



# Towards a Plural Epistemology: Qualitative Research and the Myth of Homogeneity in Fragile Contexts

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## Abstract

Ethnographic research in fragile and conflict-affected settings (FCAS) is frequently distorted by an implicit assumption of social and cultural homogeneity. In Somalia, a society defined by profound internal differentiation across clan structures, gender relations, generational identities, livelihood systems, geographic locations, and diaspora affiliations, this distortion is particularly consequential. This paper critically reviews thirty-one peer-reviewed sources published between 2023 and 2026 to interrogate what we term the 'myth of homogeneity': the methodological and epistemological tendency to treat internally differentiated societies as socially uniform units. Two guiding questions organise the review: first, how does the myth of homogeneity shape ethnographic knowledge production in fragile contexts? Second, what methodological alternatives can centre heterogeneity, reflexivity, and participatory knowledge production? Drawing on scholarship in ethnographic methodology, feminist research, decolonial epistemology, and fragile state governance, the paper argues that homogeneity-premised research designs produce epistemic distortion and contribute to misinformed policy and humanitarian interventions. The review reveals that a significant proportion of recent scholarship on Somalia relies on urban-centric, IDP-focused, or male-dominated samples, systematically excluding pastoralist, rural, coastal, minority-clan, and diaspora voices. The review is organised around five thematic areas: conceptual foundations, Somali heterogeneity, methodological challenges, ethical imperatives, and reconstructive methodological pathways. It concludes by proposing the Heterogeneity-Centred Ethnographic Framework for Fragile Contexts (HCEFF), built on five operational principles – intersectional sampling, multi-sited ethnography, reflexive positionality, participatory co-production, and attention to access economies as practical tools for rigorous, ethical qualitative inquiry in fragile contexts. Adopted systematically, this framework has the potential to reorient Somali studies and comparable FCAS scholarship toward epistemically accountable and policy-relevant knowledge production.

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## **Introduction**

Qualitative research in fragile and conflict-affected settings (FCAS) has expanded significantly in recent decades, yet a persistent epistemological challenge remains: the tendency to treat highly complex societies as socially uniform entities. This challenge is especially acute in ethnographic studies, where the researcher's positionality, access conditions, and the structural constraints of fieldwork in insecure environments all shape what is observed, recorded, and ultimately represented as knowledge. In FCAS, Enria and Shepler (2023) observe that security and logistical constraints promote simplified images of complex social worlds and systematically reduce the diversity of voices captured in fieldwork. Ahmed (2023) reminds us that ethnographic interpretation is never neutral, since the identity and positionality of the researcher shape what is noticed and documented, thereby embedding assumptions of homogeneity in the research design itself.

This paper addresses a specific research problem: the systematic reproduction of homogenising assumptions in ethnographic research about fragile contexts, and its consequences for knowledge production, policy, and humanitarian intervention. Epistemologically, these assumptions distort the categories through which fragile societies are understood; practically, they feed into policy frameworks and humanitarian programming that misread social realities, misallocate resources, and entrench structural inequalities. Two guiding questions structure the analysis. First: how does the myth of homogeneity shape ethnographic knowledge production in Somalia and comparable fragile contexts? Second: what methodological alternatives are available to researchers who seek to centre heterogeneity, reflexivity, and participatory knowledge production? Somalia is used as the primary illustrative case because it combines extreme state fragility with deep social complexity, making it an especially instructive site for examining the epistemological stakes of methodological choices.

Somalia has been in a prolonged period of instability since the collapse of the central government in 1991, marked by armed conflict, humanitarian crises, climate disasters, and a fragmented governance landscape. Menkhaus (2024) notes that this fragility has produced a governance space in which formal state authority is weak, while informal structures remain highly functional, yet are frequently overlooked in state-centric analyses. The persistence of non-state governance arrangements demonstrates that Somali society cannot be explained through a single institutional lens, and precisely this complexity renders Somalia a critical case for challenging simplified ethnographic representations.

