



Policy Brief

Bridging the Divide: **Toward Equitable Schooling in Mogadishu**



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Education Above All

Introduction

The crisis of out-of-school children in Mogadishu remains acute, driven by intersecting factors including prolonged displacement, extreme poverty, and governance fragmentation. Despite national commitments to universal access, such as those articulated in the Education Sector Strategic Plan (MoECHE, 2021a), a large proportion of children—particularly those living in informal settlements and IDP camps—remain excluded from formal schooling (NRC, 2024). The expansion of Islamic education in the absence of regulatory integration has further entrenched parallel systems that lack curricular alignment or coordinated oversight (Warsame, 2007). These challenges are exacerbated by the spatial mismatch between school infrastructure and areas of highest need, as well as the limited fiscal and institutional capacity of local authorities (World Bank, 2022).

This policy brief outlines the structural factors contributing to educational exclusion in Mogadishu. It advocates for targeted reforms to harmonize education systems, equitably distribute infrastructure, and enhance enforcement mechanisms for inclusive access.

Key Findings

To the majority of low-income families in Mogadishu, the formal education system remains largely inaccessible. Public schools constitute only 4% of the city's total schools, while the cost of private education—ranging from \$120 to \$300 per year for primary and secondary levels—exceeds the capacity of most households (Tahir and Logan, 2025), where the average monthly income is approximately \$250 and family size is 6.2 (NBS, 2022). In response, many families opt for madrasas, which align with cultural and religious expectations and often offer flexible or negotiable fees. However, these institutions typically offer limited academic content, especially in subjects like science, mathematics, and language, delaying children's acquisition of foundational literacy and numeracy and constraining long-term educational progression (Tahir and Logan, 2025).

Within this context, parents face a structural dilemma between culturally valued Islamic education and the secular system, often framed as essential for gaining employable skills and navigating modern economies. This tension reflects a colonial-era bifurcation of epistemologies—where Islamic instruction was pitted against Western formal schooling—that continues to shape educational trajectories in contemporary Somalia (Hussein, 1988; Olden, 2008). The lack of harmonization between these systems forces families to oscillate between them, often resulting in fragmented or inconsistent schooling. The decision to delay formal education in favor of early madrasa attendance is frequently a financial compromise rather than an educational choice, and one that may limit children's prospects in both spiritual and economic domains (Tahir and Logan, 2025).

Spatial disparities further compound exclusion. Peripheral districts such as Kaxda, Deyniile, and Garasbaaley, as well as minority-concentrated neighbourhoods like Xamarweyne and Shangani, suffer from severe shortages of formal public schools (Tahir and Logan, 2025). In many of these areas, school infrastructure is either entirely absent or inadequate, lacking basic facilities such as libraries, sanitation, or security. IDPs and minority groups living in informal settlements face legal ambiguities, tenure insecurity, and service exclusion, which restrict their access to even the few available educational institutions (Somalia Education Cluster, 2022). Schools in such areas are often overcrowded and remote, with unsafe walking routes, making daily attendance unfeasible for many children (Tahir and Logan, 2025).

Mogadishu's education governance is further hindered by overlapping mandates, centralized authority, and weak institutional coordination. The Benadir Regional Administration, whose leaders are appointed by the federal presidency, lacks formal fiscal and planning autonomy over education delivery. This has resulted in fragmented implementation, particularly in efforts to align formal and religious education providers. Donor-led interventions—such as the UNICEF's Accelerated Basic Education program—have significantly shaped national and federal member state planning processes (MoECHE, 2022). However, these interventions often remain only partially integrated into municipal governance structures, with limited mechanisms to ensure accountability to local communities.

