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Report

# Community Perspectives on Conflict-Related Harm Mitigation

## A Research Report by Isha Human Rights Organization (IHRO) and the PROTEX Project

November 2025

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## Funding

This report draws on research from the Protection Complexities: How EU, UN and AU practice protection of civilians (PROTEX) Project, which is funded by Independent Research Fund Denmark and led by Dr Chiara De Franco (PI) (SDU).

Grants nos. 8019-00105B and 6165-00015B.

## Acknowledgments

We are sincerely grateful to the community representatives who chose to share their time, insights, and experiences with us, often under conditions of insecurity where participation in research cannot be taken for granted. Their willingness to engage made this work possible.

We also thank the IHRO researchers that helped us with the data gathering.

Photos by Adan Mohamed Yusuf (Baidoa, Somalia).

## How to cite this Report

Alin Hilowle Hassan, Adan Mohamed Yusuf, Chiara De Franco, and Linnéa Gelot (2025), "Community Perspectives on Conflict-Related Harm Mitigation," Odense: PROTEX Project, Center for War Studies.

## About the Protex Project

PROTEX is a multi-year research project based at CWS. It examines how the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU), and the African Union (AU) protect civilians from conflict-related violence.

These international organizations (IOs) operate with distinct understandings of what protection means and how it should be practiced, reflecting the varied mandates and mission types they deploy. As a result, protection practices among IOs remain far from standardized, even when they draw on the same normative frameworks (PoC, Civilian Harm Mitigation, HRDDP, etc.). The project investigates these institutional differences to better understand what IOs actually do, and fail to do, when protecting civilians, individually and together.

More information about project activities and publications is available at https://protexproject.eu

## About IHRO

The Isha Human Rights Organization (IHRO) is a non-governmental organization dedicated to improving human rights protection and fostering peace and development in South West State (SWS) of Somalia. Founded on 1 November 1999 by a group of intellectuals, IHRO works across four thematic areas: human rights and protection, good governance and democracy, peace-building and reconciliation, and socio-economic development. Since its establishment, IHRO has implemented a wide range of programs in partnership with UN agencies and international NGOs. The organization continues to engage communities throughout Somalia to safeguard citizens' rights, promote peace, and enhance governance. More information about IHRO's projects and activities is available at https://ihrosom.org

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## Acronyms and Abbreviations

**ADR** Alternative Dispute Resolution

**ATMIS** African Union Transition Mission in Somalia

**CAF** Community Action Forum

**CDF** Civilian Defense Forum (contextual, check alignment with CDF usage in your project)

**CHM** Civilian Harm Mitigation

**CRH** Conflict-Related Harm

**CRHM** Conflict-Related Harm Mitigation

**CBO(s)** Community Based Organization(s)

**FGD(s)** Focus Group Discussion(s)

**GBV** Gender-Based Violence

**HR** Human Rights

**ICRC** International Committee of the Red Cross

**IHRO** Isha Human Rights Organization

**IDP(s)** Internally Displaced Person(s)

**INGO(s)** International Non-Governmental Organization(s)

**KII(s)** Key Informant Interview(s)

**NGO(s)** Non-Governmental Organization(s)

**OHCHR** Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

**PAC** Police Advisory Committee

**PCVE** Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism

**SGBV** Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

**SNA** Somali National Army

**SWS** Southwest State (of Somalia)

**UN** United Nations

**UN OCHA** United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

## International Terms and Definitions

**Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR)** A mechanism for resolving disputes outside the formal court system, often through dialogue, mediation, or negotiation, commonly applied to land disputes and local conflicts.

**Casualty Recording** The systematic documentation of deaths and injuries caused by conflict, aimed at accountability, advocacy, and improved protection.

**Community Action Forum (CAF)** A community-based platform bringing together elders, women, youth, and local leaders to discuss security challenges, mediate disputes, and coordinate community protection.

**Conflict-Related Harm (CRH)** Any physical, psychological, socio-economic, or structural impact experienced by civilians as a result of armed conflict, political violence, or systemic exclusion.

It includes both direct acts of violence (such as killings, injuries, displacement, and gender-based violence) and indirect consequences (including trauma, loss of livelihoods, marginalization, and the erosion of social cohesion).

**Conflict-Related Harm Mitigation (CRHM)** Measures undertaken to prevent, reduce, or respond to harm inflicted on civilians during armed conflict or periods of insecurity. These may include policy reforms, institutional mechanisms, and community-based interventions that promote accountability and civilian protection.

**Customary Law (Xeer)** Traditional Somali legal system based on clan consensus, mediation, and compensation, often used to resolve disputes outside formal courts.

**Gender-Based Violence (GBV)** Any harmful act directed against individuals based on their gender, including sexual violence, domestic violence, forced marriage, and harassment.

**Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)** Individuals or groups forced to flee their homes due to conflict, violence, or disasters but who remain within their country's borders.

**Non-State Armed Groups** Organized groups outside the formal state military or police, including insurgent groups, militias, and clan-based forces.

**Police Advisory Committee (PAC)** A community–police interface body that facilitates dialogue, monitors police conduct, and advocates for detainees, particularly vulnerable groups.

**Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE)** Programs and strategies that aim to prevent radicalization, recruitment, and participation in violent extremist activities through community engagement, awareness, and resilience-building.

**Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV)** A subcategory of GBV specifically involving sexual acts such as rape, exploitation, or harassment carried out under coercion or force.

## Note of the authors

This report emerges from a pilot collaboration between the PROTEX Project and IHRO. By making the data gathered here available to a broader community of academics and practitioners, we hope to encourage further research on conflict-related harm. We also hope to help establish better practice whereby the work of local researchers collecting data in areas that are largely inaccessible to "Western" scholars is not only acknowledged but also made visible and policy relevant. The report is also intended as a foundational output, informing subsequent academic publications in which PROTEX Project members will develop a more theory-grounded analysis of conflict-related harm. These future contributions will draw on the findings presented here, as well as on broader fieldwork and qualitative material collected over the course of the PROTEX project.

# 1 Executive Summary

This research report, developed collaboratively by Isha Human Rights Organization (IHRO) and the PROTEX Project team focuses on conflict-related harm, providing an in-depth examination of how civilians experience, perceive, and respond to harm in conflict-affected contexts in the Bay Region, Southwest State of Somalia. Based on research activities conducted by IHRO, including extensive Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews (KIIs), and community consultations with women, youth, elders, minority groups, and internally displaced persons (IDPs), the study consolidates community-level perspectives into actionable insights for policy and practice.

## Key Findings

### 1 Civilian harm is multi-dimensional:

Communities emphasized that harm extends beyond deaths and injuries to include psychological trauma, economic deprivation, forced displacement, loss of livelihoods, and systemic exclusion. Women and youth face unique vulnerabilities while IDPs, minority groups, elderly, and disabled persons remain the most marginalized and under-protected.

### 2 Perpetrators are diverse, and responsibility is often blurred:

- **Non-state armed groups, especially al-Shabaab,** are the primary drivers of civilian harm, carrying out targeted and indiscriminate attacks, forced recruitment, extortion, and severe movement restrictions. Their coercive parallel governance systems further undermine community security.
- **Clan militias and local armed groups** fuel cycles of revenge violence, resource-based clashes, and political disputes. Their actions particularly endanger minority groups, IDPs, and those outside dominant clan networks.
- **State security forces** play an ambivalent role: while they provide protection through patrols and rapid response, they are also implicated in arbitrary arrests of youth, restrictive or exploitative practices at checkpoints, delayed responses to threats, and uses of force that some communities view as excessive.
- **International forces (ATMIS/AUSSOM and Ethiopian contingents)** contribute to stability through securing towns, supporting SNA operations, and training security personnel, yet their operations can also inadvertently cause civilian casualties, trigger displacement, and restrict mobility when communication with communities is limited or civilian safeguards are insufficient.
- **Community leaders and elders** – though central to local dispute resolution – may perpetuate harm through biased mediation, exclusion of minority groups and IDPs, and the handling of GBV cases through compensation mechanisms that silence victims and reinforce inequality.

**3 Patterns of harm are systemic and cyclical:**
Violence is not experienced as isolated incidents but as recurring and reinforcing cycles of physical, social, and economic harm. Urban areas see harassment, incidents of theft or looting, and unverified or unexplained detentions while rural areas experience land conflicts, displacement, and Al-Shabaab intimidation. Vulnerable groups, especially women and IDPs, remain disproportionately affected.

**4 Community resilience is strong but constrained:**
Traditional mediation, Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR), Community Action Forums (CAF), and Police Advisory Committees (PAC) provide vital protective functions. Women's groups and youth volunteers also play front-line roles in prevention, early warning, victim support, and Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) initiatives. However, these mechanisms are under-resourced, often biased, and not fully inclusive of marginalized groups.

**5 Security improvements are uneven and fragile:**
Over the past three years, urban areas have seen modest improvements due to enhanced community policing and dispute resolution efforts. Yet rural areas remain highly vulnerable, and structural harms such as GBV, forced evictions, and exclusion of minority groups persist.

**6 Harm documentation is fragmented**
Most harm recording remains informal, community-led, or driven by local CBOs. The absence of harmonized, systematic, and confidential documentation mechanisms undermines accountability and constrains the impact of protective interventions. Notably, no community member, leader, or stakeholder we engaged with proactively referenced, or even described, the Civilian Casualty Track and Response Cell (CCTARC) established under successive AU missions. This indicates extremely low visibility or an unclear understanding of its mandate at community level. Overall, awareness of AU protection mechanisms, including the CCTARC, appears limited or inconsistent, reinforcing the broader finding of fragmented harm-documentation practices.

**7 Protection policies and frameworks exist but are poorly enforced**
While there are positive examples (e.g., disability-inclusive construction policies and timely legal action taken in response to specific incidents of violence), enforcement of GBV, child protection, and equitable aid distribution laws remains weak. Communities are often unaware of their rights or the procedures available for seeking redress.

## Strategic Implications

The findings underscore that conflict-related harm mitigation cannot be achieved solely through security responses. It requires addressing structural inequalities, enhancing accountability of both state and non-state actors as well as international forces, and ensuring the full participation of women, youth, minority groups, and IDPs in decision-making and protection mechanisms. Importantly, building trust between communities and both local authorities and international actors is essential for sustainable peace and security.

# 2 Introduction

Somalia has endured decades of protracted conflict, recurring cycles of violence, and fragile governance structures that have left civilians highly vulnerable to harm. In regions such as Bay, Southwest State, the impacts of armed conflict are deeply embedded in daily life, shaping not only security conditions but also social relations, access to resources, and community resilience. This report seeks to document these realities and support evidence-based strategies for improving harm mitigation.