This review draws on scholarship published between 2023 and 2026, encompassing ethnographic methodology, feminist and decolonial epistemology, and research on fragile state governance. Descriptively, it maps dimensions of Somali heterogeneity and the mechanisms through which homogenising assumptions enter research design. Analytically, it identifies the epistemological consequences of these assumptions for the quality of knowledge and policy relevance. Normatively, it proposes a named framework to guide future ethnographic inquiry in fragile contexts, arguing that appreciating internal diversity is an ethical and epistemological necessity, not merely a descriptive improvement.

## **Review methodology**

This paper is structured as a critical literature review drawing on scholarship published primarily between 2023 and 2026. Sources were identified through systematic searches of Google Scholar, JSTOR, JSTOR Africa, and EBSCO using the following search terms: ethnographic research Somalia, fragile contexts qualitative methodology, FCAS knowledge production, Somali heterogeneity, decolonial ethnography, feminist research fragile states, and positionality FCAS. Searches were limited to English-language peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, institutional reports, and



monographs. Inclusion criteria required sources to address at least one of the following: qualitative or ethnographic methodology in FCAS, dimensions of Somali social complexity, decolonial or feminist epistemological frameworks, or methodological ethics in fragile contexts. Sources that focused solely on political or security analysis, without engaging with methodology or representation, were excluded. While the searches yielded hundreds of results, thirty-one sources met the inclusion criteria because they provided the necessary methodological and epistemological depth, rather than merely general political or security analysis, and were organised into the five thematic areas that structure the review: conceptual foundations, Somali heterogeneity, methodological challenges, ethical imperatives, and reconstructive methodological pathways. The selection of Somalia as the primary case reflects its combination of extreme fragility and documented social complexity, which makes it analytically generative for the paper's central argument about the myth of homogeneity.

Ontologically, this paper proceeds from a critical realist position: social heterogeneity is real and structured, not merely a discursive artefact, while knowledge of it is always mediated through socially positioned research practices. This commitment is consequential: because heterogeneity exists independently of researchers' assumptions, homogeneity-premised designs produce genuine epistemic distortion rather than merely different representations. This distinguishes the argument from strong constructivism, which locates the problem solely in the politics of representation, and from positivism, which treats sampling adequacy as a technical rather than epistemological matter.

Author positionality note: The lead author is a Somali PhD candidate with direct experience of displacement and diaspora engagement, bringing insider familiarity with the clan, gender, and generational dynamics analysed here. The co-supervisors are senior scholars in qualitative methodology and African studies at Kenyan universities. This insider-outsider positioning shapes the treatment of heterogeneity as empirically grounded and methodologically generative, underscoring the paper's prescription that researchers make such positionality explicit.

### **Fragility and the myth of homogeneity**

Fragile contexts are commonly defined through state-centric indicators of political instability, weak institutions, and insecurity. These framings tend to mask the complexity of social organisation in such settings, generating incomplete inferences about how societies actually function. According to Hagmann and Péclard (2023), governance in fragile settings is often informal, hybrid, and community-based, which state failure frameworks fail to capture adequately. They show how power in these places is frequently decentralised across customary institutions, religious leaders, and local networks. Menkhaus (2024) further illustrates that Somalia exhibits governance without government, in which order is maintained through non-state forms of authority despite institutional collapse.

Descriptively, heterogeneity in this paper refers to structured differences in lived experience across social categories – gender, age, geography, clan membership, livelihood, and socioeconomic status. Analytically, it denotes an epistemological principle: that inequality, identity, and social positioning fundamentally shape access to power, knowledge, and resources in ways that vary across social locations. These disparities are further intensified by the unequal exposure to conflict, humanitarian intervention, and displacement in fragile contexts. Gillborn, Rollock, and Warmington (2023) argue that acknowledging heterogeneity is necessary to prevent analytical reductionism in qualitative studies. Heterogeneity must therefore be treated as a foundational methodological principle rather than an optional descriptive category.

