

Reflecting on Somali Federalism: Lessons Learned and Future Directions

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Abstract

This article examines the lessons learned from the implementation of federalism in Somalia and explores future directions for strengthening the country's federal governance system. Following the collapse of the Somali central government in 1991, federalism emerged as a political framework intended to address state fragmentation, promote regional autonomy, and facilitate inclusive governance. However, the implementation of federalism has encountered substantial institutional and political challenges, including constitutional ambiguities, disputes over power-sharing, weak institutional capacity, and disagreements concerning resource allocation and security coordination.

Using a qualitative research methodology, this study analyzes constitutional documents, policy reports, academic literature, and governance frameworks related to Somali federalism. The findings indicate that effective federal governance requires constitutional clarity, functional intergovernmental relations, institutional capacity-building, and equitable resource-sharing mechanisms. The study further demonstrates that sustainable federalism depends not only on formal constitutional arrangements but also on political

trust, inclusive governance, and cooperative state-building processes.

The article concludes that although federalism remains a viable mechanism for managing diversity and decentralizing governance in Somalia, its long-term sustainability depends on comprehensive constitutional reform, institutional strengthening, and sustained political cooperation among federal and regional actors. These reforms are critical for advancing political stability, democratic governance, national unity, and sustainable development in Somalia.

Keywords: Federalism, Somalia, Governance, State-building, Decentralization, Constitutional Reform, Intergovernmental Relations.

Introduction

The reconstruction of the Somali state presents one of the most complex institutional engineering challenges in contemporary public law and post-conflict political economy. Following the cataclysmic collapse of the Siad Barre regime in 1991, the Westphalian structures of the Somali Democratic Republic dissolved into prolonged civil warfare, localized clan-based governance, and deep-seated institutional fragmentation (Menkhaus, 2014). The subsequent state-building

paradigm that culminated in the 2012 Provisional Constitution marked a definitive break from the highly centralized, unitary models of the past, formalizing instead a Federal Republic.

In political theory, federalism is framed either as a "coming-together" of historically independent entities pooling sovereignty for mutual security, or a "holding-together" devolutionary strategy to prevent the centrifugal disintegration of a multi-ethnic or deeply divided polity (Stepan, 1999). Somalia fits uniquely into a third, highly volatile category: post-collapse remedial federalism. Here, the adoption of a federal structure was dictated by political necessity during transitional peace conferences notably Arta (2000) and Mbagathi (2004) serving as an essential mechanism to de-escalate clan anxieties, guarantee regional sub-state security, and establish a framework of shared rule and self-rule (Elazar, 1987).

However, fourteen years after its formal codification, the operational reality of Somali federalism reveals a profound divergence between constitutional aspiration and institutional practice. The systemic frictions between the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) based in Mogadishu and the emerging Federal Member States (FMS) Jubaland, Galmudug, South West State, Hirshabelle, and Puntland illustrate the perils of a deferred constitutional settlement.

This article evaluates the structural impediments within the Somali federal matrix. It analyzes how structural ambiguities have turned state-building

into a zero-sum game over fiscal resources, security command, and electoral hegemony. Beyond diagnosing these institutional pathologies, this study outlines the definitive legal and policy shifts required to transition Somalia from a fragile, negotiated settlement into a sustainable, legally codified constitutional democracy.

Literature Review

Scholarly literature on federalism in Somalia highlights the complex nature of state-building in post-conflict societies. Researchers argue that federalism is particularly appropriate for societies characterized by social fragmentation, regional diversity, and historical mistrust of centralized governance structures. In the Somali context, federalism has frequently been viewed as a compromise mechanism capable of balancing local autonomy with national cohesion while reducing fears of political marginalization (Elmi, 2014; Cabdi, 2020).

Several studies suggest that Somalia's adoption of federalism was largely driven by political necessity rather than institutional evolution. Following the collapse of the Somali state, regional administrations emerged with varying degrees of autonomy and administrative authority. Consequently, federalism became a pragmatic mechanism for integrating these regional entities into a unified political framework while preserving Somalia's sovereignty and territorial integrity (Menkhaus, 2014; Abdullahi, 2023).

Other scholars focus on constitutional and institutional challenges affecting Somali federalism. Ambiguities within the Provisional Constitution regarding the division of powers between federal and regional authorities have generated repeated disputes over natural resources, taxation, security coordination, and electoral administration. These constitutional uncertainties have weakened intergovernmental cooperation and contributed to recurring political crises (SIDRA Institute, 2022; Bryden, 2013).