## Background and Rationale

- Conflict-related harm in Somalia is not a new phenomenon, but its scope and complexity have evolved over time. Armed groups such as Al-Shabaab, clan militias, and other non-state actors remain key drivers of violence. At the same time, state security forces and law enforcement agencies, though tasked with protecting communities, are sometimes implicated in abuses themselves, further eroding trust between the state and citizens. Civilian populations often find themselves caught between these competing actors, with limited access to justice or effective protection.
- The Bay Region, one of the key parts of Southwest State, has been heavily affected by this reality. Persistent insecurity, competition over fertile land and scarce water resources, and displacement caused by both conflict and climate shocks have intensified community vulnerabilities. The region also hosts significant populations of internally displaced persons (IDPs), who face heightened risks of exclusion and abuse. In this context, it is essential to examine how harm is perceived, experienced, and mitigated at the community level to design responsive and inclusive protection systems.

## Objectives of the Study

The study was guided by four interrelated objectives:

- Document community perceptions of conflict-related harm to better understand community experiences.
- Identify patterns, perpetrators, and underlying causes of harm to highlight systemic drivers and recurrent dynamics.
- Assess community-led responses and coping strategies, including traditional mechanisms, civil society initiatives, and new community-based protection efforts.
- Generate actionable recommendations to strengthen harm documentation, mitigation and response measures, and accountability mechanisms at both community and state levels.

## Methodology

The findings presented in this report are drawn primarily from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with diverse groups of community members, including women, youth, elders, minority communities, and IDPs. This was complemented by key informant interviews (KIIs). Although not designed for statistical representativeness, the sample mirrors key social diversity such as gender, age, place of residence, and position in clan power structures.

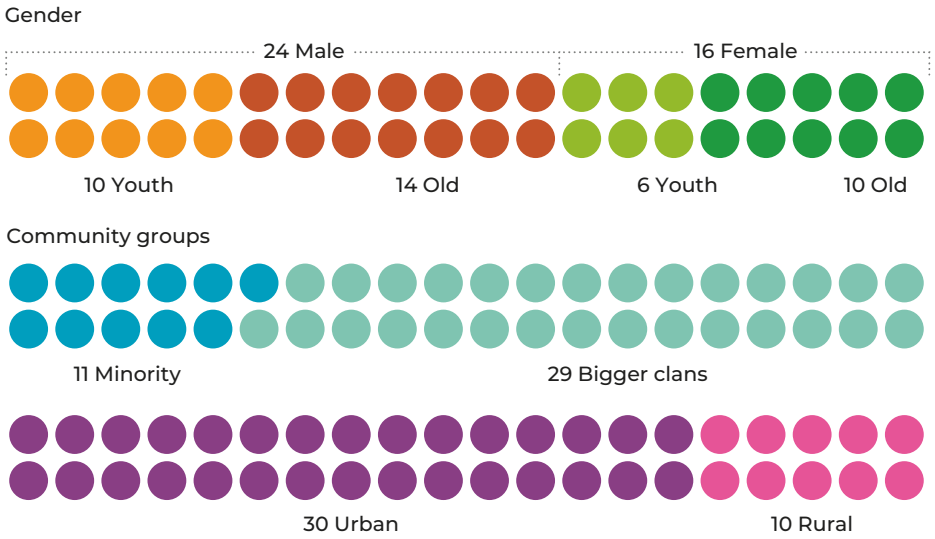
The methodology deployed during the study emphasizes qualitative insights, focusing on lived experiences, perceptions, and narratives that often go undocumented in conventional conflict assessments. The evaluation of institutional and policy effectiveness (section 9) was also developed through data aggregation and a standardized scoring framework, where participants assessed each actor's effectiveness across thematic areas such as awareness, inclusivity, enforcement, and accountability.[1] While our focus was on community perceptions rather than institutional performance audits, this methodology ensures that the results are systematically derived, comparable across actors, and representative of community-level views. The emphasis on perceptions is intentional, as the analysis aims to highlight how communities experience and interpret the effectiveness of different actors in policy implementation and security provision.

By privileging local perspectives, the study captures dimensions of harm that extend beyond battlefield deaths and injuries, such as economic loss, psychological trauma, and systemic exclusion. A validation process was carried out at the end of each FGD, where participants summarized key highlights to ensure that all perspectives were accurately captured and reflected in the subsequent analysis. This participatory approach was designed to ensure that community voices, especially those of marginalized groups, were central to the analysis.

All figures and tables presented in this report were developed from the qualitative and quantitative data collected during the field research. The visuals primarily synthesize findings from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), and community validation sessions conducted across urban and rural sites in Bay region, Southwest State. Each figure illustrates aggregated trends and perceptions emerging from these data sources rather than statistical measurements. Percentages or proportions shown represent the relative frequency or emphasis of themes identified during analysis, providing a visual summary of community perspectives. The accompanying narrative sections interpret these visuals to clarify their meaning and relevance to the study objectives.

1 Scores were compiled as follows: Individual and group perception scores were converted into percentage values for each indicator. These were then averaged at the community level, followed by aggregation of all villages to capture broader trends. Finally, the results were combined to generate the district-level averages presented in the findings in section 9 of this report.

**Figure 1 Demographic Overview**




## Scope and Limitations

The study focuses on the Bay Region as a microcosm of civilian experiences in Southwest State. While the findings are representative of this region, many of the themes resonate with broader trends across Somalia, including the pervasive role of armed groups, the fragility of governance, and the resilience of communities. Limitations include restricted access to some conflict-affected rural areas due to security constraints, and potential underreporting of sensitive harms such as gender-based violence (GBV) due to stigma or fear of retaliation. Despite these constraints, the triangulation of data from multiple groups and settings enhances the reliability and richness of the findings.

## Significance of the Study

This research contributes to ongoing debates on civilian protection in Somalia in several ways:

- It broadens the definition of conflict-related harm to include indirect, structural, and long-term consequences often overlooked by policy and security actors.
- It foregrounds the voices of marginalized groups – women, youth, IDPs, and minority groups – whose experiences are critical for designing inclusive protection systems.
- It links community-level realities to policy frameworks, providing evidence-based recommendations for national and state authorities, civil society, and international partners.

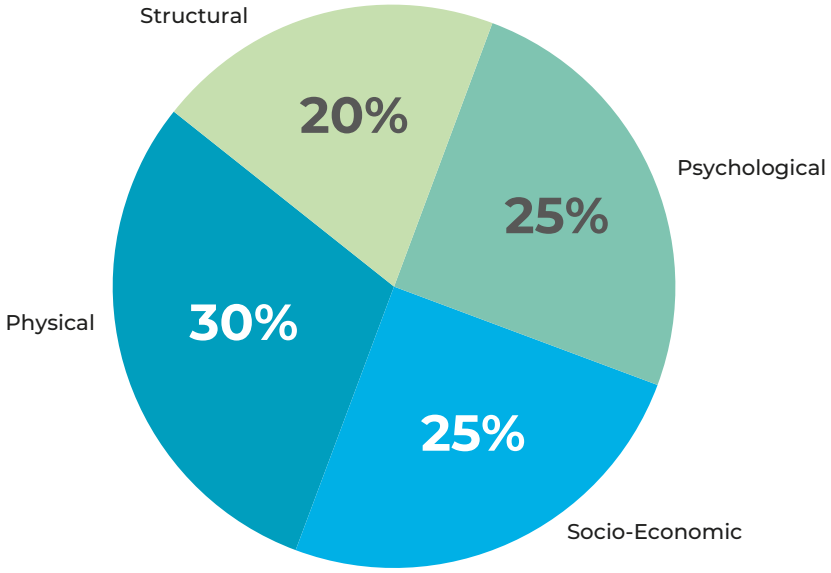
## Research Ethics

Ethical standards guided all stages of the study. Participants provided informed consent, and confidentiality was maintained through anonymized transcripts. Gender-sensitive facilitation ensured a safe environment, especially when discussing sensitive topics such as displacement or gender-based harm. The research adhered to IHRO's Human Rights and Protection Code of Conduct and followed the guidelines established in The Belmont Report and the Declaration of Helsinki.

# 3 Defining Conflict-Related Harm

A clear conceptual framing is necessary to situate community perspectives within broader protection and humanitarian analysis. Understanding conflict-related harm in the Somali context requires moving beyond narrow definitions that reduce it to physical casualties or battlefield incidents. The findings from this study highlight that communities in Bay Region perceive conflict-related harm as a multi-layered, interconnected, and enduring phenomenon. Harm is not confined to moments of violence but rather continues to shape lives and livelihoods long after conflict events.

**Figure 2** Types of conflict-related harm (Community Perception)




Communities in Bay Region articulated conflict-related harm as a broad, lived reality encompassing physical, psychological, social, and economic suffering resulting from both direct violence and indirect structural effects of conflict. Participants frequently described harm as "what we suffer because of war, fear, or injustice," linking it to long-term insecurity, loss of livelihoods, and displacement.

As one of the study's objectives was to explore how communities define harm in their own context, this section begins with their lived descriptions of conflict-related harm and civilian identity.

## What is harm?

In general, the distinction between direct and indirect conflict-related harm is foundational to policy-oriented and legal debates about harm mitigation. We found evidence that this distinction is relevant for our respondents; however, as discussed in the next section, it does not fully capture community experiences. Direct harm refers to immediate, observable consequences of armed violence resulting from deliberate or indiscriminate actions by conflict actors, although it is not necessarily intentional. Our responders framed the direct conflict-related harm as death or physical injury from shootings, shelling, or improvised explosives; destruction of homes, farms, or property during combat or raids; abduction, forced recruitment, sexual assault, or torture; and intimidation, threats, or targeted killings by armed groups or security forces.

> *"When bullets hit our homes or our children are taken away, that is harm we can see,"* said one of the youth participants from Baidoa district.

Indirect harm instead encompasses secondary or structural effects of conflict that emerge over time. These are not caused by a single violent act but by the disruption of livelihoods, services, and social cohesion that conflict produces. Examples of indirect conflict-related harm reported by participants involve loss of income and livestock due to insecurity or displacement; malnutrition and health deterioration following market closures or aid blockages; children missing education because schools are destroyed or unsafe; and social fragmentation, discrimination, and psychological distress among IDPs or minority groups.

> *"Even when there is no fighting, we still suffer because we have lost our work, our land, and our peace of mind,"* said one of the women group participants from Baidoa district.

Participants of this study emphasized that conflict-related harm is not only about death and injury, but about disrupted lives, broken communities, and lost futures. This broader understanding reflects the lived realities of civilians in fragile environments like Bay, where conflict is chronic and deeply intertwined with socio-economic and political vulnerabilities.

Direct harm is often captured through incident reporting and casualty records; however, communities emphasized that its impacts extend far beyond the immediate event, manifesting in enduring trauma and displacement. In contrast, indirect harm, though largely absent from conventional casualty data, produces deeper social and economic repercussions. This distinction underscores the need for comprehensive mitigation strategies that bridge humanitarian relief, livelihoods recovery, and governance reform.

