



Puntland  
Development &  
Research Center

PDRCTalks

# REPORT

TOPIC

**Episodic Efforts to Develop the Somali Language,  
Impact of State Collapse and the Endeavours to  
Reverse it.**

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**Episodic Efforts to Develop the Somali Language,  
Impact of State Collapse and the Endeavours to Reverse it.**

**Speakers**

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**Moderator**

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## BACKGROUND TO THE PDRCTALKS

In March 2019, the Puntland Development and Research Centre (PDRC) initiated a monthly event dubbed PDRCTalks. This event is an initiative to spread ideas, messages, and awareness on issues related to the betterment of Somalia. These issues cover topics ranging from governance, democratization, peace, and development, which are the key PDRC's focus areas.

PDRCTalks is an interactive platform in which prominent Somali scholars, veteran politicians and/or seasoned civil servants are hosted once a month to serve as guest speakers and to deliver an expert presentation at a uniquely themed talk-event at PDRC. PDRCTalks aim to spark conversation within the Somali community and, through this useful dialogue, change the attitudes and lives of Somalis. Social media is used to spread the messages throughout Somali communities living in the diaspora and within the country through live streams. PDRCTalks has been received well and has featured prominent figures in Somali society to bring to the fore a multi-faceted number of topics in politics, economics, social issues as well as cultural themes.

PDRCTalks is a value-addition component to PDRC's vision as a solutions-oriented organization that prides itself in offering useful tools to bring about peaceful coexistence and economic development for and by all Somalis.

### PDRCTalks - A Cultural and Language Aspect

As part of its implementation of The Road to Sustainable Peace project in Puntland, Galmudug and Somaliland, PDRC held its first PDRCTalks events under theme "Episodic Efforts to Develop the Somali Language, Impact of State Collapse and the Endeavours to reverse it". This prestigious event was held on the evening of 24th October 2020 brought together Dr Mohamed Dahir Afrah, an author, literary scholar and play wright as Guest Speaker, Ahmed Farah Ali (Idaajaa) a renowned literary scholar and Yusuf Shaa'ir, a poet as co-panellists and presenters.

The Somali language belongs to the Cushitic branch of the Afro-Asiatic language family. Despite several regional dialects, it is understood throughout the country and is an official language. The second official language is Arabic, which is spoken in the coastal towns. Owing to Somalia's colonial past, many older generations have a good command of English and Italian, which, in addition to Somali, were used at the country's colleges and universities. In 1973, Somalia adopted an official orthography based on the Latin alphabet. Until then, Somali had been an unwritten language.

### Organization of the Event

This PDRCTalks event was held on 24th October 2020 at the PDRC compound, Garowe, Puntland State of Somalia. The event included a lecture by the keynote speaker Dr Mohamed Dahir Afrah, accompanied by presentations by Ahmed Farah Ali (Idaajaa) and Yusuf Shaa'ir as co-panellists who supported the guest speaker in the panel discussion and audience Q&A interaction. The event's significance was also boosted by live State TV coverage and other social media outlets. The event was fully backed by a diverse audience due to its unique importance to both the local and diaspora Somali communities.

The event was attended by more than 250 participants, drawn from the government, civil society groups, human rights and advocacy groups, local government, women, youth politicians, and senior citizens who braced the chilly cold evening of 24th October to participate in this crucial event.

The event was streamed live on Facebook with live updates on Twitter to reach a cross-section of audiences all over the world. PDRCTalks prides itself on giving ample time to the guest speaker, panellists and contributors, and, most importantly, the audience to exchange ideas, learn from each other, and further to deepen their understanding of the subject of discussion.

### The objective of the PDRCTalks

The main objectives of the PDRCTalks were:

- a) To bring together the different cultural backbone structures and leaders of the community;
- b) To collect ideas, share experiences and disseminate information for developmental progress.
  
- c) Besides, the sub-themes of the event included:
- d) The Role of Literature (poems) in Somali Life; Especially in the areas of Peace and Social Cohesion.
- e) b) The history of Somali Literature: From its Golden Age to its Decline.