The consequences of educational exclusion are both individual and societal. According to local authorities, approximately one million children are out of school in Mogadishu, with enrolment in primary and secondary levels below 23% and 17%, respectively (Tahir and Logan, 2025). Out-of-school youth face increased risks of exploitative labour, early marriage, and recruitment into urban gangs or violent groups. The rise of groups such as Ciyaal Weero in districts like Dharkeynley and Kaaraan, composed largely of youth excluded from education, exemplifies this risk (ibid). Despite some NGO-led interventions, Somalia's public education system lacks embedded after-school programmes, vocational pathways, and psychosocial support, with such services primarily delivered through short-term humanitarian projects rather than integrated state provision (NRC, 2022; NORRAG, 2021).

Policy Gaps

The government has taken several policy measures to expand and improve access to public education in Mogadishu. A federal initiative was launched to rebuild and reopen public schools across 12 districts, increasing the number of operational public institutions from 25 in 2020 to 43 in 2025. Furthermore, to address chronic workforce shortages and promote stability in public education, the number of teachers was expanded from 700 to 1,700, supported by donor-funded salary subsidies of \$324 for teachers and \$400 for head teachers. These incentives aimed to enhance staff retention and improve classroom quality (Tahir and Logan, 2025). Concurrently, the Ministry of Education, introduced a centralized Education Management Information System (EMIS) to facilitate data-driven planning and oversight. Further reforms included the introduction of a national quality assurance framework for basic education and the implementation of earlier student registration for national exams to enhance logistical preparedness and certification integrity. These reforms aimed to standardize assessment procedures, strengthen institutional credibility, and restore public confidence in the education system (Tahir and Logan, 2025, 2023; see also MoECHE, 2021b). Despite signaling progress, these reforms remain insufficient to overcome structural barriers, with gaps in regulation, integration, and financing limiting their impact.

First, there is no effective regulatory framework to govern the rapid privatization of public schools. Many previously public institutions now operate as fee-charging entities, often without financial transparency, inspection protocols, or fee caps. This absence of oversight has entrenched exclusion for low-income families and internally displaced persons (IDPs), who are unable to afford rising education costs.

Second, the widespread use of Qur'anic madrasas remains disconnected from national education frameworks. These institutions are excluded from strategic planning, and no formal mechanisms exist for curriculum integration, equivalency certification, or accreditation—resulting in a fragmented and uncoordinated dual system.

Third, the absence of targeted financing mechanisms further exacerbates inequality. Pro-poor instruments such as conditional cash transfers, tuition waivers, or community block grants are not currently implemented in Mogadishu, leaving children from vulnerable groups—especially the displaced or those in marginalized urban areas—without meaningful access to education. Evidence from other least developed countries demonstrates the effectiveness of such interventions. In Nigeria, the conditional cash transfer program has enhanced school attendance and reduced dropout rates among beneficiaries (World Bank, 2024). Similarly, Haiti's tuition waiver program financed over 1,000 schools and helped maintain enrollment for more than 480,000 students (World Bank, 2019).

Fourth, the Benadir Regional Administration lacks the fiscal and institutional autonomy to design and finance education plans tailored to Mogadishu's specific urban context. Centralized federal control over education policy and donor-driven planning frameworks limit local responsiveness and accountability.

Fifth, education policy is not institutionally linked to the limited child protection mechanism in existence. Risks such as early marriage, child labor, and recruitment by armed groups are not systematically addressed, and schools are not conceptualized as protective environments within a wider social welfare architecture. These overlapping policy gaps reinforce systemic exclusion and limit the potential of education as a transformative force in Mogadishu's fragile urban landscape.