## Conflict-related Harm: Categories and Recurring Patterns

While policy and legal debates center on the distinction between indirect and indirect harm, participants from all districts described harm in broad, layered, and interconnected terms, going well beyond such basic distinction. Communities emphasized that harm is both visible – killings, injuries, displacement, destruction – and invisible – fear, trauma, poverty, exclusion, and the breakdown of relationships. These harms accumulate over time and reproduce vulnerability across generations.

> *"Harm is not only when blood is spilled, hunger and fear are also harm,"* one of the women participants from Berdale village in Baidoa district.

> *"When someone is killed, the family loses not one person, but the peace of the whole house,"* said one of the elders from Salamey in Baidoa district.

Communities linked harm to disruptions in daily life, loss of dignity, and the breakdown of relationships. They emphasized that harm often persists long after violence ends, affecting livelihoods, mental well-being, and social cohesion.

> *"Even if you survive the bullet, you still live with the fear,"* said one of the youth participants from Beerjiroon IDP Saydheelow.

> *"Today, if you visit ADC or Hanano IDPs sites, you'll find families who once had houses, farms, and businesses now living in camps with poor housing and makeshift shelters made of plastic and worn-out clothes"* stated a CBO in the key informant interview.

### A Physical Harm

Physical violence remains the most visible expression of conflict-related harm and includes:

- Killings, injuries, targeted assassinations, indiscriminate attacks, and revenge killings.
- Arbitrary arrests and detentions, particularly of youth.
- Forced displacement through conflict, evictions, or land disputes.
- Destruction of homes, property, farmland, and livelihoods.
- Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), especially affecting women and girls in IDP settlements.

Physical harms rarely stand alone; they trigger displacement, economic loss, and long-term psychological distress.

### B Social Harm

Conflict erodes the social fabric and weakens traditional cohesion. Recurring social harms include:

- Breakdown of trust between clans, neighbors, and families.
- Weakening of elders' authority and biased dispute resolution.
- Systemic discrimination, particularly against minority groups and IDPs.
- Stigmatization of survivors of GBV and forced recruitment.
- Inter-generational impacts as children grow up in fragmented, fearful environments.

These social harms often persist long after violence subsides, complicating reconciliation and recovery.

### C Economic Harm

Participants consistently emphasized that economic harm is as destructive as physical violence. Common patterns include:

- Loss of land, livestock, and productive assets due to displacement and looting.
- Market disruptions and forced taxation by armed actors.
- High unemployment and chronic poverty, especially among youth.
- Exclusion from humanitarian aid and political participation for IDPs and minority groups.
- Gendered economic exclusion, limiting women's ability to sustain households.

Economic deprivation reinforces dependency and reduces resilience to future shocks.

### D Psychological Harm

Communities described profound psychological burdens:

- Trauma, fear, and anxiety linked to recurrent insecurity.
- Uncertainty and loss of agency, particularly among displaced or marginalized groups.
- Long-term mental health impacts, exacerbated by silence and stigma around psychological distress.

### E Group-Specific Experiences

Patterns of harm vary across demographic lines:

- Women and girls: dual exposure to GBV and structural exclusion; rising indirect harms linked to livelihoods and restricted mobility.
- Youth: targeted for arrest or forced recruitment; stigmatized as potential combatants.
- Minority groups & IDPs: face compounded harms, discrimination in aid, and exclusion from justice.
- Elderly & persons with disabilities: unable to flee or access services when displaced.
- Urban vs. rural residents: distinct exposure to insecurity, from grenade attacks in towns to Al-Shabaab activity and limited services in rural areas.

These variations underscore the need for group-sensitive protection strategies.

A female participant from the youth focus group shared:

> *"The most significant incident that occurred in Baidoa in December 2022 was a political conflict that deeply affected me. On the day the violence broke out, I was preparing to travel to Mogadishu, unaware that clashes were about to erupt. I witnessed civilians being hit by stray bullets, and there were widespread destruction and loss of life. No political leaders came forward to help the injured. It was a tragic day; chaos engulfed the entire city. People could not go to work, and as a business owner, I was personally affected. The whole city came to a standstill; it was an incredibly difficult experience for me."*

### F Cyclical and Interconnected Patterns of Harm

Harm in Bay Region unfolds through cycling chains of violence and structural disadvantage. A single incident – such as a land dispute – can escalate into armed clashes, cause displacement, trigger revenge killings, destroy livelihoods, and entrench social exclusion. The result is a self-reinforcing cycle:

- Physical harm (displacement) → economic harm (loss of farmland)
- Economic harm (poverty) → social harm (discrimination, exclusion)
- Social harm (loss of trust) → psychological harm (trauma, fear)

This layered reality traps communities in chronic insecurity, with harms accumulating across time and generations.

## Working definition of harm

Overall, conflict-related harm in Bay Region is systemic, overlapping, and deeply entrenched. Based on community perspectives, this study adopts the following working definition of harm:

- Conflict-related harm is both direct and structural. It refers to the full range of physical, psychological, socio-economic, and structural impacts experienced by civilians as a result of armed conflict, political violence, or systemic exclusion. It includes both direct acts of violence (killings, injuries, displacement, GBV) and indirect consequences (trauma, loss of livelihoods, marginalization, and erosion of social cohesion).

This definition recognizes that conflict-related harm is not a temporary disruption but a persistent condition that undermines resilience and perpetuates cycles of vulnerability. It acknowledges that harm affects every dimension of life – from physical security to livelihoods, social relations, and psychological well-being – and is distributed unequally across gender, age, status, and location. Understanding the interconnected patterns of harm is essential for designing preventive, inclusive, and context-specific interventions. Addressing physical security alone will be insufficient unless the structural, social, economic, and psychological dimensions of harm are also recognized and addressed.

## Who is a civilian?

Our research shows that conflict-related harm is not limited to deliberate targeting of non-combatants but also arises from ambiguity in social identity.

Where fighters hide among communities or community defence groups mobilize under clan authority, respondents noted that security operations often become more indiscriminate, and reprisals extend to households and entire neighborhoods.

In such contexts, the boundary between direct and indirect harm blurs. As a result, direct harm (killings, arrests, property destruction) becomes harder to attribute to a specific actor and indirect harm (displacement, stigma, economic loss) multiplies as families are treated with suspicion by both sides.

For future work on Conflict-Related Harm Mitigation, this finding reinforces the need to document not only incidents but also the social conditions under which identity ambiguity increases risk, such as forced recruitment, clan defence mobilization, and retaliatory policing.

Our research shows that significant differences exist between community understandings of who's a civilian, which emphasize lived experience, long-term impacts, and moral identity, and IHL-based understandings that often reverberate in UN policies or the work of NGOs such as CIVIC.

Discussions in both focus groups and key informant interviews revealed that community members find it increasingly difficult to distinguish between civilians and combatants. Participants described situations where young men or even local elders are forced, persuaded, or intermittently involved in armed activity, making status fluid and context-dependent.

> *"A boy may farm by day and be taken by the militia at night; who is he then?"*
> an elder from Isha Village.

> *"If you have a son in the army, the enemy calls you a fighter too."*
> Stated by female participant from Baidoa.

> *"We are not soldiers or fighters, we are just people trying to survive,"*
> said a minority group respondent.

Across focus groups and interviews, participants used practical, context-driven criteria to define who counts as a civilian. Rather than relying on legal definitions from international law, community members described civilians through absence of involvement in fighting and social belonging, using moral and relational indicators such as innocence, vulnerability, or distance from power.

Several respondents acknowledged that in the current Somali context, civilian status is fluid and situational. Young men, in particular, may shift roles between farmer, guard, or militia member, depending on circumstance or coercion. Communities see this not as a change of moral status, but as a symptom of insecurity and survival.

> *"Sometimes the same person is both, a man who fights by night and farms by day,"* said one of the youth participants from Darasalam in Baidoa.

In this way, civilian is understood less as a legal label and more as a social identity tied to vulnerability and community embeddedness. Those who suffer consequences of armed actions, regardless of technical affiliation, are considered "civilian" in the moral sense of community discourse.

## Policy and Research Implications

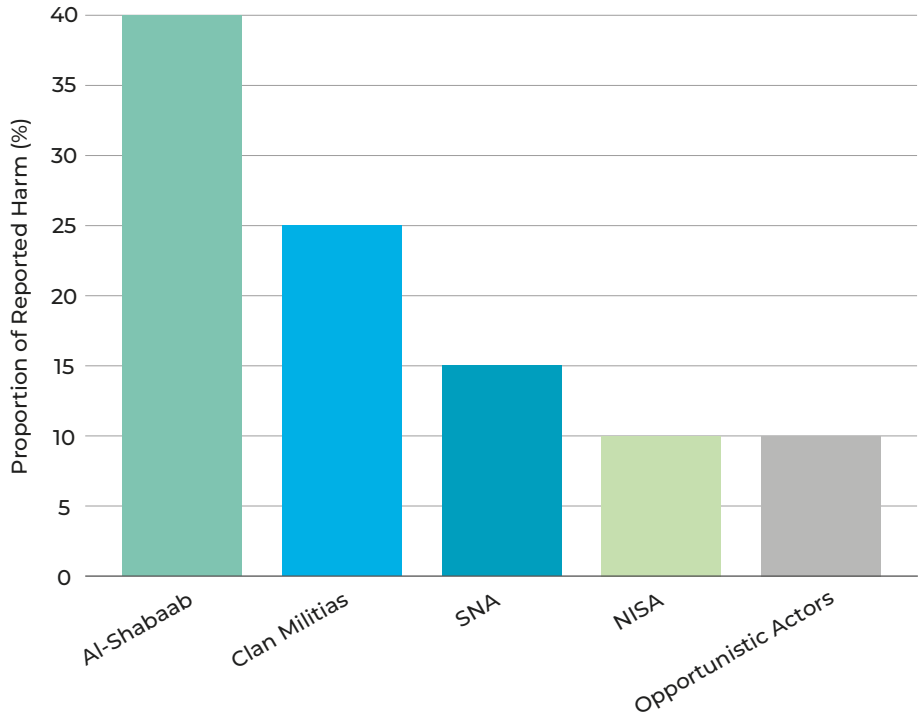
Expanding the definition of conflict-related harm and questioning easy civilian-combatant distinctions has important implications:

- For policymakers: It requires moving beyond casualty counts to incorporate how identity ambiguity increases exposure to collective punishment, displacement, and long-term exclusion. Protection systems should therefore address not only fatalities but also the social conditions that amplify harm – such as forced recruitment, clan defence mobilization, and reprisals against families.
- For security actors: It highlights that reducing harm is not only about preventing deaths but also about avoiding misidentification in contexts where civilian status is fluid. This means recognizing community-based criteria of civilianhood (innocence, vulnerability, peaceful presence) and ensuring that operations do not treat households, young men, or families of fighters as legitimate targets.
- For researchers and CBOs: It calls for multi-dimensional documentation methods that capture both incidents and the contexts that blur civilian and combatant roles. This includes recording community perceptions of who is a civilian, patterns of intermittent involvement in armed activity, and the indirect harms – stigma, economic loss, displacement – that communities understand as integral to civilian suffering.