### Introductory remarks

The event was moderated by Amina Abdulqadir, PDRC's gender focal person who thanked the participants that ranged from government officials at Puntland and federal level, elders, scholars, media, youth and women. In her brief on the theme of the event, she elucidated the importance of literature to the community, towards state and peacebuilding and how it was important to understand how the collapse of the Somali state impacted the Somali language which was the key focus on the day's event. Sheikh Yaqub Abdalla recited Quranic verses after which he expounded on the link between language, the history of prophet Adam (PBUH) and how he acquired his linguistic skills and Prophet (PBUH) Mohammed's affinity to poets.

PDRC Executive director, Ali Farah Ali, in his opening remarks, welcomed everyone to the monthly PDRCTalks event. He expressed his appreciation to the guest speaker and panellists for gracing the event. The director noted that the platform provides the opportunity to the citizens, scholars and experts to discuss a selected theme.

In his remarks, Senator Abdirizak Osman Jurile, the chairman of PDRC's board of advisors indicated that the establishment of PDRC was to bring together experienced and knowledge-based themes and link them to the citizens to create a community where people learn from each other and contribute to the bitterness' of Somalia as a whole. He noted that all the previous keynote speakers to the PDRCTalks all shared the Somali language despite presenting different topics. He said that he expected that at the end of the event, the keynote speaker and panellists will have explained how the Somali language had been orphaned and how conflicts had impacted the language.

## THE KEYNOTE SPEECH

In his remarks, the keynote speaker Dr Mohamed Dahir Afrah expressed his gratitude to be accorded such an opportunity to dissect the Somali language noting that it is one of the oldest languages in the 19th and 20th Century as agreed by anthropologists worldwide. He noted that PDRC needed to be added on the list of mother tongue defenders and appreciated the efforts by the Puntland government to protect the Somali language by passing the appropriate legislation



and was optimistic that its enforcement would be swift and help stem the decline of the language. The keynote speaker indicated that it was impossible to discuss the history of the Somali language in one sitting including the urbanisation and state-building process of Somalia from the 20th century to the 21st that have inadvertently impacted the development and growth of the language.

### Value of language

Here the guest speaker says that one can ask why does the Somali language need constant support and development? In an attempt to answer this question, the mentioned 7 reasons:

- The Somali language is a symbol of Somali's existence and national identity.
- Language is the key to knowledge; knowledge is key to development and development is key to a good life.
- The Somali language is the repository of the Somali nation.
- It is the bond that can hold the Somali identity.
- Language is the only tool that can make all Somalis aware and interact with each other.
- Language is the essence of patriotism.
- To protect against the perishing of the Somali language.

He indicated that the process to preserve and maintain the Somali language passed through four different stages which would be the core of his presentation. These stages were: the search for a written Somali language, implementation and development, reversal and drawing back and the final revival and salvation stages.

## The Search for a written Somali Language (end of 19th century - 1960's)

Before this stage, it is worth mentioning that famous religious leaders among them Sheikh Haji Ali Abdirahman (Majerteen), Sheikh Aways Al Qadiri, Sheikh Haji Ahmed Gabyoow and Sheikh Mohamed Abdalla Hassan used to write Somali religious notes using Arabic writing. A stage that was critical on providing literature in the Somali language different from the religious ones. Besides, the British colonial power in their attempt to understand and take over the region wrote about the Somali language in Latin.

Many prominent personalities independently put enormous efforts to put the Somali language in writing. According to research, the most advanced written form seems to be the one of Osman Yusuf Kenadid in 1920, followed by the versions of Shire Jama, Muse Galaal, and Mohamed Hashi among others. These different scholars were all instrumental in this time-consuming process that brought about three different scripts of the language which were:

- a) Original Somali script
- b) Latin script
- c) Arabic script

## The Implementation and Development Stage (1970 - 1980)

This was a critical period for the Somali language as the language was taken seriously and numerous efforts to entrench the language in a society where it was used not only for speaking but also for writing and recognized as the Somali's official language in place of the foreign languages that were being used both in government and learning institutions.

This period can be described as the dawn of the language, its artistic and literary creativity. The greatest efforts towards the Somali language, literature was undertaken by the Somali people and their government. These efforts were also driven by the announcement of the official text of Somali language.

