

Somaliland Presidential Election Debate



**Debate Final Report
October 19th & 20th, 2017
Inspire Group'**

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Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

.....
3

INTRODUCTION

.....
3

BACKGROUND

.....
4

INSPIRE GROUP

.....
4

MISSION

.....
4

OBJECTIVE

.....
5

PLANNING PHASE

.....
6

The Organizing Team

.....
6

Committees

.....
6

Debate Team

.....
7

Preliminary Debate Activities

.....
8

Public Engagement: "Join the Debate"

.....
9

Civil Society Organisations Consultation Meetings

.....
9

Identification of Debate Moderators & Production Team

.....
9

Identifying the Debate Venue	1
.....	1
0	
IG's Negotiating with Political Parties	1
.....	1
0	
Fundraising	1
.....	1
1	
The Main Event	1
.....	1
2	
POLITICAL PARTIES CODE OF CONDUCT	1
.....	1
2	
Debate Broadcast	1
.....	1
3	
Choosing & Negotiating with Media Partners	1
.....	1
3	
Time of broadcast	1
.....	1
3	
Online Access	1
.....	1
4	
Debate Promotion	1
.....	1
4	
Promotional Strategies & techniques re-stimulating & maintaining interest	1
.....	1
4	
Press Release	1
.....	1
5	
Conclusion	1
.....	1
6	

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In October 2017, Inspire Group has organized and executed the first-ever Presidential and Vice Presidential Election Debate in Somaliland. This was also the first of its kind that was successfully held in East Africa where all the standing candidates openly debated on live TVs. Both locally and internationally, the Debate was hailed as another milestone for the credibility and maturity of Somaliland democracy. The Debate has become the most viewed TV programme in Somaliland, reaching more than estimated 9 million viewers and 3.1 twitters users.

Somaliland Presidential Debate (SPD) aims to strengthening the growth of Somaliland's democratic process by encouraging and supporting the dissemination and discussion of political views and the National Political Parties' election manifestos in an open and unbiased manner so as to enable the Somaliland electorate to make informed decisions for voting. Specific objectives include:

INTRODUCTION

Somaliland Presidential and Vice Presidential Election Debates (SPED) facilitate the examination of issues that are of interest to an electorate. SPED became 1st Somaliland Presidential Debates, the 7th Presidential Debate in

Africa and the 85th Presidential Debate in the world. Unlike political rallies, Somaliland Presidential constitute a platform for candidates seeking public office to address issues so that viewers and listeners are better able to compare positions. Unlike political rallies too, candidates had a less room to distort the positions of their opponents as these opponents have the opportunity to challenge any perceived inaccuracies on the spot.



Figure 1 Presidential Candidates on Stage

Somaliland Presidential and Vice Presidential Election Debates also encouraged candidates to focus on details. The time constraints of formal debates and the specificity of direct questions, arguably lead participants to hone their messages carefully, and reduce the opportunities for loose, inconclusive exchanges.



Figure 2 Somaliland Vice-Presidential Candidates on the debating stage

A primary objective of Inspire Group since its formation in 2016 has been the encouragement of a culture of civility and a culture of debate in Somaliland political process. Regrettably, both inside and outside of Somaliland, exchanges have too often been characterized by personal attacks, dissemination of unsubstantiated rumors, and exaggerations of the records or positions of opponents.

BACKGROUND

INSPIRE GROUP

Inspire Groups (IG) is a social enterprise, focusing on social economic development in Africa. We aim to help citizens achieve their potentials to maximize improvements in human and environmental well-being. Inspire Group's Headquarter is in Hargeisa, with representation in Ethiopia, Kenya, UK, Norway and Sweden. We partner with local and international stakeholders to improve the lives of the citizens and achieve sustainable development, led and owned by the people.

MISSION

Inspire Group mission is to assist in the strengthening and growth of the democratic process by encouraging and supporting the dissemination and discussion of political views in an open and unbiased manner to enable the Somaliland Elections to make informed decisions for voting. Inspire Group is of the view that by staging and widely distributing national political debates it will encourage political parties and the public to identify and focus on the issues of national importance.

To meet its ongoing goal of educating voters, the Inspire Group is engaged in various activities beyond producing and sponsoring the presidential debates. Its staff prepares educational materials and conducts research to improve the quality of debates.