Institutional weakness also represents a recurring theme within the literature. Effective federal governance depends on capable institutions with sufficient administrative expertise, financial resources, and governance capacity. However, Somalia continues to face significant institutional limitations, including weak bureaucratic structures, inadequate infrastructure, and limited fiscal autonomy, all of which undermine governance effectiveness and public trust (Harper, 2012; World Bank, 2022).

Comparative studies of federal systems in post-conflict societies further demonstrate that decentralization can support conflict management, political inclusion, and local governance when supported by strong institutions and legal frameworks. Nonetheless, scholars caution that decentralization without effective coordination mechanisms may also intensify political fragmentation and competition

among political actors (Anderson & McKnight, 2015; Hassan, 2021).

Overall, the literature demonstrates that while federalism presents opportunities for decentralization and reconciliation in Somalia, its long-term success depends heavily on constitutional clarity, institutional maturity, inclusive governance, and sustained political cooperation (International Crisis Group, 2018).

Research Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative research methodology to critically evaluate the structural dynamics, institutional frameworks, and center-periphery power dynamics defining contemporary Somali federalism. Qualitative analysis is highly effective for examining public administration, constitutional design, and institutional operations within fragile, post-conflict environments. By choosing this approach over quantitative frameworks, the study can conduct an in-depth, contextual examination of the complex political processes, historical grievances, and shifting institutional relationships that shape state-building in Somalia (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2018). Rather than treating governance variables as isolated data points, this methodology analyzes how legal texts interact with political realities in a fluid state-building environment.

Systematic Document Analysis

The foundational layer of this research relies on the systematic and critical review of primary legal

texts, legislative instruments, and official policy frameworks that define Somalia's federal matrix (Bowen, 2009). The primary document reviewed is the *Provisional Constitution of the Federal Republic of Somalia (2012)*, with specific emphasis on articles regulating the division of powers, fiscal authorities, and security commands. This primary legal analysis is supplemented by:

- Intergovernmental communiqués and political agreements issued by the National Consultative Council (NCC).
- Sub-national constitutional frameworks and policy strategies from individual Federal Member States (FMS).
- Technical diagnostic assessments, macroeconomic evaluations, and institutional monitoring reports compiled by multilateral institutions, specifically the United Nations and the World Bank (Federal Government of Somalia, 2012; World Bank, 2022).

By cross-referencing these formal legal mandates with operational policy reports, this document analysis uncovers the systemic gaps between formal constitutional theory and practical governance realities, pinpointing areas of institutional overlap and legal ambiguity.

Literature Analysis and Theoretical Synthesis

To ground empirical findings within broader political theory, a comprehensive literature review of peer-reviewed academic publications, institutional monographs, and independent policy

white papers was conducted. This process mapped current scholarly debates surrounding post-conflict institutional engineering, sub-national clan dynamics, and the political economy of state collapse in the Horn of Africa (Menkhaus, 2014; Elmi, 2014). Synthesizing this existing literature helped identify critical policy gaps particularly regarding the lack of formal dispute-resolution mechanisms and provided the theoretical foundation needed to analyze how federalism, decentralization, and state stabilization function in deeply divided societies.

Comparative Institutional Approach

To broaden the study's analytical scope and move beyond localized assumptions, this research uses a comparative political approach (Lijphart, 2012; Watts, 2008). By evaluating the structural trajectories, constitutional crises, and institutional designs of other post-conflict or deeply divided federal states, this study identifies transferable best practices and recurring structural challenges. Integrating comparative analysis ensures that the resulting recommendations are informed by global precedents, offering realistic options for designing sustainable intergovernmental, fiscal, and security frameworks tailored to the Somali context.