# 4 Armed Actors, Civilian Harm, and Structural Drivers

Understanding the conduct of armed actors – state, non-state, and local – is central to assessing both the risks communities face and the opportunities for harm mitigation in Bay Region. Communities emphasized that their daily experience of security is shaped not only by episodes of violence but also by the behaviour, interactions, and structural influence of multiple actors whose roles as protectors or perpetrators often overlap. Harm results from direct acts of violence and from long-term structural conditions that reinforce cycles of vulnerability.

**Figure 3** Causes and Perpetrators of Civilian Harm



## A Non-State Armed Groups

Non-state armed groups, particularly Al-Shabaab, are the most consistently cited perpetrators of civilian harm. Their presence is pervasive and coercive, shaping everyday life through a mix of violence, regulation, and parallel governance. Communities described:

- Targeted killings and assassinations of elders, officials, and suspected collaborators
- Indiscriminate attacks (IEDs, shelling, mortar fire) in civilian-populated areas
- Forced recruitment and abductions – especially of youth and children
- Extortion and forced taxation on traders, farmers, and transporters
- Restrictions on humanitarian access and freedom of movement
- Social control measures such as curfews, bans on gatherings, and punishment for perceived collaboration

Although some acknowledged that Al-Shabaab's courts or tax systems can seem more predictable than fragmented state institutions, these systems operate under coercion, not consent. Their presence simultaneously harms civilians and undermines state authority.

## B Clan Militias and Local Armed Groups

Clan-based militias play an ambivalent role: defenders of their own communities but major sources of insecurity for others. They are often mobilized around land, grazing, and political disputes. Communities highlighted:

- Cycles of revenge killings and retaliatory violence
- Armed clashes over land, water, and political representation
- Targeted intimidation of weaker clans, minority groups, and IDPs
- Displacement and the fracturing of social cohesion

While they may provide some protection to their own lineage networks, their activities exacerbate insecurity and deepen social divisions.

## C State Security Forces (SNA, Police, NISA)

State security forces are perceived as both providers of protection and contributors to harm, depending on their conduct, accountability, and engagement with communities.

Protective roles noted by communities include:

- Patrols and presence in urban areas
- Rapid response that prevents escalation of local clashes
- Improved dialogue in some districts through CAFs or PACs

Harmful or problematic practices include:

- Arbitrary or mass arrests of youth
- Excessive or poorly communicated use of force during operations
- Restrictive or exploitative behaviour at checkpoints, affecting mobility and livelihoods
- Delayed or selective response to community reports
- Weak accountability mechanisms that undermine trust

These mixed perceptions reflect both the progress and persistent gaps in state-led protection.

## D International Forces (ATMIS / AUSSOM and Ethiopian Troops)

International forces are generally perceived as stabilizing actors, though their operations also produce unintended harm.

Positive contributions include:

- Reinforcing government authority and supporting SNA operations
- Securing key towns, roads, and trading routes
- Training national security forces

Negative impacts include:

- Civilian casualties during operations in populated areas
- Mobility restrictions linked to convoys, checkpoints, and security cordons
- Fear and displacement when operations target suspected militant hideouts
- Limited communication with local communities, leading to uncertainty and anxiety

The benefits of stability are thus accompanied by operational risks when civilian safeguards and community engagement are weak.

## E Local Leaders and Elders

Local authorities play an essential role in dispute resolution, but their actions can also reproduce harm. Communities pointed to:

- Biased mediation favouring dominant clans or wealthier parties
- Marginalization of minority groups and IDPs
- Failure to provide justice for survivors of GBV, often settling cases through clan compensation
- Decisions that reinforce grievances and perpetuate cycles of retaliation

Elders are therefore both conflict mitigators and, at times, gatekeepers of exclusion.

## F Unidentified and Opportunistic Actors

Participants also reported harm from individuals or groups exploiting insecurity for personal gain, including:

- Robberies, extortion, and forced detentions along rural routes
- Killings by unidentified gunmen
- Theft or harassment during periods of instability

These actors thrive in environments with weak law enforcement and limited accountability.

## G Structural Drivers of Harm

Beyond the behaviour of specific actors, communities emphasized structural conditions that sustain harm and magnify vulnerability:

- Resource scarcity: drought, environmental degradation, and competition over fertile land and water
- Political exclusion: unequal clan representation, biased governance, and exclusion of IDPs or minorities
- Economic vulnerability: chronic unemployment, disrupted markets, and coercive taxation
- Weak rule of law: limited access to functioning courts, impunity for powerful actors, and ineffective enforcement
- Cycles of retaliation: disputes escalating into prolonged revenge violence

These structural drivers entangle with the actions of armed actors, ensuring that harm is not episodic but systemic, layered, and self-reproducing.

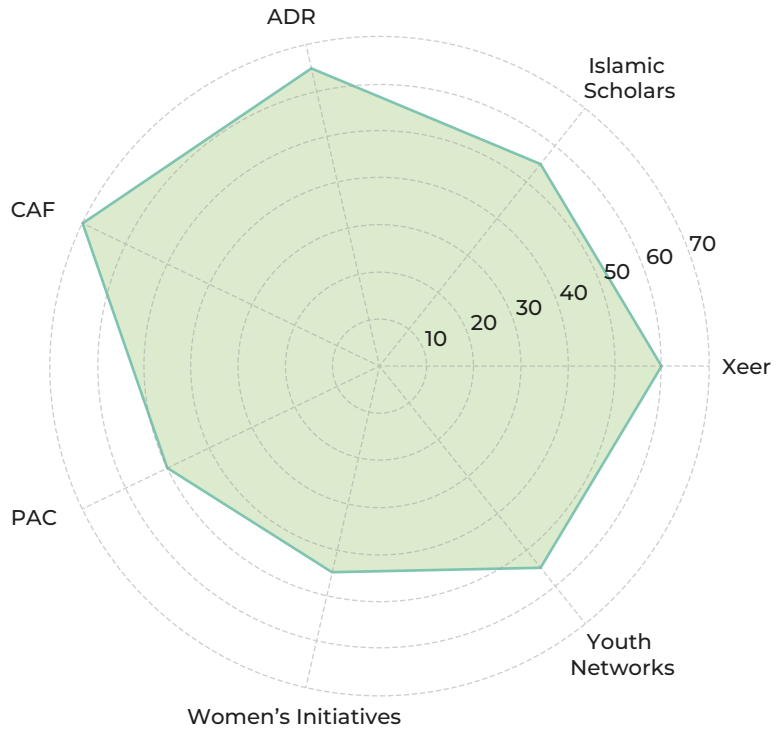
Overall, the security environment in Bay Region is defined by the interplay of multiple armed actors whose actions shape both the immediate risk of violence and the structural conditions that sustain harm. Civilians navigate overlapping demands from non-state groups, clan militias, state forces, and international troops-none of whom act in isolation. Effective harm mitigation requires:

- Strengthened accountability and restraint within state forces
- Civilian-centred operational planning by all armed actors
- Inclusive, transparent community engagement and grievance mechanisms
- Addressing structural drivers such as land disputes, exclusion, and weak justice systems

Understanding these dynamics is essential for designing interventions that reduce harm rather than inadvertently reinforcing the systems that produce it.

# 5 Community Responses and Protection Mechanisms

**Figure 4** Perceived Effectiveness of Community Protection Mechanisms




Despite persistent insecurity, weak state institutions, and chronic resource constraints, communities in Bay Region have demonstrated remarkable resilience by developing locally grounded responses to mitigate harm and protect vulnerable groups. These responses draw on a combination of traditional practices, religious authority, community-based organizations, and self-organized initiatives by women and youth. While these mechanisms provide important protection, their effectiveness is limited by biases, lack of resources, and structural exclusion of marginalized groups.

## A Traditional Structures (Elders and Customary Law – Xeer)

Traditional systems remain the first line of response for many communities. Elders mediate disputes using customary law (Xeer), often drawing on clan networks to resolve conflicts through compensation, reconciliation, or negotiated settlements.

- Strengths: Accessible to most communities, relatively fast, rooted in Somali cultural norms, and capable of preventing escalation.
- Limitations: Customary rulings can reinforce inequality, particularly when compensation denies *de jure* justice to individual survivors. Cases of gender-based violence (GBV) are often resolved through clan-based settlements that deny justice to survivors. Minority groups and IDPs, lacking strong clan representation, are frequently disadvantaged in outcomes.

In short, while Xeer provides a culturally legitimate avenue for dispute resolution, it often prioritizes stability over justice, leaving vulnerable groups marginalized.

## B Islamic Scholars and Faith-Based Mediation

Islamic scholars play a moral and spiritual role in calming tensions, promoting reconciliation, and discouraging revenge killings. They are trusted figures in many communities and often advocate for peaceful dispute resolution rooted in Islamic principles.

- Strengths: High legitimacy among communities; ability to mobilize moral authority to de-escalate conflicts.
- Limitations: Their influence is limited when disputes are deeply politicized or when non-state armed groups assert religious legitimacy to justify violence. Some leaders also lack the resources or institutional backing to sustain peace initiatives.

## C Community-Based Protection Mechanisms

Several community-driven initiatives have emerged, often supported by community based organizations (CBOs) or development partners:

- Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR): Extends justice to areas where formal courts are absent or inaccessible. ADR forums are perceived as more inclusive than traditional mechanisms and particularly useful in resolving land disputes and minor conflicts.
- Community Action Forums (CAF): Platforms that bring together citizens, elders, women, and youth to discuss security challenges, mediate disputes, and coordinate community protection.
- Police Advisory Committees (PAC): Facilitate dialogue between communities and police, monitor police conduct, and advocate for detainees, particularly vulnerable groups such as youth and women.

These mechanisms help bridge the gap between formal state institutions and community needs, though their coverage remains uneven and dependent on donor or CBO support.

## D Women's Initiatives

Women have organized their own protection responses, often driven by necessity. Women's groups mobilize resources such as food, clothing, or small cash contributions to support survivors of violence or displacement. They also lead awareness campaigns on GBV prevention, child protection, and peacebuilding.

- Strengths: Women are often the first to detect risks and issue early warnings. Their networks provide rapid and discreet support to survivors, particularly in IDP camps.
- Limitations: Structural gender barriers restrict women's participation in formal decision-making. Women's groups often lack sustainable funding, leaving their initiatives fragile and dependent on volunteerism.

## E Youth Volunteer Networks

Youth play a proactive role in emergency response and protection, especially during violent incidents.