During this period, several notable steps were achieved with these nine being the most significant ones:

- The decision to put the language in writing, which took almost 70 years was implemented.
- The adoption of Somali as the national language for both government and learning institutions.
- Robust and massive awareness campaigns conducted all over the country reaching even far-flung, remote and inaccessible areas encouraging all Somalis to strive to have the ability to read and write in the Somali language. Level of literacy moved from less than 10% to 65% after these campaigns, the efforts were acknowledged by UNESCO who awarded Somalia a medal.
- A national campaign to develop a glossary and enriched vocabulary of the Somali language.
- Establishment of national institutions responsible for the development of Somali writing such as Somali Language Committee and the Academy for Culture.

- A nation-wide awareness campaign on the value of the mother tongue.
- Writing and record-keeping were adopted in government leading to the establishment of the Somali Library Centre (SLC), which supported the growth of literature particularly poems and songs which had a lot of government goodwill.
- From the 1960s to 1980's the Somali language became the most creative through literature, poems, songs, and other performing arts.
- The study of Somali language reached a level where the National University can deliver degree courses.
- Finally, one of the greatest achievements of this era was the recognition of the Somali language in the world where it is now taught in universities and used in the media.

### Reversal and Drawback Stage (1985-1995)

This was one of the worst periods in the development of the Somali language as this stage was precipitated by the destruction in the country which led to the destruction of academic institutions (Schools and Universities) and government institutions. These two institutions were critical for the maintenance and development of the language. Furthermore, media and creativity also died with the fall of the government as there were no more publications, theatres and language resources. The Somali language which was an instrument of inclusivity was ignored, with each one considering his or her dialect as superior, and the youth were alienated against the Somali language as it was not an international language that could enable them to work or travel. According to the speaker, when youth reject their language and prefer other languages to it, this leads to the death of the native language. Not only did the lead figures in literature, poems, language left the country, there was no national curriculum that gave a standard for the young learners of Somali language. The Somali alphabet became inverted as people started violation the language rules that existed.

To further complicate matters, Somalis migrated in large numbers to other nations and settled there. These new second home country environmental and social factors contributed to the loss of their native language as they had to adapt to the use of foreign language to survive in their new environments. These developments had a hugely negative impact, particularly among the children and youth on their cultural heritage.

### Revival and Salvation Stage (beginning 1990s - Now)

Across the globe, this period was characterized by the recognition that some languages were becoming extinct and others perishing slowly. Global efforts to stem the tide were spearheaded by UNESCO (Towards a Culture of Peace in Somalia) to revise these languages and Somali wasn't an exception. These efforts were headed by different actors, from one side prominent and well renowned Somali personalities endeavoured to protect the Somali culture, language and heritage from destruction and preservation for both the current and future generations. On the other hand, there were foreigners, who were interested in Somalia and took part in the reconciliation meetings in Arta, Djibouti, who also were occupied with the revival of the Somali language and culture as a uniting force.

At the onset of the 1990s, a team organized itself voluntarily to conduct sensitization campaigns to preserve and protect Somali culture, heritage and language using several techniques including media talk-shows, interviews, organizing stakeholder meetings, and establishing partnerships with organizations (local and international). This organized team was named Gurmadka Hiilka Afka



Hooyo. These efforts were buttressed by the production of newsletters like Hal abuur written in Somali and English comprising of research studies, poems, history and cultural analysis and more. Furthermore, they also worked on the setting up of discussion forums, and the creation of a website called Somali PEN spearheaded by the Djibouti President, His Excellency Ismail Omar Gelle. This led to the International Language Day celebrations to be held in Somali cities such as Djibouti, Mogadishu, Hargeisa, Garowe and many more. A gesture which the guest speaker noted that the Somalis will always be grateful to Djibouti for. He concluded that these meetings also led to the establishment of the Regional Academy of Somali Language which was agreed upon by all Somali leaders. He added that an independent governing body consisting of 13 scholars, who specialize in Somali language and literature, were formed. These scholars were from all parts of the Greater Somalia, The Horn of Africa and the diaspora.