Recommendations

To address the above challenges, following are the recommendations

a) The state should formally recognise and support community-led education systems, including flexible madrasas and mobile classrooms. These locally embedded models have demonstrated resilience amid displacement, insecurity, and institutional gaps. During fieldwork in districts such as Hodan, interviewees reported that informal Qur'anic schools adapted to the influx of internally displaced persons (IDPs) by extending operating hours and, in some cases, waiving or reducing fees (Tahir and Logan, 2025). Institutionalising these models through national oversight frameworks would enhance quality assurance, enable targeted resource allocation, and ensure alignment with broader education policy objectives.

b) To promote systemic inclusion, successful grassroots education initiatives should be embedded within national policy frameworks, planning processes, and public budget allocations. These community-driven models currently operate outside formal structures yet provide vital services. In contexts such as Somaliland, locally managed schools funded through zakat and diaspora contributions have filled major access gaps (Gandrup & Titeca, 2019). Mainstreaming such models in Mogadishu would enhance coordination, ensure financial sustainability, and bridge the divide between informal provision and national education strategies.

c) The government should establish hybrid curricula that integrate Qur'anic instruction with foundational academic subjects such as literacy, numeracy, and science. Madrasas that meet national standards should be granted formal recognition. This reform would leverage the broad legitimacy and accessibility of Islamic education while enhancing academic outcomes. For example, in Puntland, pilot schools integrating dual content have shown improved retention among girls and IDP children (Puntland State of Somalia, 2021). A similar model could be adapted in Mogadishu to expand access in communities with limited trust in formal institutions

d) In light of fiscal constraints, madrasas should be authorised to deliver education up to Standard 6, with secondary education commencing at Standard 7. Existing primary and intermediary schools should be repurposed into secondary institutions. This strategy would reduce reliance on donor-funded construction and maximise community infrastructure. Such adaptive use of existing assets has been proposed in interviews as a cost-effective strategy for expanding access in underserved districts like Deyniile and Garasbaaley (Tahir and Logan, 2025).

e) The government should employ geospatial data to prioritize school construction and rehabilitation in historically underserved districts, especially those with high concentrations of IDPs and marginalized clans. Stakeholders reported that the recent establishment of public schools in underserved districts like Garasbaaley and Gubadley has significantly improved enrolment, although precise data remain unavailable (Tahir and Logan, 2025). Spatially targeted investment can help redress structural inequalities, promote territorial equity, and enhance state legitimacy in peripheral urban areas.

f) Education policy should be formally connected to child protection mechanisms to address risks such as early marriage, child labour, and recruitment by armed groups. Multi-sectoral coordination is essential in Somalia's fragile environment, where children face overlapping vulnerabilities. Schools should be reimagined not only as learning spaces but also as protection hubs embedded within a broader social safety system. For instance, NGO-led interventions in Kaaraan and Dharkeynley have combined psychosocial support with basic education, mitigating the risk of youth recruitment into gangs like Ciyaal Weero (Tahir and Logan, 2025).

Conclusion

The crisis of out-of-school children in Mogadishu reflects not only an education gap but a broader challenge of governance, legitimacy, and social inclusion. Rooted in colonial-era bifurcation and reinforced by contemporary economic exclusion and institutional fragmentation, this exclusion cannot be addressed through isolated service delivery reforms. Rather, it demands a structural response that recognizes education as both a fundamental right and a foundation for urban stability and social cohesion. Bridging the divide between Islamic and secular systems, confronting spatial inequalities, and clarifying governance roles are essential steps toward building an integrated and responsive education system.

This requires moving beyond short-term interventions to long-term, rights-based strategies that are attuned to the socio-spatial realities of Mogadishu—displacement, informality, and community resilience. A reimagined educational model must be decentralized, locally legitimate, and capable of harmonizing diverse learning traditions. Achieving this calls for coordinated action across government, religious institutions, donors, and civil society to ensure that every child in Mogadishu has access to meaningful and equitable learning opportunities.

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Public Policy Observatory

Education Above All's Public Policy Observatory is a platform that provides evidence-based research through a network of education and policy experts. The observatory showcases successful public policy solutions that could be replicated and scaled in different countries. Through its knowledge creation and dissemination, the observatory aims to guide policymakers international organizations and other educational stakeholders regarding effective education strategies that ensure adequate resource allocation for a more significant socio-economic impact.



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