DEBATE OBJECTIVES

1. **Informing the Voters:** This occasion will provide voters with the rare opportunity to hear each candidate's agenda and compare their credibility. The events also allow candidates to make the case for why they are best suited to be elected for the highest office of the land and present their positions on public policy issues. A qualified moderator, panelists or opponent can also probe the candidate's statements and positions, highlight policy differences and hold debaters accountable for past actions. In addition, in the course of a debate, the candidates will reveal the leadership style and personal qualities they would bring to the office
2. **Level the Political Playing Field:** In countries where one political party holds sway over the political scene, opposition candidates often face incumbents who dominate media coverage or use public resources to support their campaigns. As a result, opposing candidates find it difficult to compete and communicate their policy platforms to voters. In uneven political environments, this debate provides an opportunity to reach voters directly on radio and television, providing an effective, nonpartisan way to help "level the playing field" among candidates.
3. **Help Reduce Political Tensions and Tribalism:** The Debate will provide an opportunity for political rivals to show that despite their differences they can treat each other with mutual respect even while they disagree on the issues. More importantly, the Debate will draw much needed attention to real social issues and policies, from the common talk of shallow personal criticism and unchecked promises. Televised debate among the three presidential candidates will become an increasingly influential among voters, impacting opinion polls that reflect their performance the following day. The presidential debate is generally considered the last big opportunity to move voters before the election. They offer rare moments for Somaliland population to do some head-to-head comparison shopping between three candidates on the same stage discussing the issues.
4. **Promote Accountability by Elected Officials:** During a debate, the candidates' statements, policy positions and campaign promises will become part of the public record. Once a winning candidate takes office, citizens, the media and civil society organizations can hold them to account by citing transcripts, videos or press coverage of debates.

5. **Focus on the Issues:** The prospect of presenting and defending their views in a face-to-face debate with their political opponents encourages candidates to develop and clearly articulate their positions during a campaign.

PLANNING PHASE

The Organizing Team

In Somaliland, Presidential Election Debates became a successful saga in Somaliland history led by Inspire Group, collaborating with the Somaliland National Election Commission, Somaliland Journalist Association (SOLJA) and Somaliland Broadcasting Association representing the media houses, the Somaliland National Youth Organization (SONYO) and Somaliland State Actors Forum (SONSAF) and women activist groups.



Figure 3 Members of Somaliland National Election Commission and Inspire Group

On the other hand, Inspire Group started to feel the weight of the tasks increasing by the date and for this Inspire Group needed help. They turned towards the youth for this, testing again delicate waters with such an important assignment at hand. A group of volunteers chosen among the Somaliland youth started to work on the preparation for the event dividing themselves into teams. Dozens of meetings, hundreds of calls and thousands of texts and messages between were made in the team. Everyone was taking the task seriously and was willing to take as much load (weight) as he/she could. It was a team of leaders working as a team to lead the nation to a glorious new ground in the realm of democracy. As the team worked tirelessly and were tested both mentally and physically, positive results were being received. Venue equipment was getting ready, materials needed were getting printed, and the public was getting engaged online to send the questions they may have asked the candidates.

Our volunteers has indeed set a precedent to Somaliland and an example for the Horn of Africa and Africa by helping Somaliland the 85th country to hold a presidential candidate debate. On top of that, it demonstrated how truly capable the Somaliland youth are and how far up they can go if they are not given limitations but more importantly if they do not set limitations for themselves.

Committees

To organize an effective Debate, Inspire Group set-up a steering committee. The regular on-going committees and their responsibilities are:

Name	Members	Portfolio
Production	Finance Committee	Staging (including themes, format, rules, documentation, moderators, questioners design),
Marketing	Finance Committee (sponsors)	Public relations, advertising entitlements, terms of sponsorship, contracts, cost estimates, presentations to sponsors
Finance	Production Committee Marketing Committee sponsors,	Identifying sponsors, presentations to financial control, financial reporting, treasury.

Ad hoc committees of the Somaliland Presidential Election Debates 2017 (SPED) handle other matters, including the critical tasks of negotiating with the Political Parties by working with the taskforce assigned.