### **Presentation from poet Yusuf Osman Abdulle (Shaa'ir)**

*Peace and Negotiations through Somali Oral Literature*

Yusuf Shaa'ir began his presentation with different poems that complimented what the guest speaker Dr Mohamed Dahir Afrah had explained on the language development stages and the importance of language:

#### **Poem 1**

Aduunyada Af Baa Fura  
Aqoonta na Af Baa Qora  
Dhaqanka na Af Baa Sida  
Dhaxalkii Awoow iyo Isirka na Afka u Mudan  
Athaaarta dug iyo taarikhda aadmiga afku udub dhaxaad iyo aqalkooda weeyaan  
Ummadda na hankeeda iyo ilbaxeeda weeyaan  
Ubadka na asluubtooda iyo ayoohooda weeyaan

#### **Poem 2**

Alif macalin baa dhigay iyo Awgii Weynaa  
Keenadiid na Aashi, i aragti iyo far buu qoray  
Galaal aynigiisii, umaduu wax uga tagay  
Kadaaraa ogaalkay, qoraal loogu iman jiray  
Aqoonta na Shire ayaa yiri, maan iftiinku seenyadu  
Afrax inuu dadaalo iyo, weli orodkii muu dayn  
Gariyana na astaamaha, afka waa macnayn jiray

The first Poem speaks of the importance of language in education, culture, history and every aspect of life, while the second poem reminisces and celebrates prominent people who were very instrumental towards defending the Somali language.

Yusuf Shaa'ir discussed the role of poets in peacebuilding in the past and as well in present times. Yusuf noted that oral literature is still being used for peacebuilding just as it was used in the past. He gave an example of a war that erupted towards the end of 1994 in Somaliland (Abwaan Shaacir's home) between the government of the late Mohamed Haji Ibrahim Cigaal and an opposition group which went on for almost two years. This war was successfully stopped through several negotiations led by a council of elders who volunteered to step up and bring the warring factions together, urging them to strive for peace and surrender the weapons they were using to kill each other. Those elders successfully brought reconciliation and peace between the two groups. Yusuf Shaa'ir added that the same reconciliation methods are used ever since.

In the olden times, when a conflict occurred between two clans, for whatever grievance, elders would take a piece of cloth and wave it indicating that they were delegates or peace envoys a signal that would lead to a ceasefire between the clans or warring parties. Though in these modern times, all that is needed is to talk to the parties through loudspeakers mounted at designated places. When the fighting stops, priority is given to the safety and security of all during the period of peace negotiations. Then a committee is formed with members from both parties of either 25 or 50 members from each side who would spearhead the peace negotiations to determine a solution.

During the negotiations, deaths needed to be compensated equally for both parties. If for example, one party has lost ten people and the other eight people, then the difference of two people needs to be compensated as will be determined by the committee. In the negotiations, poems are used to emphasise the need for peace and stability as the overriding factor in communities' engagement.

The presenter noted that peace messages through poems, speeches and verbal agreements carry more weight than written agreements in Somalia due to the value given to oratory skills in Somalia. Besides, oral literature is a very powerful tool to promote peace and for conflict resolution. As can be seen from the below poem by Salaan Carrabey, many Somali poets have used art to promote peace:

You killed Rabjaan in revelry  
And in transgression of custom  
And up to today a stick has not been broken for him  
And we remember well-known Jaamac  
Who was the first in oratory for us?  
We know about what happened in the past  
No one is more close to each other than us  
And yet there is anger between us  
If you devour each other  
I won't respect you  
It's as much as I'll join forces with one side  
And join in the attack on the other  
It is as if my fingernails are  
Cutting up my stomach

And I shall die of anger  
And grief and rage  
My power will diminish  
So say together "I seek protection from God"  
Oh Clansmen, Stop the War!

The poem explores how Somali social and cultural components impact peace and security and discuss how Somali poets and artists have responded to conflict and crisis over the years. The poet attempted to separate two kin groups, namely Ahmed Faarah and Reer Daahir. Religious leaders had failed in bringing these warring clans together thus the poet was requested to use his skills to connect the two clans. It is then that he recited this long poem titled "Waar Tolow Colka Jooga". The presenter concluded by emphasizing the importance of understanding war and peace in the Somali regions through a cultural lens and the power that culture has in influencing the attitudes to war and peace.

### **Presentation by Ahmed Farah Ali (Idaajaa)**

*Culture and Somali Literature*

Ahmed Farah (Idaajaa) in his presentation indicated that poems are the expression of the way of life, while culture refers to something that a society practices and is part of its heritage. Since Somalis didn't record their history in writing, they would use poems as a medium of preservation. Mr. Idaajaa noted that the Somali language is known for its unique literature like songs, and poems among others. The community was mainly made up of pastoralists and a few fishermen who resided along the coast. The Somali had a system of governance under the leadership of a Sultan (Imam, King or Warrior) and the community obeyed the ruling system without the presence of the police or military and relied on moral authority which underscored the significance of obedience to leaders, where defiance was believed to lead to unforeseen consequence to the lives, children and properties of those who defiant.