Findings and Discussion

Political Cooperation and Trust

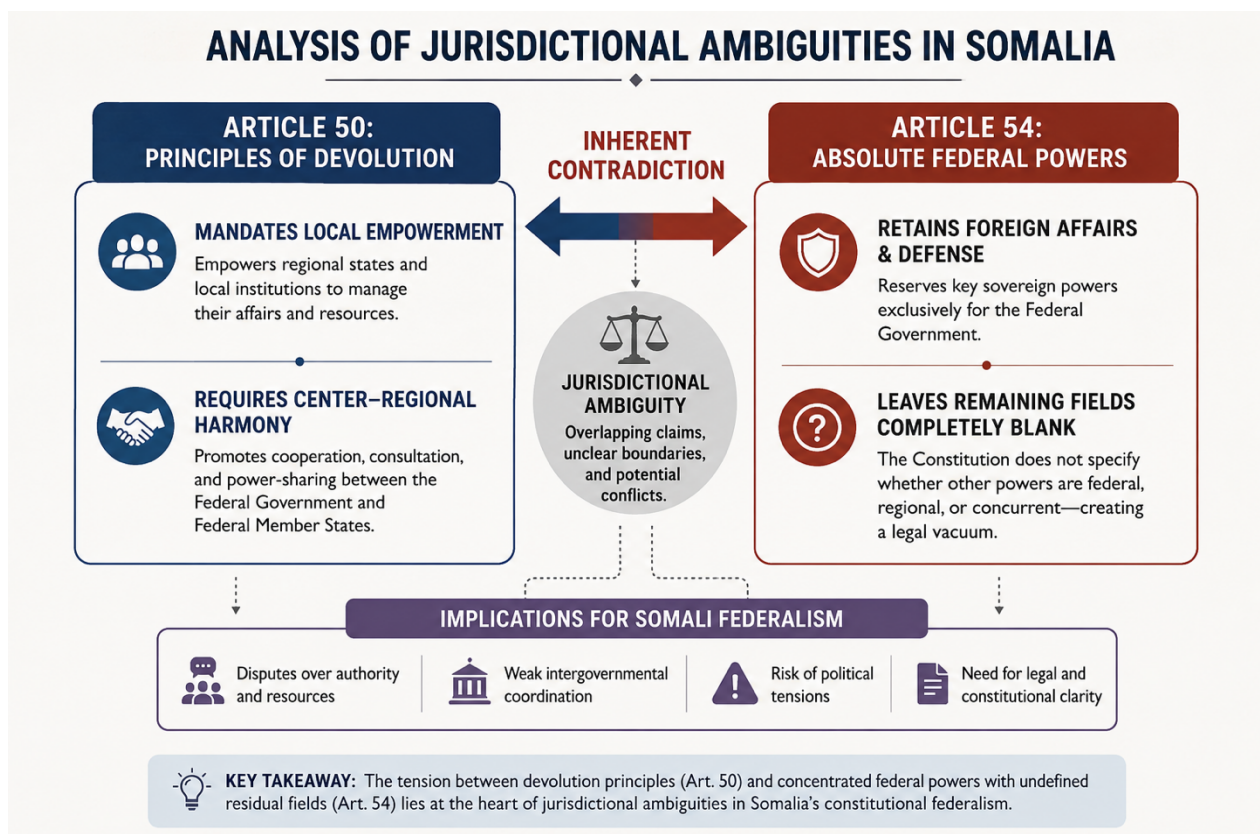
One of the most important lessons derived from Somalia's federal experience is the necessity of political cooperation and trust among governing

institutions. Federal systems inherently depend on continuous dialogue, negotiation, and coordination between federal and regional authorities. However, relations between Somalia's Federal Government and Federal Member States have frequently been characterized by mistrust, political competition, and disputes over authority, thereby weakening governance effectiveness and state-building efforts.

Constitutional Ambiguity

The analysis confirms that the deliberate retention of structural ambiguities within the

2012 Provisional Constitution acts as a primary source of center-periphery conflict. Rather than functioning as a clear legal framework, sections of the constitution serve as political battlegrounds. The most severe manifestation is found in the lack of functional definition between Article 50 (principles of federalism) and Article 54 (allocation of powers). By leaving the jurisdictions of concurrent powers completely undefined, the constitution forces the FGS and FMS into constant litigation and standoffs over revenue collection, electoral design, and security management.



Institutional Capacity Challenges

The study also demonstrates that institutional capacity remains a decisive factor influencing the success of federal governance in Somalia. Weak administrative systems, shortages of technical

expertise, limited infrastructure, and inadequate financial resources have constrained the ability of both federal and regional institutions to effectively deliver public services and implement policy initiatives.

Decentralization and Local Governance

Despite these challenges, the research indicates that decentralization has contributed positively to local governance in certain regions. Regional administrations have, in some cases, improved local security coordination, facilitated reconciliation processes, and enhanced service delivery. This finding supports broader arguments that decentralized governance may increase responsiveness to local community needs.

