

LEGAL AID PROGRAMME:
EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES,
DELIVERING JUSTICE IN 2023 ANNUAL
PROGRAMME REPORT

REPORTED BY:
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Champions of Justice in Somaliland: The Story of SOLLA

Born in 2004, Somaliland Lawyers Association (SOLLA) emerged from a collective yearning for a just and equitable Somaliland. United by a shared vision, a group of dedicated lawyers, including professors from Hargeisa University and advisors to both legislative houses, laid the foundation for what would become a formidable force in the nation's legal landscape. Today, SOLLA encompasses nearly all lawyers in Somaliland, a testament to its unwavering commitment to empowering the legal profession and upholding the highest ethical standards.

SOLLA's mission is multifaceted, yet each facet reflects a singular devotion to justice. We champion access to justice for all, ensuring that even the most vulnerable individuals have a voice in the legal system. Through free legal aid and representation, we stand beside victims of injustice and those unable to afford counsel, ensuring their rights are heard and defended. But our commitment extends beyond individual cases. We advocate for a fair and independent judiciary, one that serves as a pillar of democracy and upholds the rule of law without fear or favor.

Beyond legal advocacy, SOLLA nurtures a culture of human rights and democratic values. We actively engage in reviewing and advising on new legislation, ensuring that laws protect and empower all citizens. Our dedicated human rights monitoring system acts as a vigilant guardian, identifying and combating abuses, discrimination, and exclusion. Through education and awareness campaigns, we empower individuals to understand and claim their rights, building a society where justice becomes not just a privilege, but a fundamental right for all.

Driven by a shared commitment to fairness, equality, and human rights, SOLLA's mandate is multifaceted. The organization strives to enhance the reputation of Somaliland's lawyers, empowering them to deliver exceptional service and uphold the highest professional standards. Additionally, SOLLA champions equal access to justice for all, advocating for a fair and independent judiciary that serves every citizen regardless of background. The SOLLA also provides free legal assistance and representation to vulnerable individuals, victims of injustices, and those unable to afford legal counsel. Moreover, SOLLA actively engages in reviewing and advising on new legislation aimed at strengthening democratic principles, civil liberties, and fundamental freedoms for all. The SOLLA also applies comprehensive legal research and analyses, promoting understanding of the country's laws and paving the way for informed adoption, reform, and application, solidifying Somaliland's legal foundation.

SOLLA has made a significant impact through a range of initiatives, providing free legal aid to over 42,465 vulnerable individuals, advocating for the enactment of progressive laws, and contributing to a more peaceful and equitable society. The SOLLA has effectively collaborated with various stakeholders, including UN agencies, INGOs, and governmental agencies, to strengthen the legal system and uphold the rule of law.

With headquarters in Hargeisa and six regional branches, SOLLA has a strong presence across Somaliland. The SOLLA is committed to serving communities throughout the country and has built a governance structure that ensures operational effectiveness and accountability.

In conclusion, SOLLA's unwavering dedication to justice, human rights, and democratic values has contributed to significant positive change in Somaliland. From championing access to justice for all

too actively engaging with key stakeholders to strengthen the legal system, SOLLA's impact is a testament to the SOLLA's commitment to building a fairer and more just society in Somaliland.

Brief Introduction to the SOLLA Legal Aid Programme

In 2023, the Somaliland Lawyers Association (SOLLA) continued its 20-year legacy of illuminating the path towards justice for over 42,465 individuals across diverse communities. Their impact extends far beyond courtroom victories, encompassing advocacy, collaboration, and a steadfast commitment to building a more equitable society. This report focuses on SOLLA's transformative journey in 2023, highlighting their exceptional achievements in:

Unwavering Impact: SOLLA's diverse legal aid services delivered tangible results for 9,600 individuals (comprising 6,720 males and 2,880 females). Counseling empowered 4,407 individuals, while mediation fostered peace with 4,794 successful resolutions. Representation in 399 court cases secured fair trials, like securing the release of 137 adolescents and supporting 42 Ethiopian immigrants facing harassment.

Building Equity: SOLLA actively advocated for two crucial law reforms, shaping a more just and peaceful Somaliland. Their efforts contributed to [Revised Draft of HIV prevention Act and elections with political parts, Laws No: 91/2023 and Law No: 14/2023 reforms], strengthening the legal system and upholding the rule of law. This collaboration extended beyond government entities, partnering with UN agencies and INGOs for broader change.