Debate Team

At the same time determine policy, the day-to-day implementation resides in a secretariat. Key positions in such a Secretariat comprise:

- **Project Manager:** IG's director acted debate project manager throughout the debate process and provided managerial role to all the debate team. This position acted as the nexus of communications and operations throughout the entire planning and implementation process.
- **Debate Coordinator:** IG appointed one of its technical specialist to coordinate the debate process and to lead negotiations with political parties and other stakeholders
- **Political and Media Advisor:** IG invited a well-known Somali scholar from the diaspora, Dr. Bashir Goth, to advise the debate committee and provide technical support in terms of media engagement and debate set up
- **Taskforce Coordinator:** To work with the political parties in the debate process, IG and the Political Parties agreed to create a taskforce that would technically be focal points for the Parties. IG assigned a member to coordinate the work of the taskforce and to liaise with both the Debate team and the Political Parties.
- **Researchers.** In addition to the above roles, IG also identified 2 researchers to assist the Debate team in communication and information gathering. These research works fed into the research questions developments and public engagement.

- **Moderators.** For the debate night, IG engaged to external media experts to direct the questioning and guide the debate. Both moderators were sworn publicly and were given agreed tasks to moderate the questioning.

While all these positions are crucial, most of the functions noted (except for those assigned to the Coordinator) carried out on a full-time basis. These persons spent increasingly more time on the matters pertaining to the event. IG entered a service contract with all these key positions. Additionally, 40 volunteers, divided into three groups, were engaged for the organization, promotion and venue management.



Preliminary Debate Activities

As implied, in the Inspire Group context, planned for the Somaliland Presidential Election Debates 2017 is primarily a matter of assessing the political environment to determine when the preliminaries should begin - with the clear understanding that once the political parties agree to debate, the activities went into over-drive! At the same time, it was acknowledged that the organizing entity cannot indefinitely consume or tie up resources by engaging too early. It is a delicate balancing act. Nonetheless, there were key activities that must take place during this period, among the most important of which are:

- Commencing Negotiations with the Political Parties that meet the Criteria
- Commencing Fund-raising
- Short-listing moderators and panelists and other key personnel
- Identifying potential venues
- Commencing set design
- Commencing web-site design (if considered necessary)
- Identifying persons to fill key roles such as Manager, Producer, Director etc.



Public Engagement: “Join the Debate’

IG, operating from the importance of public engagement, realized to create platforms for the general public to provide ideas and views about the significant issues the Debate should touch upon. There were three events, named ‘join the debate’, in Hargeisa, whereby general public shared their views about the debates. These forums also acted as an important event for IG members to build a trust with the public and gain endorsement for organizing the debate. Many of the issues raised by the people were considered during the development of the debate.



Civil Society Organisations Consultation Meetings

IG also created a close working relationship with various CSOs and non-state actors such as SONSAF, SONYO, APD, NEC, Women Groups, Academic Institutions, etc. The main aim to engage with these institutions was to build general consensus about the Debate and to harness local knowledge and political will for the Debate to take place. The consultations meetings also included those engaged with media houses and religious scholars.

Identification of Debate Moderators & Production Team

Somaliland Presidential Election Debate takes the view the interests of transparency, the main personnel involved in the production of the debates should be disclosed to all participants in the negotiations leading up to the debates.

It was understandable that the political parties had a keen interest in knowing the identity of the individuals in these key roles. Their interest, experience suggests, was that persons whose sympathies are perceived to be closely identified with – or against - a political party may, by design or neglect, place the opposing representatives in an unduly favorable or unfavorable light during the conduct of the debate. Whether such fears had any basis was debatable, but that they exist was unquestionable. The responsibility of the Inspire Group was to ensure that their invitees to perform in these capacities have a track-record of impartiality and professionalism.

As the Debate format was eventually agreed, some moderators were shortlisted. In this case the moderator was also be the person asking the questions of the debaters. Horn Cable's Mohamed

Abdi Sheikh also know Elig and Ali Seenyo from Saab TV were chosen to be the two moderators of Debates.

Identifying the Debate Venue

The choice of location of the debates depended on the size of the budget, the agreed format – and the space available on the agreed date(s). Furthermore, the space should preferably be available for a minimum of eight to ten days. This location should also have the facilities necessary to house a sizeable studio audience, pre-existing or easily-adaptable transmission capacity, holding areas, parking facilities and other features. Maansoor Hall became the only locations that fulfilled all the above criteria.

IG's Negotiating with Political Parties

Political parties persuaded to commit to participating in debates by signing commitment letters. The process of persuading the political parties started with formally contacting the Party Secretariats to indicate an intention to stage debates in the period between the announcement of the Debate date and the staging of the election itself, and requesting that the parties designate contact persons (TASKFORCE MEMBERS).

Presidential Candidates appointed representatives, also known Taskforce whom have their authority to make binding commitments on behalf of their parties/candidates. The importance of properly constituting the negotiating team can hardly be over-estimated. In the best of all worlds, the representatives of the political parties will work harmoniously with each other and with the Organizers to ensure that the discussions are productive and focused.

