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# Finding shelter in Mogadishu: challenges for vulnerable groups

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Shelter provision in East African Cities: Understanding  
Transformative Politics for Inclusive Cities: City Briefing

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## About the project

This research project is a comparative analysis of systems of shelter provision in three East African cities: Nairobi, Hawassa and Mogadishu. It is funded by UKAid's East Africa Research Fund and is identifying policy-relevant, locally-driven solutions to improve shelter for low-income women, men and vulnerable groups. The programme is led by IIED in partnership with SDDirect, Tana, SDI-Kenya and Econvalue. More information can be found here: <https://www.iied.org/shelter-provision-east-african-cities-understanding-transformative-politics-for-inclusive-cities> or contact: Lucy Earle, [lucy.earle@iied.org](mailto:lucy.earle@iied.org)

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Tana Copenhagen is a development consulting firm based in Copenhagen with offices in Nairobi. We specialise in governance, peace and stabilisation, and private sector development. Our geographical focus is on Africa, the Middle East and Asia.

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## Contents

<b>Key Findings</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Summary</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
Vulnerability and access to housing	3
<b>Critical Issues</b>	<b>4</b>
Navigating informal systems to access shelter and services	4
Formal systems do not address the needs of vulnerable groups	5
Additional challenges facing vulnerable groups: the need for inclusive services	6
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>6</b>
Moving beyond reliance on personal networks and community charity	6
<b>References</b>	<b>7</b>

## Key Findings

- The Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) must ensure the constitutional review process addresses the issues faced by vulnerable groups such as female-headed households, people living with disabilities, and young single men in accessing safe housing and services.
- The Benadir Regional Administration (BRA) needs to involve these groups and respond to their particular needs in their roadmap for durable solutions for Mogadishu's informal settlements. This could include initiatives for safe shelter particularly tailored for women, youth, people living with disabilities, and young single men.
- The BRA's settlement management guidelines (currently under development) should respond to the vulnerabilities of these groups living in the settlements, with a special focus on safety. This may include developing accountable complaints mechanisms that provide safe spaces where people can report incidents and access justice and protection.
- The international community, including NGOs, the UN, and donors must increase their focus on the situation of youth- and female-headed households, young single men, and people living with disabilities in informal settlements. This means funding and developing targeted initiatives that take into account the specific challenges faced by these groups.

## Summary

Access to land and shelter in Mogadishu is governed by a complex system of formal and informal mechanisms that essentially prevent particularly vulnerable groups from accessing decent housing. Alongside single, widowed, divorced women, female-headed households and people living with disabilities (PLWD), young single men often have no choice but to find housing in the city's informal settlements. Here, access to shelter is largely dependent on personal connections, especially for these groups, who are often poor. However, while women and PLWD can rely on charity and community mobilisation, young single men rarely have the right connections and when they do find shelter often remain isolated. In addition to challenges in finding shelter, all three groups face discrimination accessing services, notably basic sanitation.

## Introduction

### Vulnerability and access to housing

This research report outlines how three groups of particularly vulnerable people who receive no external support navigate the challenges they face finding shelter and living in Mogadishu's informal settlements. It contributes to ongoing discussions on how to make durable solutions *inclusive* for all informal settlement residents in Mogadishu and is of relevance to local decision-makers, humanitarian organisations and donors.

When seeking shelter in Mogadishu, the biggest discriminating factor is wealth. Anyone who cannot afford property or rent can be considered vulnerable, because they have limited options and most likely have to find shelter in the city's informal settlements or poorer neighbourhoods. IDPs make up the majority of informal settlement residents, but the city's poor also reside in these areas for a variety of reasons: affordability of shelter, access to services, and security. Within these two groups, there are cross-sectional categories of vulnerable people: female- and youth-headed households, persons living with disabilities (PWLD), and a further, and perhaps surprising, category: young single men. Somalia's patriarchal society limits women's rights and opportunities to access decent housing. However, young men often carry the stigma of causing trouble or being likely to join the ranks of al-Shabaab, and so may be denied access to shelter. Meanwhile, people living with disabilities find that the poor infrastructure in the settlements does not cater to their special needs. During in-depth interviews with vulnerable persons from these categories across three informal settlements in Mogadishu, different ways of accessing housing emerged:

- **Single/widowed/divorced women and female-headed households** mentioned receiving assistance with building materials from humanitarian agencies, building the shelter themselves with relatives, being given temporary shelter by a charitable neighbour, a relative or by the settlement manager
- **Young men and youth-headed households** mentioned receiving assistance with building materials from humanitarian agencies and squatting in government buildings
- **People living with disabilities** mentioned living on public land and in IDP settlements, and receiving help from relatives or community members to build their shelter

While all these categories of vulnerable people are dependent on external support, whether from relatives/community or humanitarian organisations, young single men seem to be the most isolated from the personal networks that can help to secure housing.