The myth of homogeneity, as developed in this paper, refers to the cluster of assumptions and practices by which researchers represent internally differentiated societies as socially coherent and uniform units. It functions as a methodological and epistemological bias that reduces complex social



structures to single-story accounts, operating across four levels of the research process. At the sampling level, this manifests when researchers favour powerful, visible, or easily accessible groups, thereby systematically excluding marginalised populations. At the gatekeeping level, elites, NGO mediators, or local authorities control participant selection. At the interpretive level, conclusions are generalised across populations without attention to variation or contradiction. At the policy level, simplified narratives are preferred for their administrative legibility (Ibrahim & Shire, 2023). Collectively, these processes produce what Enria and Shepler (2023) call logistics-driven knowledge, in which field constraints determine epistemic outcomes.

A concrete illustration of logistics-driven knowledge is found in the pattern of IDP-centred research in Somalia. Multiple studies, including those analysed by Mahmoud and Sheekh (2024), have relied primarily on internally displaced populations located in urban camps around Mogadishu, Baidoa, and Kismayo. These populations are accessible precisely because humanitarian infrastructure concentrates them in identifiable locations. The resulting research disproportionately reflects the experiences of displaced urban communities while systematically underrepresenting pastoralists, rural agriculturalists, coastal communities, and remote minority clans whose lived realities differ significantly from those of camp-dwelling IDPs. Abdi (2023) documents how this IDP-centred sampling bias generates misleading assumptions about national-level conditions, producing what amounts to a flattened ethnography of Somalia built on a highly partial empirical base.

In fragile contexts, sampling methods that favour dominant groups constitute a major source of epistemic distortion, as they systematically marginalise less conspicuous populations. Mohamud and Farah (2024) show that dependence on socially dominant interlocutors in Somalia produces incomplete accounts characterised by elite interpretation rather than community-wide perspectives; gatekeeping structures compound this dynamic by regulating who is considered safe, relevant, or accessible, thereby determining which voices enter the research record in the first place. Generalising interpretations across diverse populations erases important differences in gendered experiences of conflict, livelihood vulnerabilities, and variations in regional governance. Policy narratives based on such research risk misidentifying needs and entrenching structural disparities (UNHCR, 2024).

These constraints are further exacerbated in fragile states like Somalia by insecurity, restricted movement, and dependence on humanitarian infrastructure to conduct fieldwork. According to Menkhaus (2024), this reliance creates access economies in which research is shaped by the agendas of humanitarian actors rather than the full fabric of social life. The resulting constraints restrict long-term immersion and minimise opportunities for triangulation across diverse social groups. As Horst and Gaas (2024) note, field-based researchers systematically avoid incorporating diaspora and remote networks, despite these groups' considerable influence on local governance and livelihoods.

Fragility does not merely complicate research logistics; it actively constitutes knowledge production. When coupled with methodological shortcuts and reliance on available populations, it systematically reinforces the myth of homogeneity. Hagmann and Péclard (2023) argue that analytical methods must engage layered social realities rather than state-centric simplifications. Ahmed (2023) maintains that reflexive positionality is fundamental to reducing epistemic distortion. Combating the myth of homogeneity, therefore, requires methodological rigour, reflexivity, and a sustained commitment to social complexity.



## Somali heterogeneity: dimensions of internal diversity

### *Clan structures and social differentiation*

Somali society is organised around complex clan and sub-clan systems that function as flexible governance structures rather than rigid social categories. These systems provide mechanisms of social organisation, conflict management, resource distribution, and political representation across the country. The normative framework underpinning these functions is *xeer* – Somali customary law – which enables the clan system to operate as a *de facto* judiciary and governance mechanism in the absence of a centralised state. Without well-developed centralised state institutions, clan-based arrangements have historically served as the primary ordering force and mechanism of resource access. Menkhaus (2024) characterises this as governance without government, in which non-state institutions, especially clan systems, continue to sustain daily social and political life. Haggmann and Péclard (2023) argue that these hybrid governance forms are pivotal to understanding order in fragile environments precisely because they substitute for rather than simply supplement weak state power. Critically, however, this flexible governance is not experienced equally by all: within the inter-clan hierarchy, minority clans, women, and the rural poor are frequently governed by *xeer*-based arrangements without meaningful participation in their formulation, thereby reproducing heterogeneous experiences of protection, exclusion, and authority.

