

Transcript

Tihana Bartulac-Blanc: So, hi again. My name is Tihana Bartulac-Blanc, and I served as a senior project director or program director for a series of Somali elections between 2016 and 2022, with two extensions of a project that I worked on. This was one of the mainly USAID or U.S. government-funded projects, but we also had some funding from the British government, or DFID and FCO, which later became merged into FCDO. And so, I will focus, actually, on several elections. The idea was that Somalia would eventually have what we called a universal or one-person, one-vote election, but in 2016, as we were starting, we started with what was called a 4.5 or clan-based formula, or sometimes referred to as an indirect election, which then, a few years later, when we repeated it, or when Somalia repeated it, it was referred to as an indirect election, but it was a very similar 4.5, clan-based formula.

So, I'm just gonna provide the dates and these labels for really four elections that we worked on, all with an idea that this will lead to a universal election at some point in 2021, 2022, which actually never happened. We came close, but there, during my time, the work was all directed towards such universal elections, and there were some very standard elements of support we have been providing, like standard components of an electoral cycle, but the actual universal election did not happen, although an enhanced version of a 4.5 formula, or an indirect election, did happen, and then our role was mainly to organize observation of that process.

So the elections were... first, there was a Somaliland, full-on, what was supposed to be presidential and parliamentary elections in November 2017. In the end, only the presidential election happened, and we supported it full-on, with support to the National Election Commission, political party support was provided, training for the parties, training for the political party agents, and Somaliland was quasi-independent, not really independent from Somalia, but quasi-independent and much safer. So this was a more traditional election setting in a sort of post-conflict or, like, low-conflict situation, and largely, we kind of refocused on that part of Somalia because we were asked by the U.S. government to stay away from supporting the 4.5 clan-based election, which was really interesting because our UN colleagues were doing that, and so our government thought it was not necessary for us as an implementer to also do that, but rather focus on this universal election in the long run, which again, we thought would happen in 2021, but it did not, at least not as a universal election.

So, in some way... and then there was also... because [in] the Somaliland 2017 election, the parliamentary and presidential elections were decoupled, actually, our government, or USAID at the time... or actually, it was our embassy that, along with a few other embassies... Danish, British, and a few other bilateral donors, sort of threatened the Somaliland government and the election commission that, if they did that, if they decoupled these two elections, they would not support two elections, essentially. Nevertheless, Somaliland went ahead and did decouple. They were just not ready for the parliamentary elections. And so all the other donors kind of reversed on that threat and did end up supporting the subsequent elections in 2020, but we did not.

So we, in Somaliland, supported the presidential election, which was, in particular, what we supported was the introduction of the biometric voting, which was hailed as the first successful implementation of biometrics in that region, or in Africa, by The Economist, actually, so we were very proud of that. Again, Somaliland is only one of the six states, it's fairly small, there were around 700,000 people registered, but this was still a huge achievement. This was still Somaliland. They've never had this type of biometric registration before, and again, it was a simpler election. It went well, and so 81% of voters turned out.

It was, again, sort of necessary and kind of a slow introduction into sort of supporting elections in Somalia. But I will say that after that, once we shifted fully to Somalia, it was just a different can of worms... or I would say, Mogadishu. Somalia is, let's say, on the federal level, and I'll refer to those as federal elections, as opposed to Somaliland's, which were sort of smaller state elections.

The enthusiasm in Somaliland... we knew that, but we also conducted a survey [that] revolved primarily around the idea that if Somaliland, if they organized the clean and relatively inclusive and free and fair election, it might win its independence, which, of course, did not happen. And so, we shifted now more fully to Mogadishu and Somalia. While we, the small team that we had was supporting... like, 80% of our effort was on supporting Somaliland elections, we also, a year before we started, in 2015, the new independent election commission for the whole of Somalia on the federal level was established in Mogadishu, and from the get-go, our main job was really to build their capacity and have them be ready to implement the eventual, universal election. They were also not, even though they had been established in 2015, they had no role in the 2016 4.5 clan-based formula. For that, separate bodies were established.

And so we immediately started working with the National Independent Election Commission, and while our colleagues at the UN were busy with the 4.5 formula election, or clan-based election, we started, sort of, working on a strategic plan for the NIEC, and after that, they developed a strategic plan, but were very much a skeleton body with very little capacity to do anything else in Somalia.

Throughout, the main reason why we never actually had an election in Somalia is that the security situation was not conducive to conducting an election. Throughout, even attempting to do that, we lived in heavily guarded compounds. It's not just that we lived in heavily guarded compounds, that was not unusual, that was the model we saw elsewhere in Iraq, Afghanistan, but it was that their government, Somali government, Somali Election Commission, they were also equally confined into compounds, even though it was... the compound that they lived in was called Villa Somalia. It was nothing like a villa. But it was extremely limiting, even for them, given the security situation in Somalia, where al-Shabaab, this loosely affiliated set of groups, was threatening security throughout, and they were major security threats and incidents. So again, we lived in another compound for a while, but then moved into the Mogadishu International Airport, which was the main compound. So, essentially, we never left the airport.

