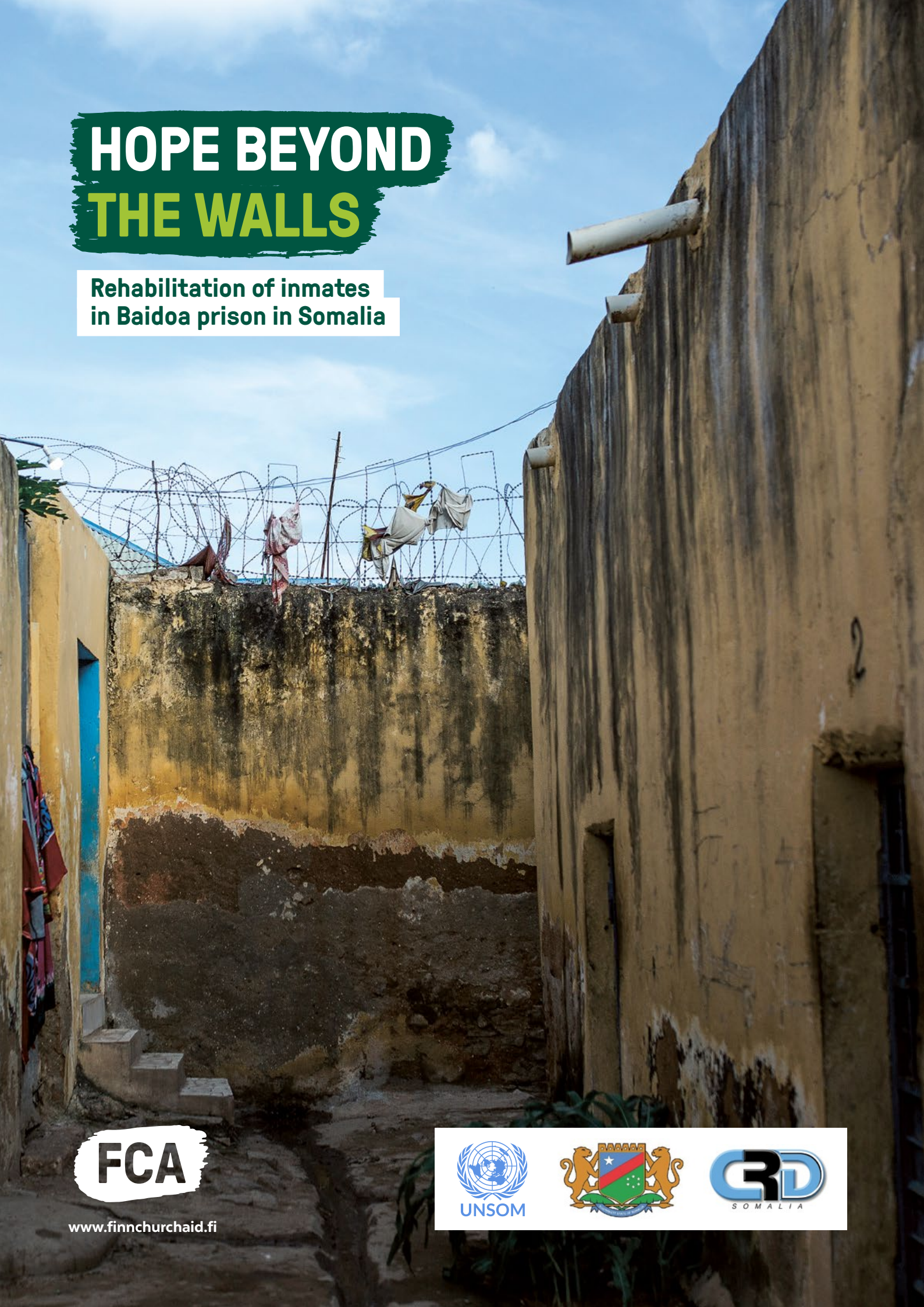


HOPE BEYOND THE WALLS

Rehabilitation of inmates
in Baidoa prison in Somalia



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Introduction

The Baidoa prison was built by the Italian government during the colonial era in the South West State of Somalia. The Ministry of Justice considers it to be one of the country's most secure prisons because it has no history of escapes and deems it suitable for accommodating high-risk prisoners. Most of the high-risk prisoners are sentenced for taking part in extremist activities perpetrated by Al-Shabaab.

The *Psychosocial Rehabilitation Programme for High-Risk Prisoners* has been implemented at the Baidoa prison since 2016. The programme, now in its third phase, aims to counter violent extremist ideologies and ensure that inmates are completely disengaged from Al-Shabaab, and also develops the living conditions to improve the well-being of inmates and staff.

The rehabilitation programme is led by the UNSOM Joint Justice and Corrections Service. The programme has been funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) and implemented by Finn Church Aid (FCA), in partnership with the Centre for Research and Dialogue (CRD).