The job of the negotiating team (in SPED's case, Inspire Group) was to secure agreements between the political parties regarding the SPED political parties code of conduct. Such as staging of the debates, e.g. number of debates, debate format, ground rules, location etc. etc. The code of conduct can prove a long, tedious and complicated process, requiring considerable give-and-take and a clear vision by the organizers as to what comprises a useful debate.

It was sometimes argued that by involving political party representatives in the discussions on the above subjects, the impact of debates may be vitiated as the political parties will be inclined to prefer to have debates that are as tame as possible. Inspire Group takes the pragmatic view that particularly in countries where debates are not a political fixture - and thus parties may judge that the risk of a public backlash if they choose not to participate is minimal - it is preferable to work alongside the parties and devise agreements that meet key objectives of all concerned. The negotiating team constantly prepared for any number of eventualities as many issues were surface: some easily anticipated, others not. Notwithstanding the assumption that debates have the greater good in mind, party representatives were likely to see their roles

more narrowly as ensuring that their candidates are not placed – or are not perceived to be placed – at any disadvantage.

Of paramount importance in this process is the fact that the participants must view the Inspire Group as a neutral, whose activities are characterized by transparency and even-handedness. Inspire Group has gone further and developed a statement and Code that precludes the participation of members in any activities that could be construed as indicating support of any political party.

Fundraising

The process of identifying potential sponsors begins the moment the organizers decide to stage debates. From the onset too, the Manager and the Treasurer were required to develop a budget reflecting the anticipated costs leading up to and during the event. Expenses were meant to include advertising, production of material, website development or upgrade, set development, location rental, production of inserts, make-up etc. etc.

As political debates were not institutionalized in Somaliland, and in situations firms were imagined fears that their support for either party may have negative consequences should that party lose in the general elections, some potential sponsors take the cautious view and decided to not support any activities that may be construed as being even vaguely political.

The task of the fundraising team was to convince them that the issue is one of promoting and reinforcing democratic principles and that their corporate image will be strengthened by their identification with these principles.

In negotiating with sponsors, the preferred path was to ensure that such promotional visibility – sponsorship entitlements - does not detract from or devalue the debate itself.

With the collaboration of the media houses, there was a range of inducements that might be considered in developing sponsorship packages, outside of the period of the broadcast. The Sponsors were noted in all pre-event publicity, event publications (e.g. supplements), placements on the web-site etc. At the end Inspire Group secured both USAID/Creative Associates funds and local sponsors and without them the Debates could not be possible.



Main Event

The Due to a number of difficulties, in 19h October, 2017, only two debates actually were held. The first debate was Presidential Candidates, while the second was between the vice-presidential candidates.

What Ground Rules?

The debates were meant to provide a forum for the presentation of issues and

were meant to be conducted in a civilized manner.

Accordingly, debaters were expected to agree beforehand on certain ground rules. Political parties and Inspire Group, finally agreed a code of conduct.

POLITICAL PARTIES CODE OF CONDUCT

The agreements negotiated with the political parties will stipulate a number of explicit and implicit “ground rules” that will range across various aspects of the debate events. These will include such aspects as security arrangements, protocol, pre-debate activities etc. Some of these are noted as below:

1. The debaters will be greeted at the entrance to the facility by the organizers and escorted directly to the hall
2. No political accessories, including banners, signs, literature etc. will be allowed in the debate facility or its immediate environs. Supporters in the audience are not allowed to wear party-branded clothing or accessories.
3. Each party is allowed the same number of supporters in the debate hall. A designated officer of each party is required to prepare and provide a list for admission purposes. The total allocation of seats will NOT be changed from that agreed beforehand.
4. Coin tosses will also determine the sequencing of studio “walks”, lectern positions and order of speaking per debate.
5. Time limits on the responses will be strictly observed. Timing mechanisms will be visible to participants and will indicate how much time is left for a response. Participants who

exceed their allocation will be interrupted by the moderator.