With that, as soon as we were able to... and I should have mentioned we had partners. The organization I worked for at the time, that was the implementer of this project, was Creative

Associates International, and our IRI, our International Republican Institute, was a partner, and they supported political parties both in Somaliland, but also in Somalia we jointly established the political party resource center, and after the strategic plan, and then probably the two main, or three main ways in which we supported the Independent Election Commission was we conducted a feasibility study for the voter registration, and found that options were very limited and extremely expensive. I mean, Somalia just did not have any usable system that could be used as a voter registration, and then again, you can just imagine in the security situation of Somalia, it would have been extremely difficult to organize a voter registration.

Then, after the voter registration, we did provide some advisors to kind of build up various departments of the election commission, but also we ran this political party resource center, which was really a major resource, and eventually ended up registering hundreds of parties.

Another big thing, I mean, Somalia being a very insecure and also conservative society, there was a lot of work that needed to be done on women's participation. We supported, sort of, women's caucuses, events for women to join political parties, and had relative success with that. But then, I would say, two years into the project, between having organized Somaliland elections and then kind of just helping NIEC built somewhat of a capacity, we were hit by COVID. So, like, kind of in the middle of the project, COVID was a real challenge.

The good thing was that with these two years of implementing behind us, or even more, three at the time, we had an experienced team, we had a lot of local partners, and we were able to continue implementing without any major problem throughout COVID. But we did redirect a lot of resources. So, for example, we had a lot of material resources planned for the political party resource center, which were then redirected to a few internally displaced persons camps, to a few IDP camps, because we were also looking at IDP voting, there were lots of internally displaced persons living in Mogadishu, and we have been working with them, so now, a lot of these material resources, and you can imagine at the time it was masks, disinfectants, and that kind of stuff that was really hard to get to, which was wildly outside of our mandate, but that is kind of what we then did. We used some of the resources to get those materials to these because it was easy for us. We were essentially working on outreach to these groups, and kind of working with them to get them to participate in elections, but then at that point, these were highly concentrated locations where COVID was particularly a huge threat, and they were living in worse conditions than people anywhere else, and it was hard for them to isolate, so that's why we kind of shifted to getting them all of these resources.

But then, throughout actually, in 2020, this is where we started getting closer to potential universal election in Somalia. Unfortunately, at that point, the political situation in Somalia and the security situation have been fluid throughout. And so, around the time of COVID, the dynamic between the federal government and the state governments, the six state governments, was really at its lowest point.

So during COVID, it seemed like once we started to get to the point, and we were able to, again, have some people start working in person in Somalia, then the sort of political agreement towards

elections seemed to be even more elusive at that point. So, essentially, what happened again, we came close to a political agreement, and even having some kind of legal structure for the elections, but it was quickly reversed, and again, the only agreement that could be reached was to repeat the clan-based formula 4.5, where the four major clans are rewarded the seats, and then 0.5 is all of the minor clans sharing in the rest of the formula.

It's a very complicated formula, but essentially, it is... elections were organized then in two locations per state. There were two polling stations per state, and some of the voting was just by raising a hand, so it was really not an election in any traditional sense of the word. Knowing that, that we are moving towards that, again, all of our efforts were on supporting a more traditional, or universal, election down the road, so essentially, it would be our colleagues at the UN that would provide the operational support, although it was not much, given just two locations per [state].

The main thing was really securing these locations, and so we ended up mounting, or agreeing with USAID, that what we would do is two things, really. Observation, but the major component that this would be a largely women-led observation, so we focused on... because, again, just a clan-based system being very male-dominated, women were not completely excluded, but their participation was a lot more limited, and so we focused on then giving them at least some more access through observation.

And so we mounted this women-led observation, and what we also did is something that, again, Jeff will probably remember fondly. We decided to use Ushahidi crowdsourcing maps to invite the public to also upload reports about elections, and it really worked. Again, we did not have that many polling stations that we could engage many people, but still, even two polling locations per state, when no one had access, when materials were getting delivered, we were able to engage the public, and we were getting some helpful reports. And then, of course, you know, doing any security incidents. So, essentially, we use this open source tool to get the public in Somalia to share with us these observation reports that we then verified, as we called it. Like, we would go through them, make sure that they were genuine reports, that they were at least, there was at least one other independent source that could confirm it, and then we would publish them. So, essentially, the observation in Somalia consisted of women going in person, or observers going in person, I should say. So there were also observers of both genders, but the emphasis was on women, more than 50% were women, and so between these two sources of observation, we came up with a pretty good observation effort, although with this limitation that it was not a real election. By some definition, it was not an election, it was more of a selection. A lot of the support of the project that was primarily intended to support political processes, but mainly elections, was directed at these broader political processes. We also supported the national dialogues between states and the government. Again, some of those dialogues were also geared at agreeing on the future model for elections, but not all of them.

In terms of some personal experiences, you know, Somalia being more insecure than really any other post-conflict country I have worked in, and I think probably more than [many] where the U.S. government has provided support. This was not so unusual.