PWLD make up a group of residents that is especially disadvantaged in all areas of social and economic life in the city. In all housing categories assessed, consideration for the needs of people with physical disabilities is almost non-existent. Girls and women with a disability are additionally challenged due to the patriarchal nature of the Somali society. Although some agencies offering support to IDPs do consider disability, because women and girls are particularly marginalised within the settlements, they may not be able to access the support offered. Some IDPs with disabilities have banded together in one settlement for security and mutual support.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Special Group IDP Settlement. *Informal Settlement Manager Training Report*. Tana Copenhagen, May 2016.

## Critical Issues

### Navigating informal systems to access shelter and services

Somali society is governed by a combination of customary law (Xeer) and religious law (Shari'a). Both are very powerful institutions but intervene at different levels and in some instances contradict each other. As a consequence, women are significantly discriminated against in terms of access to shelter and services. Shari'a stipulates inheritance rights for women, while Xeer often circumvents these rights and gives greater credence to men's inheritance claims. The law of the land is anchored in Shari'a, but issues of integrity and a poor grasp of the law also disadvantage women caught up in inheritance disputes.<sup>2</sup> Xeer does not only put women at a disadvantage: it favours majority clans, making it difficult for minority clans and certain ethnic groups (e.g. Bantu and people of Arab origin) to assert their rights.

Patriarchal values have wider implications for women, as they create a system of inequality in many aspects of society that limits women's access to shelter. Women are very dependent on men to acquire property, rent housing, or even find temporary shelter – as several women stated during semi-structured field interviews, *“Women can't fight as aggressively for their right to land as men can”*. They have significantly fewer economic opportunities that would enable them to afford housing by themselves; they also have fewer of the personal connections necessary to acquire housing than men.

Women in Hodan district (see map below) said that when trying to find housing, they first assess the security situation in a given camp, because *“being a single woman means you are in danger and it is not easy for you to settle in a place if you are not sure to what extent you can rely on its security.”* They must then use their local connections to contact the settlement elders and Informal Settlement Manager (ISM).

When seeking shelter in the settlements, young men have to present a guarantor before being allowed to move in. Finding a guarantor can often prove difficult, as the guarantor is responsible for them in case an incident occurs. It is especially difficult to be accepted into a camp or settlement for IDPs with no local family or clan ties. A group of young men from Kaxda district reported that they experience discrimination from the Informal Settlement Managers<sup>3</sup> (ISMs), who often don't consider them as “vulnerable” and even sometimes require them to front some money before they are allowed into the settlement. When they do find somebody to vouch for them and are permitted to settle, they will often be relegated to disadvantaged areas on the outskirts of the settlement. The settlement residents see young men as a security threat, especially as the houses are made of plastic and they fear that these youths can easily commit burglaries. Another perception is that young men abuse drugs, which further reduces their chance of finding shelter.

Furthermore, young men are excluded from the settlement community's social and political gatherings as they tend to be away at work or are not believed to have an interest in such gatherings. Nor are they represented in camp committees, which prevents them from bringing their challenges to the settlement leadership and increases their sense of isolation.

A common challenge that both women and young men face points to a key element of Somali society: rumours and reputation. Young men suffer from a negative stereotype based on experiences and stories