- Activities: providing first aid, donating blood, organizing rapid alerts, supporting displaced families, and using mobile technology to share early warnings.
- Strengths: Highly mobilized, innovative, and capable of acting quickly. Their energy and networks make them key actors in prevention and response.
- Limitations: Youth face stigmatization as potential combatants, reducing trust in their initiatives. Unemployment and economic exclusion also limit their ability to sustain volunteer efforts.

## F IDP and Minority Coping Mechanisms

IDPs and minority groups, often excluded from traditional and community forums, rely on informal coping strategies:

- Forming mutual support groups within settlements.
- Seeking protection from sympathetic elders or CBOs.
- Relocating to urban areas for perceived safety, even at the cost of economic hardship.

However, these groups consistently emphasized their lack of access to community-based mechanisms and justice processes, leaving them especially vulnerable.

## Challenges Facing Community Responses

The study findings identified several persistent challenges:

1. Bias and exclusion: Customary systems favor dominant clans; women, minority groups, and IDPs are often sidelined.
2. Resource constraints: Community mechanisms lack sustained funding, infrastructure, and logistical support.
3. Weak linkages to state institutions: Local mechanisms operate in isolation, limiting their impact on broader security or accountability frameworks.
4. Cultural barriers: Stigma, especially around GBV, discourages victims from seeking help.
5. Fragmentation and politicization: Local disputes and elite capture sometimes undermine the neutrality of community mechanisms.

## Opportunities for Strengthening Protection

Despite these limitations, community responses are an essential foundation for civilian protection in Bay Region. They represent locally owned, culturally grounded mechanisms that can be strengthened through:

- Capacity building and resources for women's groups, youth networks, and CBOs to sustain their initiatives.
- Institutional linkages between ADR, CAF, PAC, and state institutions for better coordination and accountability.
- Inclusive participation of minority groups, IDPs, women, and youth in community decision-making forums.
- Standardization and documentation of community responses to ensure lessons are captured and practices replicated.
- Integration with early warning systems, enabling communities to link grassroots alerts with state and regional responses.

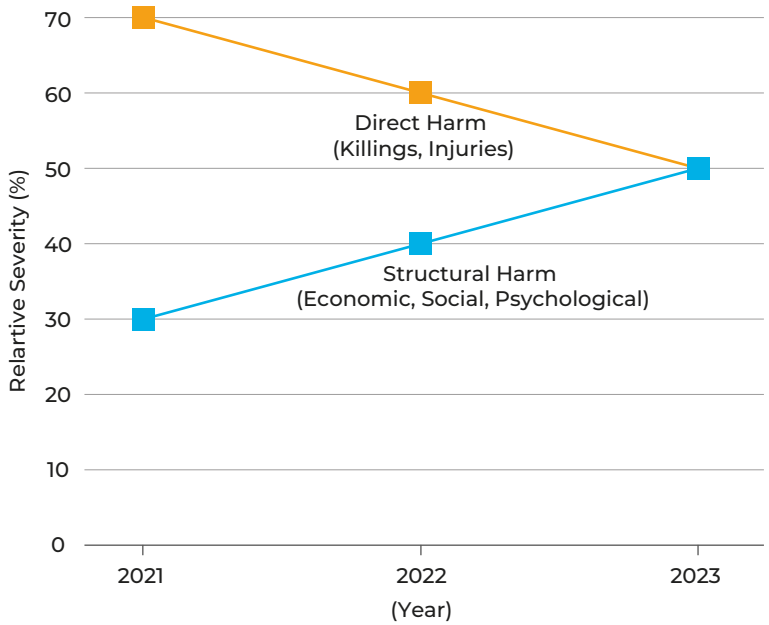
Overall, community responses in Bay Region demonstrate both resilience and adaptability, combining traditional, religious, and modern mechanisms to protect civilians. However, they are not sufficient on their own to break cycles of harm. Without resources, inclusivity, and stronger linkages to formal institutions, these mechanisms risk reinforcing existing inequalities and failing to address systemic drivers of violence. For long-term effectiveness, community protection must be embedded within broader state accountability frameworks, while still amplifying the voices and leadership of women, youth, IDPs, and minority groups.

The assessment of community protection mechanisms highlights varying levels of perceived effectiveness across different approaches. Community Action Forums (CAF) and Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) emerge as the most effective mechanisms, scoring highest in community trust. Traditional systems such as Xeer and the role of Islamic scholars also perform relatively strongly, reflecting their deep cultural legitimacy and long-standing role in dispute settlement. Youth networks and Police Advisory Committees (PAC) show moderate effectiveness, contributing to dialogue and localized security but with limited reach. Women's initiatives, while vital in advocating for protection, register the lowest effectiveness score, reflecting structural and cultural barriers that limit their influence.

These findings suggest that while traditional and hybrid mechanisms remain central to community protection, there is a need to strengthen inclusivity and enhance the institutional support available to women- and youth-led initiatives.

# 6 Evolving Trends (past three years)

**Figure 5 Evolving Trends in Civilian Harm (Past Three Years)**




Over the past three years, the nature, scope, and dynamics of conflict-related harm in Bay Region have undergone notable shifts. Communities, through FGDs and KIIs, reported both subtle and significant changes in how harm is inflicted, experienced, and mitigated. These trends reflect broader socio-political developments, evolving strategies of armed actors, and the adaptive responses of communities themselves. Understanding these trends is critical for designing forward-looking protection interventions that anticipate emerging risks rather than merely reacting to past incidents.

While about half of the respondents reported fewer armed clashes, nearly all noted worsening livelihood conditions and displacement pressures. Many attributed this to drought, rising food prices, and taxation by armed groups.

> *"The war now is hunger – not bullets,"* said one of the youth group participants from Isha in Baidoa district.

From an analytical perspective, these trends point to a transition from acute conflict to chronic vulnerability, shaped by climate shocks and the political economy of insecurity. The data suggest that even as violence becomes less visible, its effects are sustained through impoverishment, displacement, and institutional weakness.

## Shifts in Perpetrator Behavior

Communities observed that the strategies and conduct of state and non-state armed actors have evolved.

### Al-Shabaab and Non-State Armed Groups:

While Al-Shabaab remains the primary driver of violence, KIIs indicated a shift from large-scale, overt attacks in urban centers to more targeted, covert operations, including assassinations, extortion, and selective recruitment. The group relies increasingly on economic coercion and the imposition of parallel governance structures, particularly in rural areas, rather than high-casualty attacks. This evolution reflects both enhanced counter-terrorism pressure and the group's strategic focus on control over resources and population compliance.

### Clan Militias and Local Armed Groups:

Local militias have increasingly exploited resource scarcity and political vacuums to settle disputes involving land, grazing areas, and local political influence. Communities reported an uptick in inter-clan revenge cycles and retaliatory attacks in previously stable rural areas, suggesting a diffusion of militia activity into zones once considered low-risk.

### State Security Forces:

The role of state security actors has evolved unevenly. While urban policing and rapid response operations have slightly improved protection in towns like Baidoa, KIIs indicated a continuing pattern of arbitrary arrests, harassment, and selective enforcement in rural districts. Over the past three years, there have been small but noticeable improvements in some districts due to community policing initiatives and engagement via Police Advisory Committees (PACs). Yet, the dual role of security forces as both protector and perpetrator persists, particularly where oversight and accountability remain weak.

### International Forces (ATMIS/AUSSOM and Ethiopian Troops):

Community feedback shows that international forces are increasingly involved in targeted operations against high-risk insurgent cells, reducing large-scale attacks but sometimes triggering collateral displacement and fear among civilians. Coordination with local communities remains inconsistent, leaving some areas vulnerable to misinformation, rumors, and unintended harm.

## Geographic and Contextual Trends

Patterns of civilian harm vary markedly across urban centres, rural areas, and IDP settlements, reflecting differences in security provision, governance, and exposure to both armed actors and structural pressures. While the nature of violence has shifted over time, the cumulative effects of insecurity, exclusion, and constrained access to services remain pervasive across all locations. The following overview highlights the distinct vulnerabilities facing each context.

### Urban Areas

There has been a modest decline in indiscriminate attacks in major towns, attributed to intensified policing, security checkpoints, and early warning systems. However, urban populations continue to face persistent challenges such as harassment, robberies, arbitrary arrests, forced evictions, and structural harms including GBV. For many residents, insecurity is experienced less through battlefield violence and more through everyday encounters with fragmented security provision and weak accountability.

### Rural Areas

Rural communities report increasing vulnerability to land-related disputes and resource-driven conflicts, exacerbated by drought, limited humanitarian access, and coercion by Al-Shabaab. Key informant interviews indicate heightened exposure to fragmented militia activity, where local actors enforce informal governance, impose taxation, and extract resources from vulnerable households. The combination of environmental pressure, limited state presence, and shifting militia dynamics creates a highly volatile protection environment.

### IDP Settlements

IDPs continue to face chronic and layered forms of structural harm, including camps' overcrowding, inadequate services, and restricted access to formal protection mechanisms. Although some settlements have developed informal governance structures and early warning networks over the past three years, exclusion from dispute resolution, justice processes, and equitable aid distribution persists. This deepening gap between institutional interventions and community needs reinforces long-term vulnerability and marginalization.

Across all three settings, the form harm takes varies, but its underlying drivers – weak governance, fragmented security provision, exclusion, and coercive control – remain consistent. Understanding these geographic differences is essential for designing targeted, context-sensitive protection strategies that respond to the distinct risks faced by urban residents, rural communities, and displaced populations.

## Patterns of Civilian Harm

Civilian harm in Bay Region has evolved from episodic violence to a complex, layered reality shaped by insecurity, exclusion, and protracted structural pressures. Communities consistently describe harm not as isolated incidents but as an accumulation of physical, economic, psychological, and social impacts that reinforce one another over time. The patterns below highlight the key dimensions of this shift.

### From Direct to Multi-Dimensional Harm:

Direct violence – killings, forced recruitment, property destruction – has modestly declined in some towns, yet indirect and structural harms have intensified. Communities now emphasize economic deprivation, psychological trauma, exclusion from aid, and erosion of social cohesion as dominant forms of suffering, signalling a transition from acute violence to chronic, multi-layered harm.

### Targeted Vulnerabilities:

Women, youth, IDPs, minority groups, and persons with disabilities remain disproportionately affected. Women increasingly carry dual roles as front-line early-warning actors and as frequent victims of GBV and economic exclusion. Youth continue to face forced recruitment, arbitrary detention, and stigmatization. IDPs and minority groups experience consistent exclusion from justice, aid, and protection systems, leaving them highly exposed to repeated harm.

### Evolving Economic Harm:

Predatory economic practices by state and non-state actors – taxation, extortion, market disruption – have intensified household vulnerability. These pressures push youth and marginalized groups toward risky coping strategies, including recruitment into armed groups, deepening cycles of poverty and insecurity across generations.