Critically, clan identity in Somalia is not fixed, static, or uniformly activated across contexts; it is situationally mobilised in response to social, economic, and political conditions. Individuals stress or downplay clan affiliation depending on whether they are engaged in negotiations, conflict scenarios, or resource competition. Mohamud and Farah (2024) demonstrate that clan affiliation can be extensively mobilised in both urban and rural settings, particularly under conditions of intense resource rivalry or political contestation and can equally serve as a mechanism of social protection – providing safety nets, mediating disputes, and organising mutual aid – thereby generating heterogeneous lived experiences depending on one's position within the clan structure. Clan affiliation can equally be suspended in cosmopolitan urban contexts where professional, educational, or religious identities become more salient. Ahmed (2023) reinforces this argument by noting that social identities in ethnographic settings are dynamic and interaction-dependent rather than structurally determined.

In cities like Mogadishu and Hargeisa, people navigate multiple overlapping identity structures simultaneously – clan membership, religious affiliation, occupational status, and diaspora ties. Warsame (2025) notes that young urban Somalis are increasingly building hybrid identities that draw on both traditional clan affiliation and globalised cultural and political discourses. Horst and Gaas (2024) add that diaspora returnees introduce new identity logics that transform the understanding and practice of clan in urban settings, making clan identity one among several overlapping identity markers rather than a singular determinant of social belonging. Ethnographic analysis of a clan must therefore treat it as dynamic and situational, not as a fixed primordial category. Essentialist treatment of Somali social organisation, as Ibrahim and Shire (2023) warn, reproduces simplified accounts that generate misunderstandings of conflict dynamics, political alliances, and social cooperation mechanisms. The analytical move proposed here – treating clan as one among several overlapping, situationally activated identity axes – draws on Crenshaw's (1989) foundational argument that social categories are neither independent nor additive but intersecting and mutually constitutive. Applying intersectionality to clan-based societies requires recognising that clan identity is inflected differently across gender, generation, and geography depending on social location.



### ***Gender diversity and feminist perspectives***

Somali women's experiences are profoundly diverse, shaped by intersecting factors including geography, class, education level, religious interpretation, and exposure to transnational networks. Rural pastoral women tend to be engaged in livestock production and informal trade, while urban women participate in formal employment, education, and civic spaces. Diaspora women navigate hybrid identities through migration, resettlement, and engagement with global feminist discourses. Mohamed (2024) argues that gender in Somalia cannot be reduced to a single analytical lens, since lived experiences vary significantly across regions and social environments. Abdi and Yusuf (2023) observe that structural inequalities intersect with local cultural norms to produce differentiated gendered realities – a finding that requires approaching Somali women as a heterogeneous population with varied social positioning and agency.

Dominant humanitarian and policy discourses frequently depict Somali women primarily as victims of violence, conflict, or displacement, thereby diminishing both their agency and their social contributions. Ahmed (2023) emphasises that victim-centred narratives are frequently replicated in humanitarian reporting, producing partial understandings of women's lived experiences. Johnson and Warsame (2024) document that Somali women serve actively as negotiators, merchants, and peacebuilders in domestic and community settings – roles that challenge passive representations. Feminist ethnographic scholarship has further identified multiple and varied modalities of Somali femininity: rural pastoral women maintaining traditional livelihoods, urban professionals in formal employment and education, and diaspora feminists engaged in global advocacy networks. Abdi (2025) argues that feminist ethnography must incorporate intersectionality to prevent reproducing simplified gender binaries. Enria and Shepler (2023) warn that imposing homogeneous gender identities in fragile contexts may strengthen stereotypes and produce locally ungrounded knowledge.