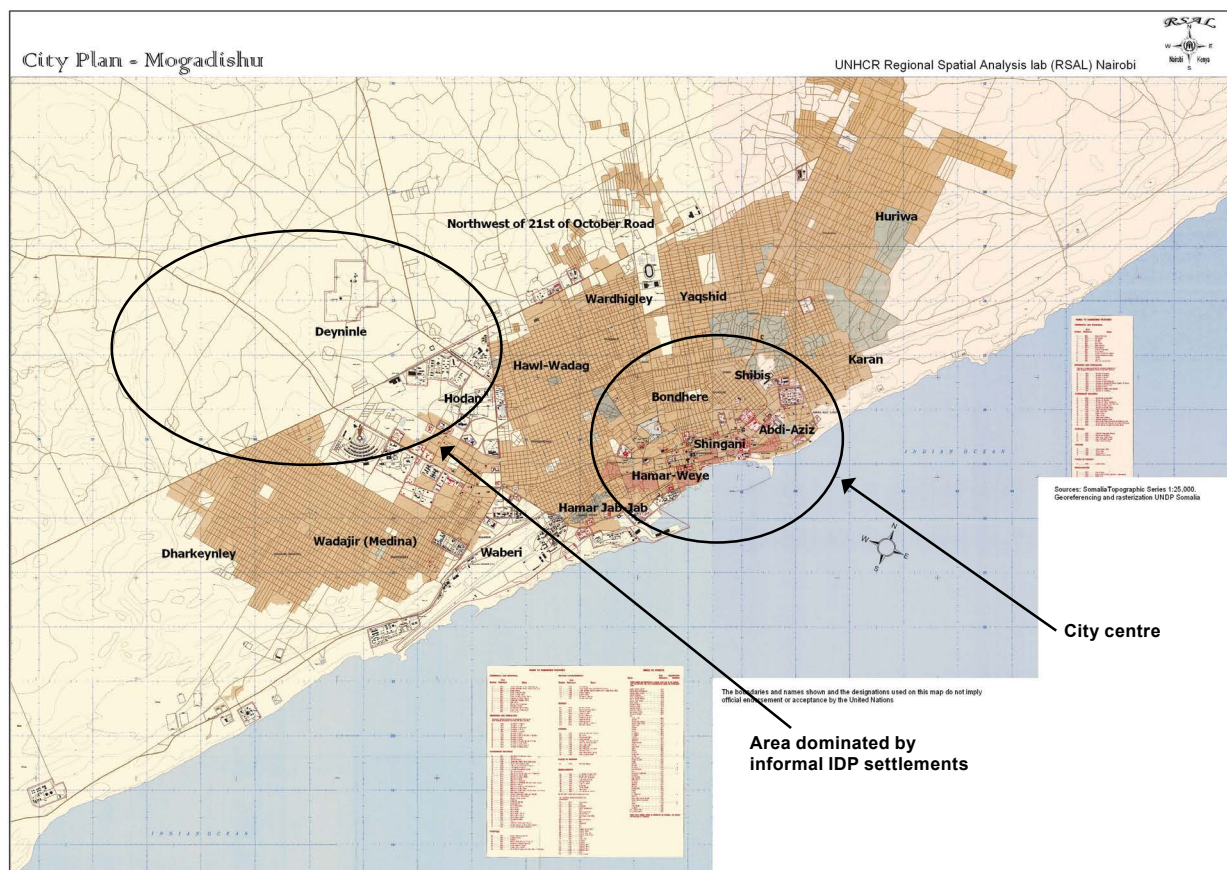
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<sup>2</sup> C. Kamau, C. Bonnet, M. Mohamoud and E. Bryld, *“Accessing land and shelter in Mogadishu: A city governed by an uneven mix of formal and informal practices”*, IIED and Tana, January 2019

<sup>3</sup> ISMs have de facto control over Mogadishu's informal settlements, and have done for a number of years. They operate in a vacuum as the government is not present in the settlements and does not take charge of management or service provision. ISMs can be self-appointed or nominated by their community. Often, they have powerful connections to the landlords that own the land on which the settlements are located, or they are an IDP/poor local resident who, through a long-standing presence in a given settlement, has won the trust and credibility of the community. The ISMs maintain their position by providing basic services such as access to land/shelter and security to new settlement residents. They are controversial figures in the government's eyes, as some have a reputation for being exploitative towards settlement residents.

told within settlement communities that then give them a bad reputation. Women likewise stated, “*Rumours and accusations against single women are common and widely held within IDP settlements. If settlers in the camp see a single woman having a friendly conversation with a man, they believe that she is having an intimate relation with him and they spread false allegations about her*”. This can significantly threaten her place in the community and the settlement.

Figure 1. Map of Mogadishu’s districts



Source: UNHCR with Tana additions (<http://bit.ly/2W3cx8t>)

## Formal systems do not address the needs of vulnerable groups

Formal government institutions are largely absent from the process of accessing housing in the informal settlements. Almost all the informal settlement residents interviewed reported that they never see or interact with local authorities, and the general sentiment is that formal government is unable to and/or uninterested in providing solutions for the IDPs and urban poor.

For women especially, the biggest issue with the absence of formal institutions in the settlements is security: those living in settlements far away from police presence feel very unsafe at night. This is another example of how community or informal institutions step in to fill the vacuum of formal authorities: some settlements organise their own surveillance patrols at night, and women arrange to go out in groups when they have to relieve themselves at night. Yet, people in situations of intersectional vulnerability – e.g. a disabled single woman from a minority clan who is also an IDP - may be left out of these initiatives as they have not been welcomed into the settlement by their neighbours.