### Psychological and Social Harm:

Trauma, fear, and social fragmentation have deepened, particularly among communities facing repeated displacement and violence. Emerging patterns include inter-generational trauma, with children internalizing insecurity and mistrust, eroding communal resilience and weakening the foundations for long-term recovery.

Taken together, these patterns reveal that civilian harm in Bay Region is increasingly systemic rather than episodic-shaped by intersecting forms of violence, exclusion, and structural deprivation. Effective protection strategies must therefore address not only physical security but also the economic, psychological, and social dimensions that define the lived experience of harm for diverse population groups.

## Community Responses and Adaptive Strategies

Over the past three years, communities have adjusted protection mechanisms in response to shifting threats:

- Traditional Mechanisms: Elders and Xeer mediation remain central but are increasingly complemented by ADR and informal youth-led security patrols.
- Women's Groups: Expanded involvement in early warning, GBV mitigation, and emergency support, though still constrained by structural gender norms and resource limitations.
- Youth Networks: Enhanced digital communication for early warning and rapid response, increasing community responsiveness to emerging threats.
- CBO Engagement: Civil society organizations have strengthened documentation, advocacy, and coordination, partially offsetting gaps left by under-resourced traditional and state mechanisms.

## Emerging Risks

KIIs and FGDs identified several new and escalating risks:

1. Complex Multiplicity of Actors: Civilians face overlapping pressures from Al-Shabaab, militias, state forces, and opportunistic actors, increasing unpredictability and reducing safe zones.
2. Climate-Conflict Nexus: Drought and resource scarcity amplify disputes over land, water, and grazing, heightening vulnerability and displacement.
3. Fragmented Accountability: Weak law enforcement and biased dispute resolution continue to erode trust in formal and traditional institutions.
4. Digital and Covert Threats: Extortion, recruitment, and surveillance increasingly exploit mobile technologies, particularly affecting youth and traders.

In conclusion, over the past three years, conflict-related harm in Bay Region has evolved from highly visible, episodic violence toward more insidious, multi-layered forms of harm. While some urban areas show signs of improved security, rural regions, IDP settlements, and marginalized groups face heightened structural vulnerabilities. Armed actors have adapted strategies, combining coercion, governance control, and economic exploitation, while communities have demonstrated resilience through adaptive protection mechanisms.

The trends underscore that harm mitigation strategies must evolve beyond immediate physical protection to address economic, social, psychological, and structural dimensions of harm, ensuring inclusivity and responsiveness to emerging threats.

# 7 Challenges And Mitigation Measures

The factors that impede effective protection must be examined systematically to determine where mitigation measures can realistically succeed. Despite the resilience and adaptive strategies of communities in Bay Region, efforts to mitigate conflict-related harm face significant and multifaceted challenges. These challenges are shaped by structural, institutional, socio-cultural, and operational factors that limit the effectiveness, inclusivity, and sustainability of both community-led and formal protection mechanisms. Understanding these barriers is critical to designing interventions that are realistic, context-sensitive, and capable of addressing the root causes of harm.

**Figure 6** Perceived Challenges in Civilian Harm Mitigation

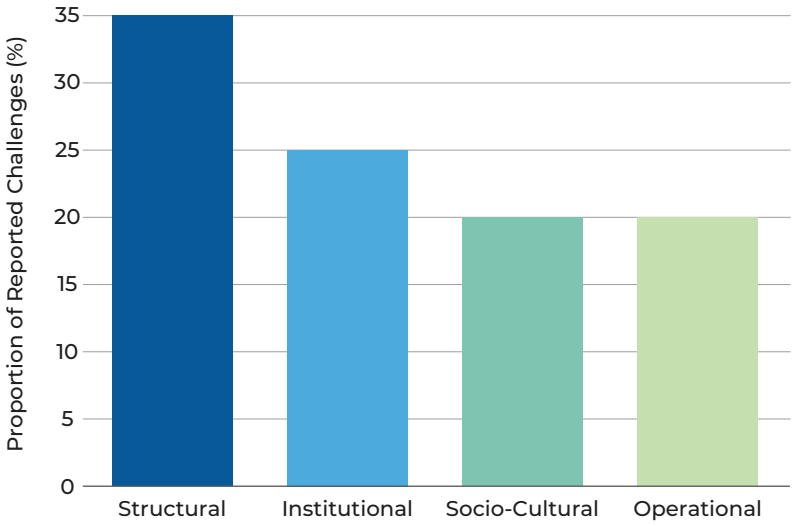


**Table 1 Challenges and Mitigation Measures**

| S# | Perceived Challenges | Description |
|---|---|---|
| Structural Challenges | | |
| **1.1** | Weak Governance and Fragmented Authority | Communities operate in a context of limited state presence and fragmented governance. Rural districts often lack functional local authorities, courts, or security services, leaving civilians reliant on informal mechanisms that may be biased or under-resourced. The absence of coordinated governance contributes to impunity for perpetrators and undermines the legitimacy of mitigation efforts. |
| **1.2** | Resource Scarcity | Chronic poverty, drought, and constrained economic opportunities exacerbate vulnerability and limit mitigation options. Communities struggle to mobilize resources for early warning systems, emergency support, or sustainable livelihoods, while armed actors exploit scarcity to reinforce control and extract resources, creating a vicious cycle of harm and dependence. |
| **1.3** | Displacement and Mobility Constraints | High levels of displacement due to conflict or climate shocks disrupt community cohesion and traditional protection networks. IDPs often lack access to established forums such as Xeer mediation, CAFs, or PACs, making them particularly vulnerable and excluded from mitigation processes. |
| Institutional Challenges | | |
| **2.1** | Inconsistent Law Enforcement and Security Presence | Security forces, including SNA, police, and intelligence agencies, exhibit uneven performance. While some urban areas experience improved patrols and community engagement, rural areas often remain under-protected. Arbitrary arrests, harassment, and excessive use of force by security personnel erode trust and reduce civilian willingness to report incidents or seek help. |
| **2.2** | Fragmented Coordination Among Actors | Humanitarian actors, CBOs, traditional leaders, and state institutions often operate in silos, leading to duplication of efforts, gaps in coverage, and confusion among communities. This fragmentation limits the effectiveness of protection mechanisms and reduces the ability to respond promptly to evolving threats. |
| **2.3** | Weak Accountability Mechanisms | Both formal and customary systems face challenges in enforcing rules and ensuring redress. Biased Xeer rulings, selective prosecution, and limited oversight of security forces contribute to persistent impunity, discouraging victims from seeking assistance and weakening overall mitigation strategies |
| Socio-Cultural Challenges | | |
| **3.1** | Gender Inequalities and Social Norms | Women's participation in decision-making and protection mechanisms remains limited, despite their frontline role in early warning and community support. Cultural norms restrict women's mobility and influence, reducing the reach and inclusivity of mitigation interventions. GBV survivors often face stigma, deterring them from accessing support. |

| S# | Perceived Challenges | Description |
|---|---|---|
| Socio-Cultural Challenges | | |
| **3.2** | Clan Dynamics and Elite Capture | Power hierarchies and clan affiliations influence access to protection mechanisms, dispute resolution, and aid. Dominant clans or influential elites may monopolize resources, skew mediation outcomes, or prevent marginalized groups from participating meaningfully. These dynamics perpetuate exclusion and exacerbate grievances, sometimes triggering retaliatory violence. |
| **3.3** | Community Fatigue and Distrust | Repeated exposure to conflict and unaddressed grievances has resulted in community fatigue, reducing engagement in mitigation initiatives. Distrust of authorities, both state and traditional, further limits the effectiveness of early warning, reporting, and compliance with mitigation strategies. |
| Operational Challenges | | |
| **4.1** | Limited Coverage and Reach of Mitigation Mechanisms | Community-led initiatives such as CAFs, ADR forums, and youth networks often have limited geographic reach. Remote villages, informal settlements, and newly displaced communities may be excluded, leaving gaps in early warning, emergency response, and protection. |
| **4.2** | Resource and Capacity Constraints | CBOs, women's groups, and youth networks frequently operate with minimal funding, personnel, and infrastructure. Lack of training, communication tools, and logistical support reduces the quality and sustainability of mitigation measures, particularly in emergency or high-intensity conflict contexts. |
| **4.3** | Security Risks for Mitigation Actors | Individuals and groups involved in civilian protection face direct threats from armed actors. Women, youth volunteers, and CBO staff may be harassed, threatened, or targeted, discouraging participation and constraining proactive mitigation measures. |
| **4.4** | Documentation and Evidence Gaps | Effective mitigation relies on accurate, timely, and confidential data on incidents of harm. Currently, harm documentation is fragmented, inconsistent, and often informal. This limits situational awareness, inhibits strategic planning, and reduces the potential for accountability or advocacy interventions. |
| Emerging Challenges | | |
| **5.1** | Adaptation of Armed Actors | Perpetrators have evolved their tactics, increasingly engaging in covert, targeted, and economically coercive actions rather than overt attacks. This adaptation complicates prediction, early warning, and protective responses. |
| **5.2** | Climate-Related Vulnerabilities | Drought, resource scarcity, and environmental degradation intersect with conflict dynamics, intensifying competition over land, water, and grazing areas. Mitigation measures must now integrate climate-sensitive strategies to address these compounded risks. |
| 5.3 | Digital Exploitation | Youth and traders are increasingly targeted through mobile-based coercion, recruitment, and extortion, requiring innovative mitigation approaches that include digital literacy, reporting channels, and monitoring. |

The challenges in mitigating conflict-related harm in Bay Region are deeply interconnected. Structural weaknesses, institutional gaps, socio-cultural barriers, and operational constraints combine to limit the effectiveness of protection mechanisms. Armed actors' adaptive strategies and evolving socio-environmental pressures further complicate mitigation measures.

Addressing these challenges requires multi-level interventions that strengthen community capacities, enhance institutional accountability, promote inclusivity, and integrate innovative strategies to respond to both traditional and emerging forms of harm. Importantly, mitigation strategies must be context-sensitive, adaptable, and grounded in local realities, ensuring that women, youth, IDPs, minority groups, and other vulnerable groups are fully incorporated into planning, decision-making, and response mechanisms.

# 8 Harm Recording and Documentation

Accurate and systematic documentation of conflict-related harm is essential for effective mitigation, accountability, and evidence-based policy interventions. In Bay Region, communities, CSOs, and state actors have developed varying approaches to recording harm, yet significant gaps persist. These gaps limit the visibility of incidents, constrain response planning, and reduce opportunities for justice and redress.

