

MANAGING VOTERS ILLITERACY IN PUNTLAND LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS

Introduction

In 1972, the rate of literacy in the Republic of Somalia was estimated to be 5.40 per cent of the total population.¹ Soon afterwards in 1974 the Siyad Barre government launched 'The Somalia Rural Literacy Campaign' – an ambitious campaign to teach people to read in rural Somalia, mostly through the unprecedented deployment of thousands of school and university graduates as teachers. In subsequent years, it also made efforts to build more schools and train more teachers. As a consequence of this, during the 1970s and 80s Somalia's literacy-rate rose to 55 per cent of the population and enrolment of school-age children reached record highs.² However, over the last 30 years since the collapse of Somalia's central government in 1991, school enrolment plummeted. Estimates made in 2018 suggest that the overall literacy level in the country is 37.8 per cent of adults (49.9 per cent for men and 25.8 per cent for women).³ Widespread illiteracy can have a significant impact on political processes.

For example, during local government elections held in Puntland in October 2021 it was noted that the level of illiteracy amongst voters was extremely high. This had a significant impact on the process and outcome of the polls, including a higher-than-anticipated number of spoiled ballots.

This policy brief considers the significance of voter illiteracy on political processes in Somalia with particular attention paid to upcoming elections. To this end, PDRRC conducted Focus Groups Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) to explore lessons learned from Puntland's Early Local Government Elections, particularly focused on the subject of voter illiteracy. The material gathered from the FGDs and KIIs was presented at a one-day forum in July 2022, 'Managing Voters' Illiteracy in Puntland Local Government Elections'. Attendees included Puntland Government, civil society groups (including women, youth groups and the media), the Transitional Puntland Electoral Commission (TPEC), political associations, academics, and concerned international agencies.

¹ '10 important facts about girls' education in Somalia', The Borgen Project, <https://borgenproject.org/tag/literacy-in-somalia/>

² A. A. Abdi, 'Education in Somalia: History, destruction, and calls for reconstruction', *Comparative Education* 34/3 (1998), 327-340.

³ 'Somalia literacy rate 1972 – 2022', Macrotrends.com <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/SOM/somalia/literacy-rate>. It should be noted that no reliable data currently exists for Puntland.

Illiteracy in Puntland's Early Local Government Elections

Voter illiteracy was widespread in the recent Early Local Government Elections in Puntland in October 2021. The following provides an outline of the key challenges voter illiteracy caused during this electoral process and how these might be addressed.

Civic and Voter Education Programme

Civic and voter education is essential, in all democracies, to prepare populations to participate in elections. This includes helping communities understand legislation and procedures related to elections and increasing awareness of the rights and responsibilities they have. Whilst some civil society organizations and TPEC made efforts to provide civic education in Puntland's three early election districts, this programme was limited and mostly confined to urban and peri-urban rural village settings. A particular weakness was its failure to reach out sufficiently to the majority nomadic community and fishermen, who form a significant segment of the electorate⁴ and comprise the largest number of illiterate voters.⁵ When the voter education team held meetings with or approached pastoralists, the timing of the events was generally inappropriate with regard to the pastoralist's free time – most of the outreach activities were conducted during the day.

Pastoralists and fishermen are often available at nighttime and in the daytime, they are mostly out in the bush tending their livestock or fishing out at sea. In addition, the voter education programme coincided with the dry season when pastoralists migrated to distant water points and were occupied tending their animals. Finally, traditional folklore and poetry, which constitutes the most effective means of communication for illiterate voters (it easily catches their attention, and they tend to remember poetry and audio-visual messages), were also not utilized in the education of the illiterate electorate. As a result, the voter education programme was only partially successful in reaching communities with high rates of illiteracy.

Assisted voting

Since many of those casting votes were from an illiterate nomadic community, prior to the elections TPEC and other key stakeholders had agreed that illiterate voters would be able to cast their vote with assistance. The policy that was agreed upon was that polling staff would ask the illiterate voter to declare whom they intended to vote for and then the representative of the specified political association would accompany the voter to the ballot box and mark the ballot for the person in question. The voter and the political association representative would then show the marked ballot to the other political association representatives to confirm the ballot had been marked as instructed.

⁴ Puntland population urban: 1,272,917; rural: 221,069; nomadic; 1,072,521) <https://somalia.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Population-Estimation-Survey-of-Somalia-PESS-2013-2014.pdf>

⁵ Post-election PDRC field FGDs

This approach ensures illiterate voters could cast their vote, with the support of an individual, however it also raises questions around secrecy of the vote.

Political associations' nomenclature and symbols

Another difficulty encountered during voting, particularly for illiterate voters, was that the logos of the political associations on the ballot paper, which were long and put in similar arrangements, were hard to differentiate. Furthermore, some of the organization names were similar and this posed difficulties for the illiterate in identifying the organization that they intended to vote for. Where the symbols accompanying were more identifiable, not enough outreach had been done to ensure that these voters associated the logos and symbols with the political association they wished to vote for.

To make sure voters get the message and identify with the political associations, the need for symbols that all segments of the communities can easily identify is key. This will reduce confusion at polling stations and the need for staff supporting the voters which contributed to the issue of lack secrecy of vote.