Future Directions for Somali Federalism

Constitutional Reform

Comprehensive constitutional reform remains essential for strengthening Somalia's federal system. Scholars and policy analysts consistently argue that Somalia's Provisional Constitution contains significant ambiguities regarding the division of powers between the Federal Government and Federal Member States, particularly in areas such as natural resource management, fiscal federalism, security coordination, and electoral administration. These constitutional uncertainties have repeatedly contributed to political tensions, governance deadlocks, and intergovernmental disputes that undermine state-building efforts and institutional effectiveness (Federal Government of Somalia, 2012; SIDRA Institute, 2022).

Research further indicates that constitutional clarity is a fundamental requirement for the successful functioning of federal systems,

especially in post-conflict societies where political trust and institutional capacity remain fragile. Clearly defined constitutional arrangements can reduce overlapping mandates, strengthen accountability, and improve administrative efficiency by establishing predictable governance structures and dispute-resolution mechanisms (Watts, 2008; Lijphart, 2012).

Moreover, comparative studies on federal governance demonstrate that inclusive constitutional reform processes are critical for enhancing political legitimacy and strengthening national cohesion. In Somalia's context, an inclusive constitutional review process involving federal institutions, Federal Member States, civil society organizations, traditional leaders, and community stakeholders could contribute to broader political consensus and increase public confidence in the federal system (Stepan, 1999; Elazar, 1987).

Several scholars also emphasize that constitutional reform should not only focus on legal clarification but also address broader governance challenges related to decentralization, fiscal arrangements, and intergovernmental cooperation. Effective constitutional reforms may therefore contribute to strengthening democratic governance, improving resource-sharing frameworks, and promoting long-term political stability in Somalia (Menkhaus, 2014; International Crisis Group, 2018; Anderson, 2008).

Strengthening Intergovernmental Relations (IGR)

The durability of Somali federalism relies on moving away from personal, elite-driven political bargaining and establishing formalized, permanent channels for intergovernmental coordination. Currently, center-periphery engagements are predominantly reactive, occurring in response to severe legislative or security gridlocks. To stabilize this dynamic, Somalia must institutionalize statutory mechanisms for ongoing dialogue, joint policy-making, and structural conflict resolution.

This requires establishing a legally recognized, permanent Intergovernmental Relations Secretariat. This body would function independently of changing political leadership to manage routine administrative synchronization between the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) and Federal Member States (FMS). By normalizing statutory intergovernmental forums across sectoral lines such as education, infrastructure, and internal security the state can handle policy disputes through institutional processes before they expand into wider constitutional crises.

Fiscal Federalism and Strategic Resource-Sharing

A federal framework cannot function effectively when sub-national administrative duties are separated from actual revenue-generation capabilities. The current fiscal configuration leaves the FMS bearing the direct operational costs of localized public service delivery and basic

administration, while primary revenue collections specifically customs duties at key maritime hubs and international direct budgetary support remain concentrated at the center.

To resolve this imbalance, Somalia must design and enforce a transparent, formula-based Fiscal Equalization and Revenue-Sharing Framework. This system should replace unpredictable political cash transfers with a structured allocation model based on objective, verifiable criteria such as regional population size, localized infrastructure deficits, and poverty indices. Furthermore, formalizing natural resource governance through clear exploitation and derivation rules is vital to transform natural resource management from a source of political conflict into a predictable pillar of national macroeconomic stability.