### ***Livelihood systems and spatial inequality***

Somalia's population is characterised by highly diverse livelihood systems closely tied to geography, ecology, and historical settlement patterns. Pastoralists in arid and semi-arid areas depend on livestock mobility as the primary survival strategy. Agro-pastoralists combine agriculture and herding in more fertile zones. Coastal communities are engaged in fishing, marine trade, and small-scale commerce, while urban inhabitants participate in formal employment, informal trade, and service-based economies. Little (2023) argues that these livelihood systems are not merely economic adaptations but social institutions that define governance, identity, and resource distribution. Haggmann and Péclard (2023) note that this livelihood diversity reflects broader patterns of hybrid governance in fragile settings, where formal and informal systems co-exist.

As documented in Section 2, the over-reliance on IDP populations exemplifies logistics-driven knowledge production. The spatial bias this creates is not merely empirical but intersectional: pastoralist women in remote regions, for example, occupy a very different social location from displaced urban women in Mogadishu camps, and research that conflates these groups not only misrepresents livelihoods but also distorts the gendered and geographical dimensions of vulnerability. Mohamed and Warsame (2025) note that these spatial biases shape development policies that systematically fail to reflect the realities of pastoral and coastal populations. The implication for research design is that spatial diversity – urban, peri-urban, rural, nomadic, coastal – must be explicitly built into sampling frameworks rather than treated as a logistical constraint to be managed after the fact.



### ***Diaspora and generational differences***

The Somali diaspora plays a critical role in shaping economic, political, and social life through sustained remittance flows, transnational advocacy networks, and knowledge exchange. According to Horst (2024), the Somali diaspora constitutes a transnational social field that maintains dense linkages between host countries and homeland communities through mobility and communication. Kleist (2023) adds that diaspora engagement is not homogeneous: different generations and geographic locations produce varied types of political and economic participation, making the diaspora itself a heterogeneous and dynamic actor. Generational differences also create distinct orientations toward governance, identity, and modernisation. Older generations tend to emphasise continuity of clan structures and traditional authority (xeer), while younger Somalis are more intensively engaged with digital technologies, international educational systems, and global development discourses.

Mahmoud and Horst (2024) demonstrate that generational change is redefining authority relations, particularly in urban centres where young people are increasingly participating in civic life and challenging inherited forms of authority that conflict with their educational and professional aspirations. Warsame (2025) argues that youth identity formation in Somalia is increasingly transnational – shaped through the interaction of local cultural expectations and international norms encountered through media, migration, and digital platforms. Ahmed and Kleist (2024) observe that young Somalis must manage multiple simultaneous identity demands, shifting dynamically between traditional and modern registers. These generational and diaspora-driven shifts have significant consequences for ethnographic representation: dismissing generational variation risks producing overgeneralised accounts that obscure internal change. Enria and Shepler (2023) warn that failing to incorporate generational processes contributes to the stale, fragile depictions of context, while Horst (2024) underscores that diaspora and youth networks are central to understanding contemporary Somali governance and development trajectories.

### **Methodological challenges in fragile contexts**

#### ***Access and security constraints***

Fieldwork in fragile contexts such as Somalia presents interrelated methodological challenges that significantly shape ethnographic knowledge production. A major limitation is restricted access due to insecurity and volatile conflict dynamics, which compel researchers to work within relatively secure urban settings for short periods. Dependence on large towns and displacement camps constrains immersion and limits access to rural and mobile populations, creating geographic and social bias that systematically privileges safer areas over more representative communities. These conditions do not merely influence sampling decisions; they determine which social realities become visible in research outputs, shaping the scope, depth, and representativeness of findings in ways that must be explicitly acknowledged in research design.