**Table 2 Harm Recording and Documentation**

| S# | Document Process | Description |
|---|---|---|
| Current Practices in Harm Recording | | |
| 1.1 | Community-Led Documentation | Many incidents are recorded informally by local leaders, women's groups, youth networks, and community volunteers. Documentation often takes the form of verbal reporting, written notes, or registers maintained by elders or local committees. This practice allows for rapid identification of immediate needs, such as displacement or medical assistance, and facilitates informal dispute resolution. |
| 1.2 | Civil Society and NGO Systems | NGOs operating in Bay Region maintain structured reporting systems, often focusing on gender-based violence (GBV), child protection, or displacement. These reports usually include details such as the type of harm, location, date, and affected population. Some organizations have begun using digital tools to enhance accuracy and streamline reporting across multiple communities. |
| 1.3 | State Security and Police Records | Police stations and other security institutions maintain logs of arrests, security incidents, and criminal complaints. However, access to these records is limited, and the data often underrepresents incidents of conflict-related harm due to selective reporting, institutional bias, or lack of trust from the community. |
| 1.4 | Hybrid Approaches | In certain areas, early warning systems combine inputs from community networks, NGOs, and local authorities to track incidents. These systems, although limited in scope, help anticipate escalation and coordinate response efforts. |
| Challenges in Harm Documentation | | |
| 2.1 | Fragmentation and Lack of Standardization | Different actors record harm in varying formats, with inconsistent terminology, categories, and reporting timelines. This fragmentation makes it difficult to aggregate data, analyze trends, or share findings across organizations and government bodies. |
| 2.2 | Underreporting of Sensitive Cases | Gender-based violence, child recruitment, and politically sensitive incidents are often underreported due to stigma, fear of retaliation, or lack of trust in authorities. Women, youth, IDPs, and minority groups are particularly hesitant to disclose harm, leaving large gaps in available data. |

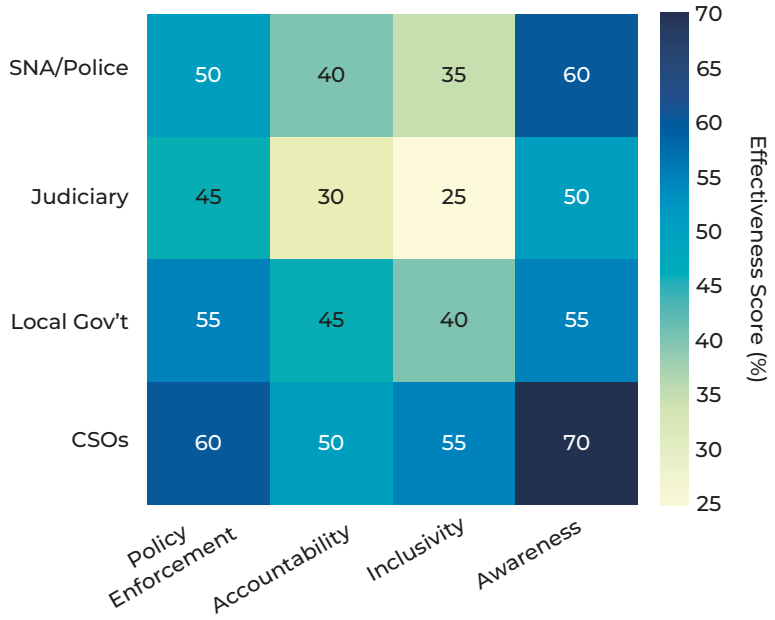
| S# | Document Process | Description |
|---|---|---|
| Challenges in Harm Documentation | | |
| 2.3 | Security and Access Constraints | Remote and conflict-affected areas are often inaccessible to humanitarian or monitoring teams. As a result, incidents in rural or Al-Shabaab-controlled areas are rarely recorded, leading to skewed data that may underestimate civilian vulnerability. |
| 2.4 | Inadequate Technical Capacity | Many community volunteers and local committees lack training in systematic data collection, confidentiality, and verification. Errors in recording or misclassification of incidents can reduce the reliability of data for planning or advocacy. |
| 2.5 | Confidentiality and Trust Issues | Civilians may fear that sharing information with authorities or external actors could result in reprisal, particularly in areas controlled by armed groups. The absence of confidential reporting mechanisms reduces participation and the accuracy of documentation. |
| 2.6 | Delayed or Inconsistent Follow-Up | Recorded incidents are not always followed up with response or support, which discourages future reporting. Communities often perceive documentation efforts as symbolic rather than practical if no tangible action follows the recording of harm. |
| Emerging Practices and Innovations | | |
| 3.1 | Digital Reporting Platforms | NGOs and youth networks are experimenting with mobile-based reporting tools, allowing victims or witnesses to report incidents discreetly and in real-time. Digital systems facilitate data aggregation and can link reports to early warning and emergency response mechanisms. |
| 3.2 | Community Verification Committees | Some districts have established committees composed of elders, women, youth, and CBO representatives to verify reports, reducing errors and ensuring that marginalized voices are captured. These hybrid structures combine local legitimacy with technical oversight. |
| 3.3 | Integrated Early Warning Systems | Early warning platforms that link harm documentation with alert mechanisms allow for rapid response by authorities, humanitarian actors, and community networks. Integration ensures that documentation is not solely for record-keeping but directly informs mitigation and protection measures. |
| 3.4 | Data Sharing and Coordination Forums | Periodic coordination meetings between CBOs, local authorities, and community representatives help harmonize recording methodologies, share trends, and identify priority areas for intervention. |
| Gaps and Opportunities | | |
| 4.1 | Lack of Harmonized Standards | There is a need for a standardized framework for conflict-related harm documentation in Bay Region that defines categories of harm, data collection protocols, confidentiality measures, and reporting timelines. |
| 4.2 | Inclusive Data Collection | Documentation must ensure participation of women, youth, IDPs, minority groups, and persons with disabilities. Without inclusive practices, mitigation interventions risk overlooking the needs of the most vulnerable populations. |
| 4.3 | Capacity Building | Training for community volunteers, CBO staff, and local authorities on systematic documentation, data verification, and digital tools can improve accuracy and reliability. |
| 4.4 | Linking Documentation to Response | Effective documentation should be directly connected to mitigation and protection strategies. Reports should trigger follow-up, referral to services, or accountability mechanisms to ensure that data translates into tangible outcomes for affected communities. |
| 4.5 | Confidentiality and Safety Measures | Strengthening safe reporting channels and anonymizing sensitive data can encourage broader participation and reduce risks of retaliation. |

Harm recording and documentation in Bay Region is evolving, but remains fragmented, inconsistent, and under-resourced. While community networks and CBOs play an essential role, challenges in standardization, inclusivity, trust, and follow-up limit the impact of current practices. Strengthening documentation systems through harmonized standards, digital innovations, capacity building, and safe reporting mechanisms is critical for enabling data-driven harm mitigation, accountability, and protection strategies.

By enhancing the scope, quality, and usability of harm documentation, stakeholders can better anticipate threats, prioritize interventions, and ensure that the experiences of marginalized populations are fully recognized and addressed.

# 9 Institutional and Policy Effectiveness

**Figure 7 Institutional and Policy Effectiveness by Actor**




This section dicusses the perceived effectiveness of policies, legal frameworks, and security institutions in Bay Region. While Somalia has established formal policies and laws to safeguard civilians, the implementation and enforcement of these frameworks remain inconsistent. Communities report a mix of improvements in certain areas alongside persistent gaps, highlighting both the potential and limitations of existing mechanisms.

The analysis of institutional and policy effectiveness reveals significant variation across different actors. CBOs in Bay region consistently demonstrate the strongest performance, particularly in promoting awareness (70%) and advancing inclusivity (55%), reflecting their close engagement with communities and advocacy role. Local governments show moderate effectiveness, with relative strength in policy enforcement (55%) but weaker results in inclusivity (40%). The Somali National Army (SNA) and Police present a mixed picture, performing better in awareness (60%) yet lagging considerably in inclusivity (35%). In contrast, the judiciary emerges as the weakest actor overall, with especially low scores in accountability (30%) and inclusivity (25%), underscoring persistent gaps in trust and institutional capacity. Collectively, these findings suggest that while non-state actors such as CBOs are playing a crucial role in filling gaps, state institutions require targeted reforms to strengthen accountability, inclusivity, and policy implementation.

**Table 3 Institutional and Policy Effectiveness**

| S# | Tools and Policies | Description |
|---|---|---|
| Overview of Existing Tools and Policies | | |
| **1.1** | National Legislation | Somalia has ratified and developed several laws and policies designed to protect civilians, including:<br>• The Somali Penal Code and Criminal Procedure Code, covering criminal offenses, arrests, and legal redress.<br>• National policies addressing gender-based violence, child protection, disability inclusion, and forced displacement.<br>• Policies regulating humanitarian access and engagement, aimed at ensuring equitable distribution of aid. |
| **1.2** | State and Regional Frameworks | Southwest State and Bay Region have established local ordinances, security protocols, and administrative procedures intended to complement national policies. These include local dispute resolution mechanisms, community policing initiatives, and frameworks for coordination between state security forces and civil society. |
| **1.3** | International Obligations | Somalia is a signatory to international human rights instruments and conventions, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the Geneva Conventions. These provide overarching standards for civilian protection during conflict. |
| Implementation Challenges | | |
| **2.1** | Weak Enforcement Capacity | Security institutions such as the Somali National Army (SNA), police, and intelligence agencies often lack the personnel, resources, and operational reach to fully implement laws. Rural areas and conflict-affected zones are particularly underserved, leaving civilians exposed to harm. |
| **2.2** | Selective or Inconsistent Application | Certain laws, especially those addressing gender-based violence or minority protection, are applied unevenly. Law enforcement bias favors dominant clans or urban populations, marginalizing women, IDPs, and minority groups. |
| **2.3** | Limited Awareness Among Communities | Many civilians are unaware of their legal rights or the procedures available for reporting abuse. Knowledge gaps reduce the likelihood of seeking formal justice or accessing protective services. |
| **2.4** | Political and Clan Influence | Local political dynamics and clan affiliations can override formal legal processes. Influential actors may obstruct investigations, manipulate dispute resolution outcomes, or protect perpetrators, undermining policy effectiveness. |
| **2.5** | Coordination Gaps | Policies often require collaboration between multiple actors such as state institutions, CBOs, and international partners but coordination remains weak. Fragmented approaches result in overlapping responsibilities, duplication of efforts, and gaps in coverage. |

