representing a clan or sub-clan constituency. But in reality the clan served as an instrument to further ambitions of individuals, most of whom had held influential government positions in the past and were competing for similar ranks in a possible new administration.

An agreement was signed endorsing Ali Mahdi as president. This deal was immediately rejected by General Aideed, who was from a different Hawiye sub-clan to that of Ali Mahdi and was contesting Mahdi’s leadership of the United Somali Congress (USC). As result a bloody civil war in Mogadishu and the south ensued.

The second major national reconciliation meeting was organized by the United Nations (UN) in Addis Ababa in March 1993. This time there were 15 parties to accommodate. Some were new clan organizations, including some minorities that had not been present at Djibouti, but many of the new factions were splinter groups aligned with either Ali Mahdi or Aided.

The Somali National Movement (SNM) was invited but did not participate. Only three parties had remained intact since the Djibouti meeting. A process to form a new government was agreed but never implemented. By this time the faction leaders were popularly referred to as ‘warlords’.

The UN held another meeting in Nairobi in March 1994. The number of attendees had again increased, but all belonged to one of two alliances, Aideed’s Somali National Alliance (SNA)
and Ali Mahdi’s Somali Salvation Alliance (SSA). Divided factions carried the name of which grouping they were allied to, eg the USC/SSA and USC/SNA, the Somali Patriotic Movement (SPM)/SSA or SPM/SNA.

In October 1996 Kenyan President Daniel Arap Moi hosted the three main Mogadishu leaders, Ali Mahdi, Osman Atto and Hussein Aideed (who had succeeded his father as SNA leader after the latter’s death) along with other members of the SSA. Despite agreeing a nine-point peace deal, the initiative failed to resolve anything and the proliferation of parties continued.

The international community was unable to engage fresh leaders or persuade the factions to be represented by unified bodies. New breakaway factions of existing groups were always allowed to attend.

Some twenty-seven signatories were party to the third major reconciliation conference organized in Sodere, Ethiopia, from November 1996 to January 1997, even though Hussein Aideed and four factions allied to him had refused to attend.

A fourth reconciliation meeting in Cairo in late 1997 saw 28 signatories to the ensuing agreement, including both Ali Mahdi and Aideed. But this time faction leaders closer to Ethiopia such as Abdullahi Yusuf withdrew from the talks, which they saw as hostile to the Ethiopian-backed Sodere process and also too close to some members of Al Itihad – an Islamist militant group engaged in armed confrontations with Puntland and Ethiopia.

From Arta to a federal charter

The next national peace conference was held in Arta, Djibouti and marked a new phase in Somali reconciliation. Endorsed by neighbouring countries as a regional initiative of the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), talks took place over five months, culminating in August 2000 with the Arta Declaration and the formation of the Transitional National Government (TNG) led by Abdulqasim Salad Hassan.

In contrast to previous reconciliation meetings, the Arta conference included extensive participation by unarmed civic leaders – intellectuals, clan and religious leaders and members of the business community. A few of the less powerful warlords took part, but the more notorious Mogadishu warlords did not, and nor did Abdullahi Yusuf who objected to the lack of a federal structure.

Nevertheless the TNG was the first Somali government since 1991 to secure a measure of international recognition, enabling Somalia to reoccupy its seat at the UN and in regional bodies. But the international community failed to provide substantive assistance to the TNG, in part due to Ethiopia’s support for Abdullahi Yusuf.

Abdullahi Yusuf met with 17 other Somali political groups and alliances in Awasa, Ethiopia, in March 2001 where the Somalia Reconciliation and Restoration Council (SRRC) was formed to oppose the Arta process and the TNG, and to promote the formation of a federal Somali state.

In an effort to reconcile the TNG with its SRRC adversaries, IGAD launched a fresh national reconciliation process before the TNG mandate had ended. This process eventually developed into a sixth major Somali reconciliation meeting, the Somali National Reconciliation Conference, held in Eldoret, Kenya, in October 2002. It produced a ceasefire agreement signed by 24 faction leaders stipulating the need to create a federal structure, reversing the unitary structure established at Arta.

Signatories included representatives of the TNG, a strong cohort of the SRRC, several of Somalia’s most powerful warlords and various leaders linked to the factions that had appeared in earlier meetings. The process engaged 300 delegates in lengthy deliberations over two years. This led to an agreement on a Transitional Federal Charter and the selection of 275 members of parliament, who in turn elected Abdullahi Yusuf as President of the TFG in October 2004.

Both Arta and the federal charter employed the ‘4.5’ power-sharing formula dividing Somali clans into four major ones and condensing all others into the remaining ’0.5’. The formula masked the lack of support from the administrations in Somaliland and Puntland. Individuals from the predominant clans of these regions took part in the peace talks but were limited by their inability to represent their own regions on the basis of the 4.5 formula.

Looking back

The multiple Somali peace and reconciliation processes have produced many agreements but have never sufficiently addressed the real grievances that exist among Somali individuals and clans. At each round of talks and conferences the factions and international community members repeated the same mistakes made in previous processes and agreements.

It seems that Somalis look back on these processes only to regret, not to learn lessons, which is why the outcomes have rarely changed and the political balance has stayed the same.

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