Nationwide Reach: SOLLA's commitment extends beyond Somaliland regions. In 2023, they expanded their reach to previously underserved regions like Hargeisa, Borama, Burco, and Cerigabo, ensuring access to justice for all communities. Which empowered 9,600 individuals, comprising 6,720 males and 2,880 females, across diverse communities, Children (1920): Safeguarding young people's rights and ensuring their well-being, IDPs/Refugees/Asylum Seekers (3840): Offering crucial legal support to displaced populations and Prisoners/Detainees (960) exemplify SOLLA's commitment to serving diverse populations for upholding the rights of those within the justice system.

Join us as we delve deeper into this transformative journey in the full report. Explore the stories of individuals whose lives were changed, the specific impact of legal aid services, and how SOLLA is building a brighter future for Somaliland, one case, one community, at a time.

Situation update / Context of the reporting period

Lost in a Labyrinth of Laws: Navigating justice in Somaliland feels like wandering through a confusing maze. Traditional and formal systems intertwine, leaving many citizens, especially vulnerable groups like women and children, feeling lost and powerless. In this vulnerable state, they are often at heightened risk of suffering sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), domestic violence, and harmful practices like female genital mutilation (FGM). But amidst this complexity, hope shines through with the SOLLA Legal Aid Programme. They act as a beacon, offering free legal assistance, raising awareness of rights, and fighting for crucial reforms.

Progress Paves the Way, But Obstacles Remain: Though their journey isn't without challenges, like limited funding and resistance from traditional systems, SOLLA is making undeniable progress. They're bridging the gap between the old and new, partnering with local organizations to bring legal knowledge and support to remote areas, where the lawyer shortage (only 310 for 5.7 million!) hits hardest. This is just the beginning of building a more inclusive legal environment where everyone feels heard and protected, empowering them to resist and report injustices like SGBV, domestic violence, and FGM.

The Next Steps to Justice for All: The journey towards a future where everyone in Somaliland can confidently access justice is far from over. Increased resources, harmonized legal systems, and continued training for lawyers are crucial steps on this path. And SOLLA remains at the forefront, paving the way for a society where understanding, protecting, and exercising one's rights becomes a reality for all, ultimately contributing to a safer and more equitable environment for everyone.

Data: A Double-Edged Sword: However, even SOLLA faces hurdles. Fragmented data collection and inconsistent reporting create blind spots, making it difficult to allocate resources strategically and measure their impact. Additionally, disjointed communication channels make accessing legal aid unnecessarily complex, further disadvantaging those who need it most.

Building a Bridge of Information: But instead of succumbing to these challenges, SOLLA is actively building a bridge of information and accessibility. This bridge comes in the form of a unified data management system that will capture comprehensive and high-quality information, empowering strategic decision-making and program improvement. It also takes the shape of the "Justice App", a user-friendly mobile app connecting individuals directly with SOLLA lawyers, providing legal resources, and simplifying assistance requests.

Empowering Lives, One App at a Time: This innovative approach will have a profound impact:

- **Empowered Choices:** Accessible information and direct communication will equip individuals to confidently seek legal support, knowing their rights and options, ultimately empowering them to resist and report harmful practices like SGBV, domestic violence, and FGM.
- **Optimized Resources:** Data-driven insights will guide SOLLA to reach underserved communities more effectively and maximize their impact, contributing to a safer and more just society.
- **Trust and Transparency:** Seamless communication fosters stronger community connections, building trust and promoting justice for all.

This transformative step forward marks a new era for SOLLA, where technology empowers communities, bridges the gap between information and action, and paves the way for a more just and equitable Somaliland.

Summary of key achievements during the reporting period

Since its inception in 2023, the Somaliland Lawyers Association (SOLLA) has been a guiding light, illuminating the path toward justice for countless individuals and communities. Beyond mere courtroom victories, SOLLA's impact extends to advocacy, collaboration, and an unwavering commitment to building a more equitable society.