#### ***Sampling and gatekeeping***

Related to access constraints is the problem of gatekeeping, through which institutional actors – including NGOs, local authorities, and international agencies – mediate participant selection and effectively filter who is considered safe, relevant, or accessible to researchers. According to Menkhaus (2024), this institutional mediation creates access economies in which the research agenda is shaped by humanitarian actors' priorities rather than the full range of social experience. The result is a structural tendency to oversample populations that are already integrated into the humanitarian system and to undersample remote, pastoralist, minority-clan, and politically sensitive communities. Mohamud and Farah (2024) document how dependence on socially dominant interlocutors produces



accounts characterised by elite interpretation rather than community-wide perspectives. Researchers must therefore develop explicit strategies to diversify their interlocutor base and to critically question the gatekeeping arrangements that shape their field access.

### ***Language and translation***

Language and translation represent another significant challenge in conveying local meanings within academic frameworks. The linguistic complexity of Somalia – with multilingual communication patterns across Somali, Arabic, and English – presents researchers with intricate interpretive contexts. Many culturally specific concepts, such as *xeer* (customary law), carry layered meanings that do not translate directly into Western scholarly terminology. When translated without adequate contextualisation, these concepts risk being simplified or repackaged in ways that strip them of their normative and institutional meaning. This can distort analysis when culturally grounded practices are misunderstood or inappropriately assimilated into external conceptual frameworks. Language must therefore be treated not as a neutral technical medium but as a critical site of meaning-making and epistemological negotiation, requiring researchers to invest in deep linguistic competence or sustained collaborative translation processes.

### ***Positionality and trust***

Researcher positionality and its effects on trust represent a fourth significant challenge, shaping both access to participants and the quality of the data produced. Researchers who share clan, language, or community background with their interlocutors may benefit from cultural familiarity and established social networks that enable access to sensitive information and informal knowledge systems; however, they may also face demands for loyalty, allegations of bias, or pressure to conform to localised narratives. Researchers who lack these shared markers may be perceived as more neutral, but often encounter restricted access or filtered responses shaped by gatekeepers and community intermediaries. Critically, this apparent binary obscures the fluid and multidimensional nature of positionality: a researcher can simultaneously be an insider by clan affiliation but an outsider by class, gender, or educational background, meaning that positionality is not a fixed attribute but a relational and situationally shifting condition. These overlapping dimensions of insider and outsider status must each be declared and analysed, not resolved into a single category. This dynamic suggests that trust is not a given but an ongoing negotiation throughout the research process. Ahmed (2023) stresses that the researcher's identity must be critically acknowledged as an active force shaping both field relationships and knowledge production, rather than treated as a background variable to be controlled through standard research protocols.

## **Ethical implications of ethnographic research**

### ***Risk and consent***

Conventional informed consent procedures are often insufficient in fragile contexts such as Somalia, where participation in research may expose individuals to political, social, or security-related risks. Consent in these settings is not a one-time administrative requirement but a context-dependent process that evolves and may need to be revisited throughout field interactions. The vulnerability of participants can shift as conflict dynamics, local power relations, and community tensions change. Ethical responsibility, therefore, extends beyond initial consent to include continuous assessment of risk and participant safety. Researchers must prioritise participant protection over procedural compliance to prevent unintended harm, treating consent as a dynamic, relational, and ethically substantive practice rather than a bureaucratic formality.



### ***Representation ethics***

The generalisation of ethnographic findings risks reinforcing stereotypes and misinforming policy interventions in vulnerable settings. When diverse social realities are compressed into simplified narratives, important differences in identity, experience, and agency are erased. The ethical obligation of ethnographic representation thus requires analytic disaggregation – disaggregating findings by clan, gender, livelihood, geography, and generation – to preserve complexity and prevent essentialist interpretations. Ahmed and Duale (2024) argue that recognition of gender heterogeneity is fundamental to creating ethically responsible and analytically sound ethnographic inquiry. More broadly, accurate representation is simultaneously a methodological and an ethical requirement: researchers who suppress internal variation in the name of generalisability produce knowledge that is both epistemically inadequate and potentially harmful to the communities it purports to describe.