| S# | Tools and Policies | Description |
|---|---|---|
| Security Institutions and Civilian Protection | | |
| **3.1** | Somali National Army (SNA) and Police | These forces are tasked with providing security, maintaining law and order, and protecting civilians. Positive contributions include:<br>• Patrols and presence in urban centers that deter opportunistic violence.<br>• Engagement with communities through Police Advisory Committees (PAC) and Community Action Forums (CAF).<br>• Rapid response to clashes or criminal incidents in accessible areas.<br>Limitations include:<br>• Arbitrary arrests, harassment, and excessive use of force.<br>• Delayed response to rural incidents or politically sensitive cases.<br>• Weak accountability mechanisms for misconduct, leading to diminished community trust. |
| **3.2** | Non-State Armed Groups and Militia Oversight | Al-Shabaab, clan militias, and local armed groups operate parallel governance and security systems. Formal policies have limited leverage over these actors, leaving civilians subject to coercion, forced taxation, and retaliation. Efforts to engage militias through negotiated local peace agreements have had limited success, often being temporary or selectively enforced. |
| **3.3** | International Forces (ATMIS/AUSSOM and Others) | International peacekeeping forces contribute to security and capacity-building but face constraints in aligning operations with local civilian protection priorities. Unintended consequences include:<br>• Civilian casualties during operations near populated areas.<br>• Disruption of local livelihoods through roadblocks, convoys, or movement restrictions.<br>• Limited engagement with community feedback mechanisms, leaving civilians anxious or uninformed about military actions. |
| Policy Successes and Positive Developments | | |
| **4.1** | Disability and Gender Inclusion | Some municipalities have implemented disability-inclusive construction policies and GBV reporting protocols, creating incremental improvements in accessibility and accountability. |
| **4.2** | Community Policing Initiatives | CAFs and PACs provide a platform for dialogue between civilians and authorities, enhancing transparency and facilitating conflict resolution in urban areas. |
| **4.3** | Targeted Legal Enforcement | Instances of swift prosecution for high-profile killings or major criminal acts have reinforced community trust in select cases, demonstrating the potential of consistent enforcement. |
| Persistent Gaps | | |
| **5.1** | Structural Weaknesses | Limited infrastructure, inadequate funding, and insufficient staffing constrain policy implementation. |
| **5.2** | Rural and Remote Exclusion | Security coverage and legal enforcement are disproportionately urban-focused, leaving rural communities more vulnerable to harm. |
| **5.3** | Accountability Deficits | Weak judicial follow-up and impunity for perpetrators – particularly in politically or economically sensitive cases – undermine trust in state institutions. |
| **5.4** | Exclusion of Marginalized Groups | Women, youth, IDPs, minority groups, and persons with disabilities often lack meaningful access to protective mechanisms or participation in decision-making processes. |

| S# | Tools and Policies | Description |
|---|---|---|
| Opportunities for Strengthening Institutions and Policies | | |
| **6.1** | Standardization and Harmonization | Aligning national, state, and local policies with clear guidelines for enforcement can reduce inconsistencies and improve accountability. |
| **6.2** | Capacity Building for Security Actors | Training on civilian protection, human rights, and engagement with communities can enhance the professionalism and responsiveness of security forces. |
| **6.3** | Inclusive Community Engagement | Strengthening participatory mechanisms ensures that marginalized groups are represented in decision-making and benefit from protection frameworks. |
| **6.4** | Linking Documentation to Action | Integrating harm recording systems with policy enforcement can facilitate evidence-based interventions and timely responses to emerging threats. |
| **6.5** | Monitoring and Evaluation | Establishing regular review processes to assess policy effectiveness, compliance, and impact on civilian protection can identify gaps and guide reforms. |

Policy and security frameworks in Bay Region exhibit both promise and limitation. While legislative instruments and community-focused initiatives provide a foundation for civilian protection, implementation is uneven, selective, and constrained by structural, political, and capacity-related challenges. Effective protection requires bridging gaps between policy and practice, strengthening accountability, and embedding inclusive, community-centered approaches in both law enforcement and conflict mitigation strategies. Policies are most effective when they are not only codified but operationalized with attention to local realities, vulnerable populations, and systemic drivers of harm.

# 10 Recommendations

The findings from Bay Region underscore the need for multi-layered, context-sensitive approaches to reduce civilian harm. Communities have articulated practical solutions that prioritize inclusion, accountability, and resilience. The following recommendations are structured to address key dimensions of harm mitigation: community empowerment, security sector reform, policy enforcement, and structural prevention. They are therefore mainly directed at national and regional government authorities, informal governance actors such as clan chiefs, and community-based organizations.

## 1 Strengthening Community-Led Protection Mechanisms

### A Enhance Traditional and Religious Dispute Resolution

- Provide training and capacity-building for elders and religious leaders to ensure that mediation processes are inclusive, gender-sensitive, and aligned with national legal frameworks. Establish guidelines to integrate customary law (Xeer) with formal legal systems, particularly for cases of GBV, land disputes, and minority protection.
- Encourage collaboration between traditional leaders and CBOs to improve documentation of resolved and unresolved cases, facilitating learning and accountability.

### B Support Women's Networks and Youth Volunteer Initiatives

- Allocate sustainable resources, including funding, logistical support, and training, to women's groups and youth volunteer networks to expand their protective reach.
- Formalize women's and youth engagement in community safety committees, ensuring their participation in decision-making processes.
- Develop mentorship programs linking experienced protection actors with emerging local leaders to strengthen continuity and expertise.

### C Inclusive Engagement of IDPs and Minority groups

- Establish dedicated forums within Community Action Forums (CAFs) for IDPs and minority groups to voice protection concerns and contribute to community planning.
- Facilitate partnerships with CBOs to provide culturally and linguistically appropriate support services to marginalized groups.
- Promote mobility and access to services for IDPs through coordinated humanitarian interventions and local governance support.

## 2 Enhancing Security Sector Responsiveness

**A** Strengthen Accountability Mechanisms for State Security Forces

- Develop robust oversight structures for police, SNA, and intelligence agencies, including independent review boards and community monitoring committees.
- Introduce transparent reporting channels for civilian complaints, ensuring protection from retaliation.
- Provide regular training on human rights, proportional use of force, and civilian engagement.

**B** Civilian-Centered Operational Planning

- Develop Civilian Harm Mitigation mechanisms for SNA and improve visibility, reach, and overall effectiveness of AUSSOM's CCTARC.
- Incorporate community early warning systems into security operations to reduce civilian exposure to harm during military or police interventions.
- Ensure that operations by both national and international forces consider local livelihoods, cultural norms, and seasonal migration patterns.

**C** Engagement with Non-State Armed Groups

- Encourage negotiated local peace agreements to reduce harm from clan militias, emphasizing community-led monitoring and accountability.
- Support demobilization and reintegration programs for former combatants, particularly youth, to reduce recruitment and retaliatory violence.

## 3 Policy Implementation and Legal Reform

**A** Promote Awareness and Accessibility of Legal Frameworks

- Launch community awareness campaigns on legal rights, reporting procedures, and protection mechanisms, targeting women, youth, IDPs, and minority groups.
- Simplify and disseminate key legal documents in local languages, using radio, community meetings, and mobile platforms.

**B** Strengthen Enforcement of GBV, Child Protection, and Minority Rights

- Ensure consistent prosecution of crimes against vulnerable groups, regardless of clan affiliation or political influence.
- Establish specialized courts or mobile legal units to address GBV, child rights violations, and land disputes in remote areas.
- Integrate legal aid services into community forums to facilitate access to justice for marginalized populations.

**C** Harmonize Policies Across Governance Levels

- Align national, state, and district-level protection policies to reduce gaps and duplication.
- Develop monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of policy implementation, including data collection, reporting, and corrective action processes.

## 4 Data, Documentation, and Evidence-Based Interventions

A Establish Harmonized Harm Recording Systems

- Develop standardized tools for documenting incidents of civilian harm, capturing both direct and indirect effects.
- Integrate community-led reporting mechanisms with district and regional data systems to ensure comprehensive and timely analysis.
- Maintain confidentiality and protection measures for victims to encourage reporting, particularly for GBV and politically sensitive cases.

B Leverage Data for Strategic Decision-Making

- Use evidence from harm documentation to guide resource allocation, early warning systems, and policy interventions. Share aggregated data with civil society, local authorities, and international partners to inform prevention strategies and advocacy.

## 5 Addressing Structural Drivers of Harm

A Mitigate Economic Vulnerability

- Support livelihood programs targeting youth, women, and marginalized groups to reduce dependency on harmful coping strategies, such as recruitment into non-state armed groups.
- Implement agricultural support initiatives, microfinance schemes, and vocational training to enhance community resilience.

B Reduce Political and Social Exclusion

- Ensure equitable representation of women, youth, IDPs, and minority groups in local governance structures and decision-making forums.
- Promote dialogue and reconciliation initiatives across clans, particularly in rural and resource-contested areas.

C Strengthen Disaster and Conflict Preparedness

- Integrate early warning systems for conflict and climate-induced displacement into community planning.
- Provide training on emergency response, evacuation, and protection measures to increase readiness and reduce vulnerability during crises.

## 6 Coordination and Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration

**A** Foster Partnerships Between Communities, CBOs, and local authorities

- Develop formal coordination platforms linking communities, civil society organizations, and local authorities to share information, best practices, and resources.
- Encourage joint planning of protection interventions that combine traditional knowledge, local insights, and technical expertise.

**B** Engage International and Regional Partners Strategically

- Collaborate with international forces (or say ATMIS/AUSSOM), international NGOs, and development agencies to ensure that interventions are aligned with community priorities and minimize unintended harm.
- Advocate for international support to focus on capacity-building, harm prevention, and sustainable community protection initiatives.

These recommendations reflect the voices of Bay Region communities. Effective harm mitigation requires a holistic approach that combines:

- Community empowerment, ensuring that women, youth, IDPs, and minority groups have meaningful roles in protection and decision-making.
- Security sector reform, embedding accountability, professionalism, and civilian-centered practices.
- Policy enforcement, linking legislation with practical, equitable implementation.
- Evidence-based interventions, guided by reliable harm documentation and local knowledge.
- Addressing structural drivers, including economic, social, and political vulnerabilities.
- Multi-stakeholder collaboration, integrating the efforts of local, state, and international actors.

By operationalizing these recommendations, Bay Region can strengthen civilian protection, reduce recurrent cycles of harm, and foster resilient communities capable of navigating ongoing security and development challenges.

# Conclusion

This report highlights that conflict-related harm in Bay Region is not an isolated or temporary occurrence but a persistent, multidimensional condition shaped by violence, exclusion, and structural inequalities. Communities emphasized that harm extends beyond immediate casualties and encompasses trauma, economic deprivation, and social fragmentation. Vulnerable groups, especially women, youth, minority groups, IDPs, and persons with disabilities, bear the heaviest burdens.

Through this study, we seek to emphasise the importance of integrating community perspectives into casualty recording and harm mitigation efforts. By capturing the voices of affected populations, we aim at enhancing the accuracy, inclusivity, and ethical integrity of conflict-related harm documentation. The insights generated provide both a local foundation for trust-building and a global platform for accountability and advocacy.

Moving forward, effective civilian protection will require:

- Standardized yet context-sensitive casualty-recording methodologies.
- Stronger partnerships between communities, government institutions, CBOs, and international actors.
- Continuous capacity building, resource mobilization, and legal safeguards for casualty recorders.
- Addressing structural drivers of harm such as exclusion, poverty, and weak governance.

## About the authors

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