2023 Annual Report Highlights:

- i. **Empowering Communities through Legal Aid:** SOLLA remains committed to providing legal aid services to diverse communities in Somaliland, including Hargeisa, Borama, Burco, and Cerigabo. Our services are tailored to meet the specific needs and challenges faced by vulnerable populations, including children, displaced individuals, and prisoners. We ensure accessibility to our services through outreach and awareness programs, making justice available to those who need it most.
- ii. **Delivering Justice: Services and Impact:** SOLLA offers a range of legal aid services, including counseling, mediation, and representation, to empower individuals seeking justice. In 2023, our efforts led to successful resolutions, with numerous mediations resulting in agreements and appeals, as well as acquittals for those wrongly accused. Through our work, we have transformed lives, protected children, and provided essential legal documentation to displaced individuals

Key Results In 2023

The Key Results impact of SOLLA's legal aid program in 2023 by reflect the unique Exceptional Achievements in Empowering 9,600 Individuals from Diverse Backgrounds:

1. **Diverse Legal Aid Services:** Witness the unwavering impact of SOLLA's services, including:
 - o **Counseling for 4,407 individuals:** Guiding them through legal intricacies, enabling informed decisions.
 - o **Mediation (4,794 successful resolutions):** Facilitating peaceful conflict resolution.
 - o **Representation in 399 court cases:** Upholding fundamental rights.
2. **SOLLA Beneficiaries provided legal aid services:** SOLLA's dedicated efforts expanded services to previously underserved regions like [Hargeisa, Borama, Burco, and Cerigabo], ensuring all communities have access to legal aid. This resulted in empowering 9,600 individuals, including 6,720 males and 2,880 females, from diverse backgrounds.
3. **Protecting Vulnerable Groups:** SOLLA prioritized the most vulnerable members of society, offering vital legal support to:
 - i. Children (1920): Safeguarding their rights and ensuring their well-being through legal interventions.
 - ii. IDPs/Refugees/Asylum Seekers (3840): Providing crucial legal assistance to displaced populations navigating complex legal hurdles.
 - iii. Prisoners/Detainees (960): Upholding the rights of those within the justice system, ensuring fair treatment and legal representation.

4. Nationwide Reach: SOLLA’s commitment extends to underserved regions, including:

- **Hargeisa:** Empowering 3,089 individuals, safeguarding children’s rights, supporting IDPs/refugees/asylum seekers, and upholding prisoners’ rights.
- **Borama:** Transforming the lives of 2,887 individuals, including IDPs/refugees/asylum seekers with children and detainees.
- **Burco:** Providing vital legal assistance to 1,822 individuals, including children, prisoners/detainees. and crucial to IDPs/refugees/asylum seekers
- **Cerigabo:** Benefitting 1,802 individuals, including children, IDPs/refugees/asylum seekers and detainees.

Upholding Justice

SOLLA’s legal aid program remains unwavering in its commitment to justice, ensuring accessibility for all communities. Together, we continue to make a difference in the districts and regions where Legal Aid Lawyers have reached. Beneficiaries are disaggregated by gender, social status, and regions, supporting approximately **9,600 vulnerable people**:

- **30% women**
- **20% Children**
- **40% IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons)**
- **10% prisoners**

This critical support is meticulously recorded in date tables, reflecting our dedication to transparency and impact.

Location	Lawyer Beneficiaries		
	Counseling/Advice	Mediation	Representation
Hargeisa	1105	1937	47
Borama	1131	1559	197
Burco	1222	557	43
Cerigabo	949	741	112
Total	4407	4794	399

Location	Beneficiaries					
	Male	Female	Total	Children	IDPs/Refugees/Asylum seekers	Prisoners/Detainees
Hargeisa	2162	927	3089	618	1235	309
Borama	2021	866	2887	577	1155	289
Burco	1276	546	1822	365	729	182
Cerigabo	1261	541	1802	360	721	180
Total	6720	2880	9600	1920	3840	960

Location	Type of Case			
	Civil	Criminal	Family Dispute	Total
Hargeisa	7	17	23	47
Borama	5	187	5	197
Burco	7	19	17	43
Cerigabo	4	103	5	112
Total	23	326	50	399

Impactful Stories:

1. Fatima’s Custody Battle

One of SOLLA’s success stories involves **Fatima**, a displaced woman who regained custody of her children with the help of SOLLA’s legal representation. Her case exemplifies the profound impact our legal aid program has on the community.

2. Ahmed’s Acquittal

Another remarkable success is the story of **Ahmed**, a prisoner who was acquitted of wrongful charges with the support of SOLLA’s legal aid services. Ahmed’s life took a positive turn due to our commitment to justice.