We had a huge turnover in terms of staff. That included the Chiefs of Party. We went through four. It was, you know, we lived and worked out of the same compound throughout, and so I was a Washington-based program director, but the only person who kind of stayed on the project from beginning to end. And because we had this huge turnover, I served as acting chief of party myself for longer periods of time, and did spend a lot of time in Somalia, personally. And I would say, our Deputy Chief of Party actually also stayed throughout. I mean, he left maybe a year before the end of the second extension of the project, so the sixth year. But, he lived in Somalia throughout, except for the brief period during COVID in 2020.

It was extremely limiting to live and work in Somalia. I mean, you were essentially within the airport compound. But it was a shared large compound, a little bit like a green zone in Iraq, and so it was possible to meet government officials and sometimes NGOs, although it could be complicated for them getting in and out of the airport compound. But like, we really did not have outside of [that], we did not see or operate much out of the Mogadishu International Airport.

And when we were in a compound, the sort of thing for the first year of the project, we did not get out much, and it was even more limiting, because we were the only organization with a few sub-partners in that compound. At least when we moved to the airport compound, then we could meet with UN colleagues, or we could more easily meet government officials traveling in and out. So, it was extremely limiting, and also it was extremely expensive supporting the NIEC. They were in their own compound, maybe not even a kilometer or a mile outside of the airport compound. But nevertheless, in their own compound. And so, any time we traveled to see them, it was extremely expensive, because we traveled with a heavily armed convoy, and had to cross at least two checkpoints into their government compound, where the NIEC, the National Independent Election Commission, was based.

So it was extremely limiting working like this in Somalia, and I think what might be of interest and kind of pertinent now, I would share, for example, a meeting I had with the ambassador and the USAID Director. As I mentioned, the FCDO merged their equivalents, and I think with this latest U.S. administration, one of the ideas behind the closure of USAID was that it would be transferred or merged with the State Department. And so there were differences sometimes in the policy and what we were doing, what USAID was implementing, and what the U.S. government policy was, and I think this election was a very interesting example, because again, I sat in a meeting with a U.S. ambassador who was saying we gave him a briefing on... actually, I had a personal connection, and I asked to provide him with a briefing, because USAID was based in Kenya, we were based in Somalia, and so when I was in Somalia and Mogadishu, and the ambassador had just moved also into the airport compound, I reached out and asked to brief him about our work, told him about the elections we were working on, and what he said is, that doesn't make sense in this situation. There are a few elections in Africa that will matter, and that we can implement, and this is not one. And I did agree with him, I was absolutely [in agreement], but I couldn't voice that at the time, because next to me was sitting [the] USAID Mission Director, I mean, the person controlling my money and the project's money. And so, of course, I couldn't say, "yes, it doesn't make sense," because, obviously, his counterpart sitting next to me would beg to differ, right? They were funding us to do what we were doing.

I do think also that the message was more directed towards the mission director than me, then, but this was an interesting example of that kind of a real-life situation, and I think there's, again, this is an interesting moment in history where we're thinking of USAID and what the impact of its closure was, and of course it was, again, I spent my entire career on USAID-funded projects, and I think it was wrong that it was shut down so abruptly and without much thought, but I do hope that if anything, or if the implementation continues through whatever is left under the State Department, we should, rethink, how we implement these elections, and then more broadly, how we deliver international development, and that there is more of an alignment between the policy and the implementation, because I found myself in this situation in Somalia that we're talking about with elections.

This is a perfect example where it did not align, and that was very hard for us implementers, and again, now that I've kind of explained all the challenges. I'm not even sure. There was a lot that we did on this election, a lot of capacity that we built, but was the universal election, or this at least one person, one-vote election the most realistic option in Somalia's security situation? Probably not. But then not just the security situation, but with, at the time, as we were closing the project, and I was reading my recommendations with Afghanistan experience behind us, and [the] Taliban, any type of election where you were not engaging all of the stakeholders... and I don't want to sound like I'm suggesting that al-Shabaab as a terrorist group should have been at the table, but if you're not talking to all of the stakeholders, and then, as they did in Afghanistan, they just take over, I'm not sure that it made sense. And the situation in Somalia was much worse than it ever was in Afghanistan when we were trying to organize similar elections.

So, in a way, it wasn't a plan not to have a universal election in Somalia, but I can't say that I regret that we did not have them. Again, I'm not sure that that was what Somalia needed at the time. Although, again, just working with the women, with all of the stakeholders on elections, but also, with women who are traditionally disadvantaged, and building up the capacity of the new election commission. All of that made sense. But I think probably had we...had our expectations and plan been a little bit more appropriate for Somalia, something other than the... these universal elections, I think maybe we would have been even more efficient.

That said, it was a really wonderful 6 years, and probably more so for us than our local counterparts, who really went through a lot. But also, I think, learned a lot about elections, should they one day be able to organize them. So, again, I think this is it. I hope I did not skip any major parts, but thank you for the opportunity to talk about Somalia's elections.