In those olden times, there was an unwritten constitution set by the council of elders that defined the roles and responsibilities of both the governed and the governing. Government officials operated through collaboration and officials operated under a tree. The community abhorred dictators and those who tried to impose dictatorship like Garaad Wiilwaal and Ugaas Hashi learned the hard way as the community summarily rejected them.

Regarding marriage, which was considered as vital as life itself, there were set procedures that had to be followed in the search for a marriage partner and settling down. The process involved family members of both families and each gender had specific roles though culturally females are pushed to the background despite their many talents and roles. The presenter noted that Somalis generally have good morals such generosity, courage, faithfulness, obedience to parents, respect for elders, being cognizant that anyone who misbehaved would be punished swiftly lest they become a negative influence on the youth.

## PANEL DISCUSSION

The PDRCTalks platform is designed a way in which the audience and the keynote speaker aided by a panel of experts have two-way interaction, which is central to the discussions. The second part of the session (panel discussion) offers an opportunity to PDRC to ask critical questions to the panellists but also for the participants to interact with the guest speaker and panellists.



In attendance and as part of the panel, were the State Minister of Education, Abdullahi Roble; State Minister of Information, Telecommunication, Tourism, Culture and Heritage, Abdifatah Nuur Ashkir; Halima Biyood and Ruqiya Aw Mohamed who sent audio of her contribution.

In responding to the question on what the government's plans were to prevent the distortion and destruction of the Somali language and how to strengthen its use in all aspects of life, the State Minister of Education Mr Abdullahi Roble who used to work at the Somali National Academy of Arts, Sciences and Literature before the collapse of Somalia's central government, responded by saying that 60 to 70% of languages are endangered and risk disappearing by the end of the 21st century and Somali language wasn't an exception. He indicated that for a language to survive it needed to be spoken by more than 50 million people. The minister mentioned four factors which according to him accelerated the demise of a language or its disintegration. These were: underrating native language, placing foreign language at a superior level to the native language, preventing natives from using their language, and when orators mix foreign and native language when communicating to their audience. State Minister Roble posited that it was of critical importance to be on the lookout for such incidences and take appropriate action in good time.

Finally, he concluded that in Puntland some key actions that support the growth and use of the Somali language are:

- a) Broadcasting all the lessons for both Primary and Secondary school learners on social media in Somali while the learners were at home during the COVID-19 pandemic;
- b) Starting from next year, all subjects for class 1 to 4 shall be translated and published into Somali, class 5 to 8 will follow next year;
- c) There is a plan for all education and learning materials and curriculum to be published in the Somali language;
- d) The protection law was prepared, translated into Somali and signed.

State Minister of Telecommunications, who is also an author with great interest of Somalia language followed by discussion the reasons that led to the "Somali Language Preservation Act", he also added that this act emphasized that both government, education and media should use the Somali language.

A participant wanted to know if it was possible to get prominent Somali personalities who strove so hard to protect and preserve the Somali language and who would replace notable people like the Sayyid, Salaan Carrabey or Dr Afrah to pass these critical lessons to the next generation. In response, Dr Afrah, the guest speaker noted that it was both possible and at the same time not likely. The possibility lies in the many men, women, boys and girls who are doing their best in the promotion of the Somali language and culture and these needs to be accorded the moral support to be role models to others. Nevertheless, he noted that it is also difficult in finding suitable replacements because of the difference in the language morphology being used today as compared to the past. This is coupled with different talents and degree of commitment.

On whether poems, songs and proverbs can be used to dissuade Al-Shabab from fighting and war, like it has been done for clan and political disagreements, Yusuf Shaa'ir was categorical that was possible considering that the members of Al-Shabab are Somali and Muslim. What is required he added was a total and absolute commitment from all actors and stakeholders. He noted that it is also important to understand the distinct differences between clan-based fighting and political fighting. He said in the former, the fighters know each other, and their leaders were usually present when negotiations are being held while with the latter, whereas leaders know each other, the fighters don't, and in most cases, leaders are never present during negotiations but have representatives. Before negotiating, it is prudent that one knows who the enemy was, in the case of Al Shabab who does one talk to.