### ***Knowledge extraction and power imbalances***

Research in Somalia is frequently shaped by unequal global knowledge production systems in which data are extracted from local communities but interpreted, analysed, and published within external academic or policy institutions. This creates structural imbalances in authorship, ownership, and epistemic authority. Nkrumah and Odoi (2023) demonstrate that African research has historically reproduced extractive knowledge systems in which the interpretation process is controlled by external institutions, with local voices occasionally undermined or retold through analytical lenses that do not reflect indigenous interpretations. These asymmetries raise fundamental questions of epistemic justice and the ethical right to knowledge. Researchers must critically interrogate whose voices are prioritised in analysis and publication, and normatively pursue more participatory and equitable forms of knowledge production that involve communities as co-producers rather than as objects of study.

### **Reconstructive methodological pathways**

To address the myth of homogeneity in fragile contexts such as Somalia, this paper proposes a heterogeneity-centred ethnographic framework built on five operational principles. These principles collectively constitute what we name the Heterogeneity-Centred Ethnographic Framework for Fragile Contexts (HCEFF), a structured methodological orientation that future empirical studies can adopt, adapt, and critically test. The framework moves beyond aspirational critique toward a set of actionable design commitments that directly counter each mechanism through which the myth of homogeneity operates, from sampling and gatekeeping to interpretation and knowledge dissemination.

#### ***Principle 1 – Intersectional sampling***

Intersectional sampling requires that research designs deliberately recruit participants across multiple axes of heterogeneity, including clan, gender, age, livelihood system, geographic location, and diaspora status, rather than defaulting to dominant, visible, or conveniently accessible populations. This principle directly counters the sampling-level operation of the myth of homogeneity, ensuring that marginalised groups are systematically included rather than merely incidentally present. In practice, this means developing a sampling matrix before fieldwork that maps the dimensions of heterogeneity relevant to the specific research question and establishes minimum representation targets across categories. For a study on governance perceptions in southern Somalia, for example, this would require recruiting from urban elites, rural pastoralists, IDP communities, minority clans, and women's civic organisations, not merely whichever group is most accessible through NGO gatekeeping.



### ***Principle 2 – Multi-sited ethnography***

Multi-sited ethnography requires research designs that pursue diversity of space and sociality by extending fieldwork beyond conveniently accessible urban or camp settings to include rural, pastoral, coastal, and diaspora sites. This minimises dependence on available populations and expands the empirical foundation of studies. It also ensures that mobility, displacement, and transnational linkages are properly integrated into analysis rather than treated as peripheral phenomena. Horst (2024) underscores that diaspora and remote networks are central to Somali governance and livelihoods yet are routinely absent from research conducted within the country. In practice, multi-sited designs must account for differential security conditions across sites, and researchers should develop site-specific access strategies, including digital ethnographic methods for diaspora engagement, rather than treating all sites as methodologically interchangeable.

### ***Principle 3 – Reflexive positionality***

Reflexive positionality requires researchers to continuously interrogate how their own identity, assumptions, institutional affiliation, and field interactions affect data collection and interpretation, and to make these reflections transparent in their published outputs. This principle has deep roots in feminist epistemology: Haraway's (1988) concept of situated knowledge established that all knowledge claims emerge from a particular location and that the pretence of a view from nowhere is itself a form of epistemic evasion. Harding (1991) extended this through standpoint epistemology, insisting that researchers who critically examine their own social position produce stronger, not weaker, knowledge claims. Ahmed (2023) argues that reflexivity is fundamental to reducing epistemic distortion in qualitative inquiry. In practice, reflexive positionality involves maintaining a field reflexivity journal, explicitly declaring positionality in the methodology section, and subjecting interpretive claims to member-checking or peer review by local researchers, not as a procedural formality but as a substantive epistemic commitment.