The programme equips prisoners with the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to contribute positively to their communities and society in general upon their release. Following screening by the Somali prison authority in conjunction with the National Intelligence Service Agency, inmates enrolled in the rehabilitation programme are provided vocational training, education and psychosocial support.

The Custodial Corps staff who administer the prison are few in number but are highly trained. The programme builds their capacity to support the rehabilitation of prisoners while also ensuring the security of the prison.

According to the South West State Ministry of Justice, the rehabilitation programme in Baidoa prison has been more effective than other rehabilitation centres in Somalia: "This project creates a smooth working relationship between line ministries, including the Ministries of Health, Education and Religion, and it allows the Ministry of Justice to take the lead and responsibility. For this programme to be implemented in other regions, the implementers must be trained to deal with counter-narratives to extremism. It also requires support from

the community, prison authorities, the Ministry of Justice, the State Governments as well as dedicated people who trust each other and are willing to make sacrifices to achieve the project's objective."

Inmates arrive in prison with deep-set prejudice and fears

Prisoners typically expect the worst when they arrive at the prison because of the ongoing conflict and stigma facing the extremist group, Al-Shabaab. Al-Shabaab builds on an anti-government narrative towards Somali government authorities and institutions that creates prejudice and hostility among the group's members.

35-year-old Ibrahim was one of the first prisoners convicted in Baidoa of being a member of the extremist group. He described his first impressions of the prison:

"I felt very depressed and thought my life came to an end. In the early days, I was in fear of torture, and I thought I was going to suffer so much," Ibrahim says.

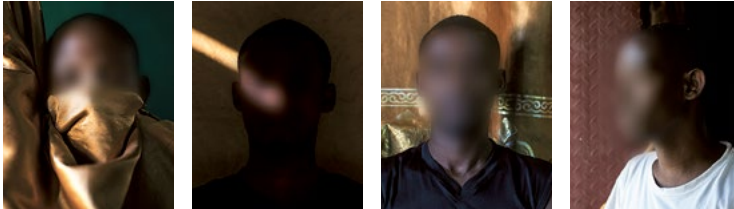
Ibrahim grew up with his parents in rural Somalia. His parents were herdsman and wanted him to attend school, but Ibrahim joined Al-Shabaab when his friends did the same.

"My parents did not know about this. I wanted to take part in jihad, although I did not understand the meaning of jihad at the time."

Mukhtar, 32, was sentenced to more than seven years in prison for being a member of Al-Shabaab. He described his life before prison as hopeless after he lost both of his parents very early in life. He grew up with his grandmother and says that poverty prevented him from going to school.

When Al-Shabaab came to Mukhtar's village in the Bakool region, he felt he had only two options: join the group or leave his home and his grandmother:

"I had to choose the first option. I did that to get a good salary to care for my grandmother and myself. Al-Shabaab used to pay a good salary and draw us a meaningful path of life. At that time, I felt they brought order and peace to our place." Mukhtar continues, "Most of my friends joined, and so did I. They also somehow persuaded us that what we



were doing was righteous; to rule the world by Allah’s word, and order for peace and prosperity.”

Arriving in prison in 2012 was very hard for Mukhtar. He noticed that the inmates struggled with mental health issues and he was scared of being confined and spending nights with them.

“I was also angry, frustrated and disappointed. I believed that I would never see the lights of freedom and that my life would end within the walls of the prison cell,” he says.

Another inmate, 32-year-old **Abdifatah**, says that he felt depressed when he came to the prison.

“I said to myself that my life would end here. I was surprised that the same cell was both our bathroom and bedroom. I suffered terribly, and I thought I was being bullied.”

The intervention: Not an end to life, but a new beginning

The inmates are unanimous in that the prison staff were very welcoming despite their initial fears. Some of the prisoners describe the Custodial Corps as “more polite than the police.” Some of the Custodial Corps staff themselves say that the training provided to through the psychosocial rehabilitation programme changed their attitudes in a positive way towards the prisoners.

“I have been working in this prison since 2006. At first, I feared to work in such an environment, but later I adapted and started feeling comfortable,” says **Abdirahim**, a 32-year-old sergeant.

“I had to develop myself gradually, but today, my relationship with the prisoners is good.”

The Custodial Corps staff highlight the importance of respect and open-mindedness towards the prisoners. Inspector **Bashiir** said the programme made tangible changes.

“We used to think that extremist groups are dangerous and that their members cannot change, but through the project, we came to know this was the wrong mindset.”

Bashiir says there was misbehaviour and aggression from some inmates before the start of the programme; those prisoners were emotionally upset - they never greeted the guards and instead mocked them by calling them “non-Muslims.”

Bashiir was initially tasked solely to guard the inmates however, as a result of the training by the UNSOM Corrections Advisor, his mindset and that of the other guards changed; instead of ignoring the prisoners, Bashiir began welcoming and encouraging them.

“I tell the inmates that a sentence term is only a number and that a person can make use of this time instead of building up stress. The

training taught me a lot, for instance, about the Nelson Mandela Rules on how prisoners must be handled without torture and violating their rights”, he says.