Key hurdles and impactful solutions:

Possible critical challenges addressed:

- Limited Resources: Lack of funding, and legal infrastructure can restrict access to justice, particularly for marginalized groups.
- Limited Access to Legal Aid in Remote Areas: Due to a shortage of lawyers and limited geographical reach of existing legal aid programs, individuals in remote communities face significant difficulties accessing legal support. This disproportionately impacts vulnerable groups like women, children, and minorities. (Data point: Only 1 lawyer serves every 10,000 people in rural Somaliland compared to 1:1,000 in urban areas.)
- Complex Legal System: A combination of traditional and formal systems can be confusing and difficult to navigate, especially for those unfamiliar with legal procedures.
- Cultural Barriers: Traditional norms and practices may conflict with formal legal principles, creating challenges for women, minorities, and other vulnerable groups in seeking justice.
- Limited Awareness: Many citizens may be unaware of their rights and legal options, hindering their ability to access justice effectively.
- Limited Technology: Lack of access to technology and digital legal resources can further exacerbate difficulties in navigating the justice system.
- Challenge: Somaliland faces a critical shortage of legal professionals, hindering access to justice, particularly for marginalized communities. While existing internship and mentorship programs provide valuable experience, they may not be fully optimized to address this challenge.

Key Solutions and Recommendations:

- **Increased Funding:** Increased investments in legal aid programs, lawyer training, and infrastructure development can improve access to justice for all.
- **Mobile Legal Clinics:** Implementing mobile legal clinics equipped with technology and staffed by paralegals and lawyers can expand access to legal services in remote regions.
- **Community Legal Empowerment Programs:** Training local community members on basic legal rights and procedures can empower them to assist others and navigate the justice system more effectively.
- **Harmonized Legal System:** Efforts to harmonize traditional and formal systems can create a clearer and more consistent legal framework, making it easier to navigate.
- **Community Outreach & Education:** Raising awareness of rights and legal options through community engagement and educational programs can empower individuals to seek justice effectively.
- **Legal Technology Initiatives:** Developing and implementing user-friendly legal apps, online resources, and digital legal aid platforms can improve access to justice and information.
- **Empowering Local Communities:** Collaborating SOLLA with Government, UN, INGOs, National organizations and community leaders can build trust and tailor legal services to address specific needs and cultural contexts.
- **Increased number of qualified legal professionals:** Expanding program reach and inclusivity will provide more opportunities for young graduates, addressing the lawyer shortage.
- **Enhanced lawyer skills and competencies:** Improved mentorship and training will equip young lawyers with the skills and knowledge needed to effectively serve diverse communities.
- **Improved access to justice for all:** Increased legal capacity and pro bono initiatives will create a more accessible and equitable legal system for Somaliland citizens.
- **Empowered legal community:** Building a strong network of young lawyers committed to social justice and pro bono work will lead to a more vibrant and sustainable legal sector.
- **Structured curriculum and practical assignments:** Develop a structured training curriculum with practical assignments aligned with specific legal skills and competencies needed in Somaliland.
- **Mentorship beyond placement:** Extend mentorship beyond the internship period to provide ongoing guidance and support for career development.
- **Increase funding and partnerships:** Secure additional funding from private corporations, UN, INGOs, National organizations, or government grants to expand program capacity and offer financial incentives like stipends for participants.
- **Partner with diverse legal institutions:** Collaborate SOLLA with UN, INGOs, National organizations and government agencies to offer diverse internship placements and expose participants to a wider range of legal practice areas.

- Target underrepresented groups: Actively recruit law graduates from marginalized communities (women, minorities, rural areas) through targeted outreach and scholarships.

Unlocking Wider Impact and Accessibility:

- Area-Based Approach: The successful expansion of services beyond Hargeisa through regional collaborations with SOLLA offices should be further adopted. This approach ensures a broader impact by reaching underserved communities.
- Advocacy and Lobbying for SOLLA: Expanding the scope of mobile courts for legal aid and awareness to vulnerable groups, especially women, children, and minority communities, in remote regions would significantly enhance access to formal justice. Advocacy efforts can drive this expansion.
- Streamlined Monitoring: Transitioning to monthly performance monitoring and budget allocation allows quicker identification and correction of issues that may hinder legal aid effectiveness. Regular assessments ensure efficient resource utilization.
- Empowering SOLLA: Increased funding and stronger representation in the UN Joint Rule of Law Programme Steering Committee will leverage SOLLA's expertise and enhance their engagement. Empowering the organization strengthens its impact.
- Strengthened SOLLA Team: Adding staff, including a dedicated technical coordinator, will solidify implementation support and monitoring capabilities. A well-supported team ensures effective service delivery.