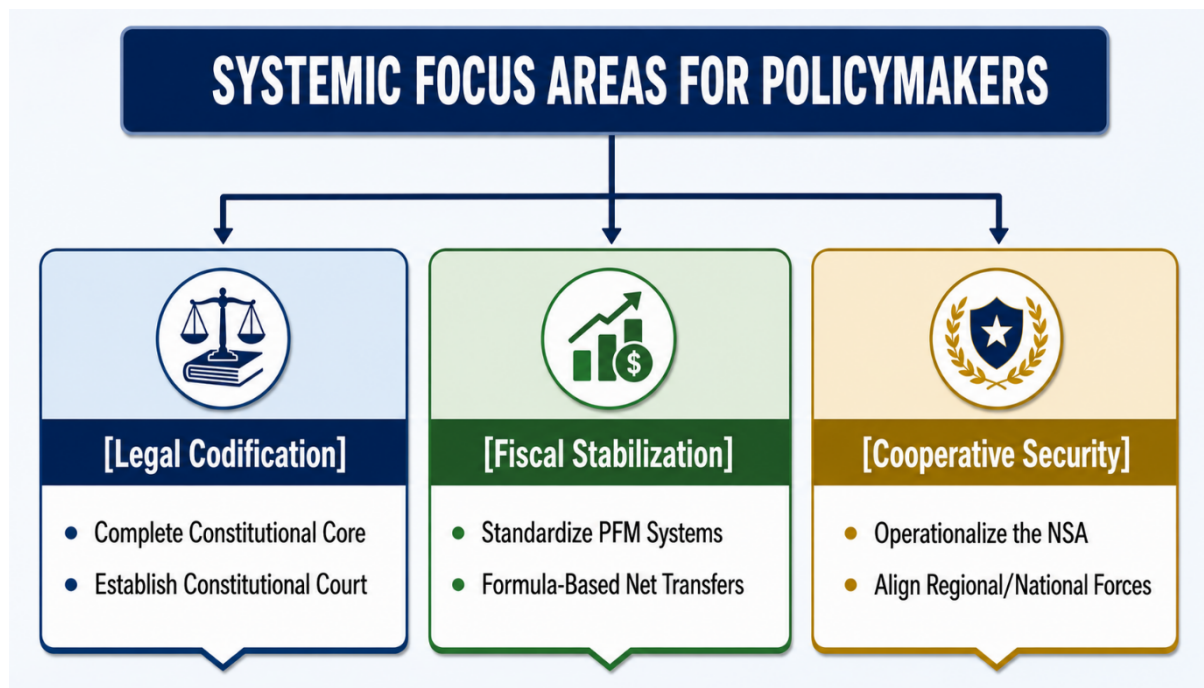
Strategic Institutional Capacity Building

The operational success of decentralized governance is ultimately limited by the technical and administrative capacity of its institutions. Decades of structural fragmentation have left both central ministries and regional bureaucracies with varying levels of technical proficiency, fragile public financial management (PFM) systems, and thin civil service cadres.

Addressing these challenges requires targeted investments in institutional capacity stabilization. This involves standardizing professional civil service training, deploying uniform, automated financial monitoring systems across all levels of

government, and integrating digital governance technologies to improve transparency. Enhancing bureaucratic competence and public financial accountability helps sub-national administrations execute policy decisions effectively, while building the public trust and international donor confidence necessary to attract long-term development capital.

SYSTEMIC FOCUS AREAS FOR POLICYMAKERS



Policy Implications

The structural realities identified in this study point to several definitive pathways for contemporary state-building and governance reform in Somalia:

- **Prioritizing Structural Legal Clarification:** National and regional policymakers must view finishing the constitutional review process as a foundational requirement for stability, rather than a secondary goal. Clearly defining exclusive versus concurrent jurisdictions is essential to

prevent routine administrative actions from escalating into gridlocks over sovereignty.

- **Insulating Bureaucracy from Political Volatility:** The execution of critical development portfolios, public health initiatives, and infrastructure projects must be protected from high-level executive standoffs. This requires building independent, rules-bound institutions that run smoothly regardless of political disputes between capital and regional leaders.

- **Recalibrating International Technical Assistance:** International development partners and multilateral donors should pivot away from short-term, politically driven stabilization funding. Instead, resources should target structural institutional architecture, sub-national financial compliance, and long-term macro-fiscal capacity.
- **Normalizing Inclusive Political Reconciliation:** Federal structures cannot succeed through legal drafting alone; they require a baseline of political trust. Continuous, bottom-up reconciliation initiatives are needed to manage traditional clan anxieties, protect minority representations, and build broad civic consensus around the federal model.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides a comprehensive institutional mapping of Somali center-periphery relations, its analytical boundaries must be noted. First, the research relies primarily on secondary data, including published public law, policy white papers, academic literature, and institutional reports from multilateral organizations. The absence of primary empirical fieldwork, widespread sub-national surveys, or structured interviews with active field administrators limits the integration of informal, localized political dynamics that occur outside formal state structures.