It should be noted that there is a great variation in women's sense of security in the different settlements. There are a few examples where the settlement community cooperates with local police, who are in contact with the ISM and camp committee to improve security, and this helps women feel more secure. However, in the majority of cases when women report feeling relatively safe, it is thanks to self-organising.

## Additional challenges facing vulnerable groups: the need for inclusive services

For vulnerable people, one area that needs urgent attention is related to services, specifically access to latrines. Nearly all women speak about the danger they face when using the few and overcrowded latrines, and most of the people interviewed acknowledge that latrines are inaccessible and/or completely inadequate for PLWD to use. During a social mapping exercise in which a group of women were asked to draw their settlement on a piece of paper, they explained that if a female-headed household has a latrine in their compound<sup>4</sup>, the head of the household will let neighbouring families use it, giving privileged access to other women. Carrying out the same exercise with young single men showed that this in turn discriminates them, as they are often living on the outskirts of a settlement, far away from a public latrine and without one on their plot. They will therefore be denied entry to privately-owned latrines, whether female- or male-owned, because they are often suspected of attacking women.

People living with disability in the informal settlements have “no options”, and their numbers are increasing due to terrorist attacks in the city. With one exception, none of the interviewed described receiving support from NGOs or local government and rely entirely on their relatives. When the family is too poor to provide assistance, the community leaders and members sometimes step in. However, one man said that the ISMs may favour having disabled persons in the community:

*“It is not harder for the disabled to get somewhere to live because managers of the camps in the neighbourhood prefer giving plots to disabled people as they believe that humanitarian agencies will assist IDP camps if disabled people are residing in it.”*

## Conclusion

### Moving beyond reliance on personal networks and community charity

The systems governing access to shelter in Mogadishu are unpredictable. Having a broad personal network with connections to powerful groups is the best route to secure housing for the urban poor. For vulnerable populations living in informal settlements, this is even more crucial, as social capital is often the only kind they have. However, women, young men, and PLWD are often in a position where they do not have access to a strong network to the same extent as adult married men. In these situations, the community can step in and provide support or charity to people in need. Female-headed households with young children and disabled persons are more likely to receive this kind of help from the settlement leadership or the community than young single men. The latter are not usually considered “vulnerable” by the community, NGOs, or government. Women form support systems among each other for childcare and protection, since virtually no assistance is available. However, women and single men are also more exposed to prejudice and slandering by the community, which can put their access to housing at risk.

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<sup>4</sup> In the informal settlements, a “compound” refers to a small plot on which there is one or several small huts or “rooms”, usually behind a fence made of sticks and plastic.



Efforts are underway to find durable solutions for the residents of Mogadishu's informal settlements<sup>5</sup>. At this stage, it is crucial for policymakers to include the perspectives of the settlements' most vulnerable groups, who often are not invited to the table to voice the particular challenges they face. NGOs and service providers should also strive to support a participatory process when assessing needs in the settlements, with attention being given to female-headed households, PLWD, and young single men.

To achieve the above, there are specific actions that both the government and the international community can take. The voices of the most vulnerable must reach the FGS through the BRA, which could lead a consultative process of data gathering among these groups to bring their issues and concerns to the forefront. This data will be valuable at the local level for the BRA to structure its durable solutions agenda around the needs of the most at-risk residents. This agenda could incorporate building inclusive shelter, making settlements safer, and potentially cooperating with innovative service providers to create adapted solutions for basic service provision. In addition, while developing Settlement Management Guidelines, the BRA should focus on creating a management system that is accountable to *everyone* residing in the informal settlements (e.g. through accountable and safe complaints mechanisms, inclusive settlement committees, etc.). For its part, the international community should commit to raising awareness about and funds for the improvement of living conditions for vulnerable populations in informal/IDP settlements.

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<sup>5</sup> In January 2019, the Benadir Regional Administration (BRA) launched the IDP Policy, focused on making the settlements safer, providing better services, and reducing the risk of eviction by finding land on which the residents can settle. Furthermore, the BRA is currently developing Settlement Management Guidelines to make settlement management more transparent and accountable towards all settlement residents, including the most vulnerable.

This city briefing presents findings from research on access to shelter and services in Mogadishu, Somalia, focusing specifically on vulnerabilities associated with gender and disability. It is part of a three-city study in East Africa also covering Nairobi, Kenya and Hawassa, Ethiopia. Guided by political economy analysis, the two-year research project investigated why and how city dwellers make certain shelter choices, and generated recommendations to improve access to adequate shelter and basic services for the most vulnerable urban residents.



## Project Materials

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**Access to land and shelter;  
Vulnerable urban populations**

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*Keywords:*

Accountability; Vulnerability; Housing;  
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