Ballot paper design

The ballot paper provided to the electorate caused multiple challenges for illiterate voters. Firstly, the ballot papers demonstrated to the public for practice and the ones provided at the polling stations were different, which confused many voters. Secondly, the spaces between the lines illustrating the names of the

political organizations were too close.

This resulted in illiterate voters not being able to pinpoint exactly where they should mark and consequently many spoiled their ballot unintentionally.

Thirdly, the size of the box for marking in the ballot paper was equally small, which caused the markings to reach outside of the box subsequently leading to more spoiled ballots. Fourthly, TPEC advised voters to mark signs on the boxes and regarded invalid those ballot papers marked with a sign. However, despite the interchangeability in the common usage of these two symbols, culturally, the sanctioned has a negative connotation and it's therefore difficult to associate the symbol with rightness and/or use it for an approval. Many legitimate votes were therefore potentially discarded as spoiled ballots, disenfranchising many voters. Finally, these issues related to ballot design can also contribute to making voting less accessible for people with disabilities.

Implications

Literacy is key to civic education and engagement as well as voter turnout. For illiterate communities, the electoral process can create barriers at all stages, from voter education to the registration process and casting the ballot. Helping them at the polling stations enables them to understand what and who they are voting for and ensures that their vote counts. However, allocating a person to assist illiterate voters mark the ballot papers undermines the secrecy of the voting procedure. It also exerts an extra burden on already limited polling staff and competing political associations' observers.

Though there is limited research on the impact of illiteracy on voter turnout, analysis in different countries, such as the USA, has shown that when literacy rates decline or are low, voter turnout also decreases. Despite the support offered, 12 per cent of votes casted were disqualified, mostly due to wrong markings from assisted and non-assisted voters.

Policy Recommendations

In view of the above challenges, the below recommendations are proposed to address how illiterate members of the electorate can be assisted to successfully participate in elections in the future.

Voter education programme

» Utilize poetry and traditional folklore in the voter education programme to pass messages to illiterate voters. This is more likely to attract large public gatherings, potentially reducing the amount of outreach that is needed.

» To the extent that resources allow, expand the coverage of the voter education programme, and create video clips showing how to mark the ballot paper using street theatre and other means. Repeat this continuously to the public through both online (digital) and offline (theatre/performance) programming.

» Organize street theatre, public meetings, and other performance/spoken events from sunset onwards at which time fishermen and pastoralists are back from work and available.

» CSOs should participate intensely in a voter education programme to educate the electorate, particularly illiterate voters.

» The media, which has large coverage and influence, should regularly disseminate voter education materials.

» CSOs should coordinate closely with TPEC to ensure broad geographic coverage and diverse tools are used to reach all segments of the population.

» CSOs should ensure that all messaging and educational content is endorsed by TPEC so that the process to vote is being taught using TPEC's intended approach.

» TPEC should train representatives from the political associations to ensure that candidates and party leaders understand the process and are explaining it clearly to their constituencies.

» The international community should provide increased financial support for voter education, specifically targeted to the illiterate voter education programme, thus extending the outreach to the pastoral and fishing communities.

» The international community should support civic and voter education programmes that use diverse tools and methods to reach a cross-section of the population, including rural populations, nomads, people with disabilities, and, especially, voters that are unable to read.

» The international community should boost technical assistance in provision of more learning materials, equipment, and VE curriculum.

» The international community should ensure that all funded

voter education programming is coordinated through TPEC.

- » The Puntland government should provide financial resources, education materials and moral support to the voter education programme.
- » The Puntland government should encourage district authorities to support voter education teams in organizing meetings and accessing pastoral communities given these authorities are familiar with and possess the trust of their respective citizens.

Political association nomenclature and symbols

- » Political associations should simplify their symbols and make them user friendly for the illiterate voter. Adopt such symbols as a camel, cow, sheep, ostrich, etc.

Ballot paper design

- » Utilize the same ballot paper for public demonstration and actual voting to avoid confusion.
- » Arrange special places (dedicated accessibility locations) within the polling stations for people with disabilities to cast their votes.
- » Instruct the graphic designer responsible for designing the ballot paper to develop it with large spaces between the names of the political organizations to assist the voter in marking the intended political associations' box correctly. This will eliminate the large number of spoiled ballot papers.
- » Increase the actual size of the boxes where the vote is marked, enabling

illiterate voters to easily mark their ballot properly and not spoil the vote by exceeding the borders.

- » Formally adopt a check sign to mark on the ballot paper to replace the cross sign. However, considering the high illiteracy rate, and general interchangeability in the use of and signs, do not invalidate ballot-papers bearing either of these two signs if they are rightly lodged in the designated box and the intention of the voter is clear.

- » TPEC should work with political associations to ensure names and logos are easily identifiable by all voters and are not too similar.




- » TPEC should adopt policies against the practice of bribing to lure voters and should further reinforce this with preventive, supervisory, and disciplinary measures.

- » TPEC should train non-aligned staff to accompany illiterate voters to the ballot box and assist in marking, instead of forcing the illiterate voters to declare their choices publicly before the polling staff and observers' panel and thus breaching secrecy of voting.



This work is under Creative Commons licence
Attribution - NonCommercial 3.0
Unported (CC BY-NC 3.0)

Contact Information
Garowe, Puntland, Somalia
info@pdrcsomalia.org

 @SomaliaPdrC
 @SomaliaPdrC
 pdrcsomalia.org