6. Candidates are not to interrupt each other.
7. No flash photography is permitted during the debates.
8. The formulation of questions is the SOLE responsibility of the panel of questioners, and sponsors or the SPED are specifically precluded from any attempt to influence such.
9. The debates will last 135 minutes. each and will have specific breaks of 2 minutes" duration at intervals 45 minutes.
10. Candidates are required to be at the venue one hour before the start of the debate and are required to be on-stage 15 minutes before the start of the debate.
11. Audience members are required to be seated one hour before the scheduled start of the debates.
12. Neither entry nor exit will be permitted into or from the debate hall as of 10 minutes before the start of the debate except by members of the liaison teams who are allowed to enter and exit during the sponsorship breaks.
13. Participants are encouraged to make themselves available for interviews with the media after the debates. Separate facilities will be made available to accommodate such.
14. Each party will have a liaison room for use by party advisors. These rooms will be equipped with a television set that will show the broadcast as seen by the general population (i.e., not fed directly from the studio).

Debate Broadcast

Choosing & Negotiating with Media Partners

A policy regarding re-broadcast should be determined, as the production itself must be viewed as the property of the organizers and re-broadcast should only be done with their consent. An agreement with the media was made. It was reflecting the fact that the material cannot be edited and that only news pieces can be shown in say, news summaries. The political parties were also urged to not use excerpts or images from the debate production in political advertisements etc.

Time of broadcast

The broadcast was simulcast on television and radio. Prime-time television viewership time was desired since the production is largely intended for television audiences and participating radio stations will only need to take a feed for the broadcast location. The presidential debates clearly have been a hit with the public. Nearly seven-in-ten (69%) say they have watched at least some of the televised debates between the candidates.

Online Access

To ensure that the diaspora was able to benefit from the debates it is desirable to stream the content (exactly as what is broadcast locally) live on the internet. The Debate averaged 11.9 million total viewers for cable TV's and it became most-viewed program telecast of all time. Additionally, according to Twitter's stats, those 3.1 million impressions generated 2,300 clicks to our content. But Facebook, with far less impressions, generated 10 times that number of clicks to our content, about 70,000



Debate Promotion

Promotional Strategies & techniques re-stimulating & maintaining interest

A thorough promotional programme was mandatory in order to stimulate interest in the debates. Again, the importance of including the media in the partnership was reinforced. It was useful to have a marketing communications professional allied to or as a part of the organizers, even in an advisory capacity.

There was a several opportunities for news to be made before the debates themselves.

- Announcement of intention to stage debates by the organizers
- Signing of agreement between the parties for number of the debates
- Announcement of moderators/director/telecast carriers etc.
- Announcement of debate dates(s), time and location.
- Signing of sponsorship agreement(s).
- Web-site launch.



Press Release

These debates represent a change from politics as usual. Our goal is to help instill a 'Debate culture' so that all Somalilanders can learn from the candidates, understand the importance of active political involvement, and see that each of us has a role to play in determining the course of our country's future.

Our special appreciation goes to the cooperative spirit displayed by the political parties and the media in helping to make these debates a reality, as well as to our sponsors and our other partners in the public and private sector.

Inspire Group is a neutral and impartial. its purpose is:

- ✓ To create an environment in which political parties and their representatives can focus on issues during a presidential election campaign.
- ✓ To lift the level of public discussion, and to educate and inform the public about the real issues that should guide the electorate in casting its vote.

The presidential debates clearly have been a hit with the public. Nearly seven-in-ten (69%) say they

have watched at least some of the televised debates between the candidates. The latest national survey by Inspire Group, conducted October. 20-22 among 1,000 adults, finds that nearly two-thirds (65%) of those who watched the debates say they have been helpful in learning about the candidates. And about half of debate watchers (51%) say they have found the debates “fun to watch.”

The Debate averaged 11.9 million total viewers for cable TV's and it became most-viewed program telecast of all time. Additionally, according to Twitter's stats, those 3.1 million impressions generated 2,300 clicks to our content. But Facebook, with far less impressions, generated 10 times that number of clicks to our content, about 70,000.

Conclusion

The general public's reactions indicated that the Debate has been very successful for people to know the main issues the Political Parties stand for and why they should give their votes. The media also show casted that many people in all Somaliland regions saw the Debate an important event that affected their views towards the political parties and their candidates.



The debates have been seen, both domestically and internationally, as a significant milestone for a healthy and mature democracy in Somaliland. People viewed debates as an indication of an open, transparent election process where all candidates can present their policies and plans for better Somaliland. Voters were also able to see issues they are concerned about addressed by candidates during debates and hold them to account for past actions. These factors contributed to the overall legitimacy of the election process and its credibility.

Finally, IG has organized thanksgiving event for all those who involved in the debate such as volunteers, political taskforce, moderators, promoters, media outlets and the public.