“We are past the time when the prisoners thought that we were their enemies. Now they share their difficulties, and we give them advice. Now we are friends and brothers,” says sergeant **Adan**.

The inmates and the Custodial Corps staff report that the kindness and respect pays them back.

“The Custodial Corps gave us hope that we can have a normal life after prison [...] The inmates started respecting the Custodial Corps and behaving well. My trust for most of the Custodial Corps changed because they helped me and treated me as one of their own,” Ibrahim says.

“The prison staff developed better ways to treat us politely. They used to fear us, but when they began to trust us, our impression of the Custodial Corps improved positively. We became friends and collaborative with the Custodial Corps,” Mukhtar says.

Education and psychosocial support - for the first time in their lives

Project participants express satisfaction with the rehabilitation programme, which includes psychosocial support sessions, basic education, religious education on counter-narratives, and discussions with former inmates who have completed the rehabilitation programme and reintegrated into society.

“This project changed the welfare of all the prisoners [not only the project beneficiaries] and also made them optimistic about their future life. Earlier, they used to stay idle, and that was risky to us staff members,” sergeant Abdirahim of the Custodial Corps says.

“When I heard about the activities of this project, I thought negatively about them, but when I came back from the first day of the activities and sat in my corner of the cell, I began thinking differently. Since then, I really liked all the activities, and attended them regularly,” Mukhtar says.

“I especially liked participating in basic education and sports. It helped me understand how to manage stress and depression. The individual counselling by the psychotherapist was essential for us,” says Ibrahim. “I was also excited to join vocational training and gain tailoring skills.”

“When I came to prison, I didn’t even know how to read and write. The project as a whole was very interesting, especially in the areas of basic education. My view on religion gradually changed since I learnt, for instance, that [Al-Shabaab’s] message on jihad was wrong,” says Abdifatah.

“Also, the friendship between us inmates improved gradually. We started making revisions about lessons, playing games and having fun by telling entertaining stories from our different life experiences before prison,” Mukhtar says. “The psychosocial support gradually reduced our level of stress, sleeplessness and hopelessness. We started sharing plans for a better life after prison.”

The intervention changed views on extremism

The rehabilitation programme challenges the views presented by extremist groups, making inmates aware of national and international law as well as different interpretations of religious text.

“My view now is that extremist groups just want you when you are healthy. Once you are injured and imprisoned, they will forget you. Your family, however, will not. I would tell a young person never to allow yourself to be brainwashed by people with hidden agendas. It is better to do something constructive for your family and your community,” Ibrahim says.

“I don’t want to waste my time on anything that doesn’t benefit my family and me. My dream is to work for my family and educate my child because education sheds light. I will speak publicly on how extremist groups took advantage of me and others that were stranded or idle,” Abdifatah says.

“I would now advise youth not to join extremist groups because they will use you to achieve their political goals. I would also tell them that joining such groups is a crime according to national and international laws,” Mukhtar says.

Relief upon release: the programme gives the capacity to dream

Ibrahim, Abdifatah and Mukhtar – the three former inmates that were interviewed – are today released from prison. This is how they describe their first emotions of life after their release:

“I felt happy on the day I was released. I immediately went to my family, and they welcomed me well [...] I would like to start up a business to manage my life. [My time in this prison programme] made me come up with a sense of responsibility and strive for life,” Ibrahim says.

“I cannot express the joy I felt on that day when I re-joined my family [...] The people were very welcoming and did not have any problems with me,” Abdifatah says.

“All my impressions and attitudes towards a better life have changed. I have decided to continue my education up to university level. Without this programme, I would not have survived my time in prison. Now I have a good picture of my future life,” says Mukhtar. “I want to attend the outreach programme to share my thoughts and experiences of being an extremist.”

“I believed that I was granted another chance by Allah to seek forgiveness from my family and community and live for the safety of all. I also decided to marry again,” says Mukhtar.

Society should give another chance

The Custodial Corps staff at the Baidoa prison report that the programme profoundly transformed their relationship with the prisoners. They even reported that former inmates continue to keep in touch with them after their release.

“I would tell society that no one was born guilty and that good behaviour and kindness will turn things the other way around,” Inspector Bashiir says. “Religious and education classes brought light to their life, and now after release, they have become law-abiding citizens.”

“When we meet the former inmates in town, they greet me and treat me like a brother because of the help that I used to offer them. They have a sense of responsibility and are thinking of their future life. They even call me to invite me to spend time with them,” Sergeant Abdirahim says.

“I will suggest to the general community and society that the only way to fight extremist groups is through rehabilitation – not war. I urge the community to welcome and treat the released prisoners well, once they are reintegrated,” Prison Commander **Mohamud Mayow Osman** says. ❖

The names of the interviewees, with the exception of the Prison Commander, have been changed to protect their privacy, and some quotations have been edited for grammar and clarity.

ALL PHOTOS BY PATRICK MEINHARDT