On the classification of different terminologies and whether music was part of Somali culture, the participants were told that culture referred to ideas, customs and social behaviour of a particular people or society, whereas heritage is something that is preserved over time and handed over to the next generation to protect and pass it over to the next. Art, Idaajaa noted is the expression or application of human creative skills and imagination typically in a visual form such as painting or sculpture, producing works appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power. And yes, music was and is part of Somali culture the difference being that is has been modernized.

Considering the requirement to be fluent in some foreign languages to work in the government or for non-governmental organizations, which affects the use and preservation of the native language, the panel informed the audience of the common methods to apply to achieve these were:

- Create recorded and print resources which are essential in preserving language's sound and context;
- Teach or attend language classes;
- Use digital and social outlets to promote the language;
- Insist on speaking in the native tongue

Halimo Biyood, an advocate for culture and language presented a poem regarding Somali history, culture and Somali language. She noted that mothers play a major role in the transmission of a language through songs, recommendations (advice) and praises sang for babies which have many language aspects in them from rhythm to wordings. She also mentioned the songs by nomads for their cattle, camels and goats.

Ruqiya Aw Mohamed joined the contributors through a recorded audio message in which she challenged the participants to take an active role in the use and preservation of Somali language by taking responsibility for how they use the language, particularly, groups that use the Somali

language in their work (authors, government officials, media, etc.). She insisted that structure of language, grammatic rules and the diction with a focus on the subject matter discussed are the fundamentals for an accurate and meaningful language interaction, which contributes greatly to comprehension and effectiveness of the information and messages transmitted both orally and in writing.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The preservation of the Somali language and culture requires collective efforts. Those identified as having more leeway in safeguarding the language and culture are:

- i. The federal government and member states.
- ii. Educational institutions both public and private
- iii. Independent institutions
- iv. Parents especially mothers

Besides, the following raft of recommendations was made towards the preservation of the Somali language and culture:

- Culture is a uniting phenomenon that allows Somalis to come together even at times of war and clan conflict, so cultural events need to be promoted as a peace connector.
- Any effort to preserve and develop the Somali language must be both backward and forward-looking. It is paramount to understand the origins of the neglect, harassment and shelling of the language to enable proper effort to make the language more valuable and important to the society.
- For the Somali language to survive, it is prudent that Somalis recognize the Somali language is what they all have in common and is the most unifying factor for them across the globe
- Start the enforcement of the Somali Preservation Law from primary school and integrate poems, history and Somali heritage into the curriculum to provide a base for the youth to learn and enjoy the beauty of the Somali language
- Government authorities need to play a leading role in the preservation of the Somali language, creativity and culture
- Platforms need to be established to discuss, promote and create awareness on the importance of Somali culture and language
- Encourage the use of Somali language on billboards, directions and all signs on public spaces.
- Roll out massive and robust awareness campaigns with messages that promote and encourage the use of Somali language
- Reach out to the youth and help them understand that culture and language are part of their identity and that they need to defend and protect both by using them more
- To keep abreast with the dynamics of language changes, institutions need to link the development of the Somali language to history and amalgamate it with the modern version of the language.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The audience both at the event and those online were unanimous that the event was a success. The concluding remarks by the Keynote speaker, panellist's contributions and Q&A sessions indicated that the preservation and protection of the Somali language were of utmost importance and that all stakeholders needed to play their part in this process.

The youth were identified as the weak link and thus needed support and help to appreciate that culture and language are crucial aspects of their identity that they should don them both and consider them as part of their lifestyle.

PDRC's executive director expressed his sincere gratitude and appreciation to the guest speaker and the panellists for education the participants on the history of the language and the significance of culture in state-building, peace building and stabilization of the nation. He expressed immense thanks and noted that PDRC was indeed grateful to the United Nations Peace Building Fund and the Swiss Embassy in Somalia for facilitating the 15th PDRCTalks on Culture and Peace. The director was optimistic that by using culture as a peace connector then the desire to attain sustainable peace that would promote state-building and stabilization in Somalia would be achieved.





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