Second, the political and security landscape in Somalia remains highly fluid. Ongoing negotiations within the National Consultative Council (NCC), changing security frontlines, and evolving legislative architectures mean that specific institutional arrangements and center-periphery dynamics may shift rapidly, requiring continuous empirical tracking and updated analytical models.

Future Research Directions

Future research should focus on the practical implementation of federalism within Somalia's governance institutions. Studies involving policymakers, civil society actors, and local communities may provide deeper insights into governance challenges and opportunities. Additional research is also needed concerning fiscal federalism, security coordination, and local governance systems within Somalia's evolving federal framework.

Recommendations

The findings of this study suggest that the long-term success of federalism in Somalia depends upon a combination of constitutional clarity, institutional strengthening, fiscal cooperation, and political consensus-building. While significant progress has been made since the adoption of the federal system, persistent challenges continue to hinder effective governance and state-building. Accordingly, several policy recommendations are proposed.

First, Somalia should accelerate the completion of the constitutional review process to address existing ambiguities concerning the distribution of powers and responsibilities between the Federal Government and Federal Member States. Particular attention should be given to resource-sharing arrangements, security governance, and mechanisms for intergovernmental dispute resolution. The establishment of a Constitutional Court would further strengthen constitutional interpretation and safeguard the rule of law.

Second, policymakers should institutionalize formal intergovernmental relations through legally recognized coordination mechanisms capable of facilitating dialogue, negotiation, and conflict resolution. Regular consultations between federal and regional authorities would contribute to trust-building, policy coherence, and political stability.

Third, a transparent and equitable fiscal federalism framework should be developed to govern revenue generation, resource allocation, and intergovernmental transfers. Formula-based fiscal transfers, standardized public financial management systems, and independent oversight mechanisms would help reduce political competition over resources while promoting accountability and economic cooperation.

Fourth, substantial investments should be directed toward strengthening institutional capacity at both federal and regional levels. Administrative professionalism, digital

governance systems, technical expertise, and public service delivery mechanisms require continuous development to enhance governance effectiveness and institutional resilience.

Fifth, inclusive political dialogue and national reconciliation efforts should remain central to Somalia's federalization process. Sustainable federal governance requires mutual trust among political actors, cooperation among institutions, and meaningful participation by civil society, traditional elders, women, and youth groups.

Sixth, local government institutions should be empowered through administrative decentralization, fiscal support, and capacity-building programs. Strong local governments can improve service delivery, increase citizen participation, and strengthen democratic accountability at the grassroots level.

Seventh, civic education initiatives should be expanded to improve public understanding of federalism and decentralization. Greater awareness of constitutional rights, governance structures, and citizen responsibilities can strengthen democratic participation and reduce political misunderstandings.

Eighth, security-sector coordination should be strengthened through the operationalization of the National Security Architecture (NSA) and the alignment of federal and regional security forces under a coherent national framework. Effective security cooperation remains essential for political stability and state consolidation.

Ninth, international partners should continue supporting Somalia's governance reform agenda through technical assistance, institutional development, and long-term capacity-building programs. External support should prioritize sustainable institution-building rather than short-term political interventions.

Finally, policymakers and academic institutions should promote evidence-based policymaking through increased investment in governance research, policy analysis, and data collection. Future studies on fiscal federalism, decentralization, local governance, and intergovernmental relations can provide valuable insights for improving the effectiveness and sustainability of Somalia's federal system.

In summary, the future success of Somali federalism will largely depend on completing constitutional reforms, strengthening intergovernmental cooperation, establishing transparent fiscal arrangements, enhancing institutional capacity, and fostering inclusive political dialogue. These reforms collectively provide a pathway toward a more stable, effective, and sustainable federal state.

Conclusion

Somalia's adoption of federalism represents a major component of its broader state-building and political stabilization process. While federalism has created opportunities for decentralization, political inclusion, and regional participation, its implementation has also exposed significant

constitutional, institutional, and political challenges.

The study demonstrates that successful federal governance depends on constitutional clarity, institutional effectiveness, equitable resource-sharing, and sustained political cooperation. Without these foundational elements, federalism risks becoming a source of political fragmentation rather than national unity.

Ultimately, the future success of Somali federalism will depend on the country's ability to strengthen governance institutions, refine constitutional arrangements, and promote cooperative political engagement among all levels of government. Through inclusive reforms and sustained political commitment, Somalia can transform federalism into a durable framework capable of supporting peace, stability, and sustainable development.

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