### ***Principle 4 – Participatory co-production***

Participatory co-production requires involving community members in the co-definition of research questions, co-interpretation of findings, and confirmation of conclusions, thereby reducing epistemic asymmetries and strengthening ethical accountability. The intellectual lineage of this principle runs through Chambers's (1994) participatory rural appraisal tradition, which demonstrated that communities possess expert knowledge of their own social contexts that external researchers systematically underestimate, and through the multi-sited ethnographic tradition established by Marcus (1995), which challenged the assumption that researchers can adequately represent mobile and transnational communities from a fixed observational position. Together, these foundations establish participatory co-production not as a recent methodological innovation but as a response to well-documented epistemological limitations of conventional research design. Nkrumah and Odoi (2023) argue that participatory approaches represent the most direct methodological response to extractive knowledge production systems. In fragile contexts, participatory methods may need to be adapted to conditions of insecurity – for instance, through community validation sessions in safer locations or through engagement with diaspora community representatives when direct in-country participation is impossible.

### ***Principle 5 – Attention to access economies***

Attention to access economies requires researchers to explicitly document and critically analyse how field access was obtained, who mediated it, what populations were made accessible or inaccessible as a result, and how these access structures may have shaped the data collected. This principle operates at the gatekeeping level, countering the institutional bias introduced by mediation by NGO, state, and community authorities. In practice, this means writing an access reflexivity statement as part of the



methodology section – documenting the access economy of the specific fieldwork – and assessing its likely effects on sampling and interpretation. Menkhaus (2024) argues that unless access economies are made explicit, their influence on research outputs remains invisible and unchallenged.

***Illustrative research design template***

To demonstrate how the HCEFF framework operates in practice, we offer a schematic application to a hypothetical study of gendered livelihoods in pastoral versus urban settings in southern Somalia. This template illustrates how each of the five principles shapes concrete research decisions.

*Table 1: Illustrative HCEFF guided research design for a study of gendered livelihoods in Somalia*

HCEFF Principle	Research design application	Key trade-offs and constraints
Intersectional sampling	Recruit across pastoral women (Bay/Bakool), urban women (Mogadishu), and diaspora women (Nairobi/Minneapolis); stratify by age (18-30 vs 31-50) and clan diversity	Security limitations may restrict pastoral site access; diaspora recruitment requires digital methods
Multi-sited ethnography	Conduct fieldwork in three sites: pastoral camp (Baidoa area), urban neighbourhood (Mogadishu), diaspora hub (Nairobi); use digital ethnography for diaspora strand	Higher resource and time requirements; differential security protocols per site
Reflexive positionality	Declare researcher identity (gender, clan, institutional affiliation); maintain reflexivity journal; conduct member-checking with local research partners	May require co-researchers from different positions to triangulate positionality effects
Participatory co-production	Involve community representatives in refining interview guides; return preliminary findings to communities for validation; attribute contributions in publications	Community validation may be difficult in insecure settings; it may slow the publication timeline
Attention to access economies	Document all gatekeepers and access mediators; map whose voices were made accessible vs inaccessible; include an access reflexivity statement in methodology	Gatekeepers may restrict documentation of their role; they may require careful diplomacy

This template illustrates that the five principles are not merely aspirational but generate specific, operationalisable design choices with identifiable trade-offs. Researchers working in comparably fragile contexts, including conflict-affected settings in the Sahel, South Sudan, or Yemen, can adapt the framework to their specific research questions while retaining its core commitment to heterogeneity-centred, reflexive, and participatory inquiry.

**Positioning the framework: contribution and distinction**

The heterogeneity-centred ethnographic framework proposed in this paper builds on but is analytically distinct from three existing strands of scholarship that have shaped research on fragile contexts and, specifically, Somalia. Understanding these distinctions is important for clarifying what the paper adds to existing debates.

First, relative to standard FCAS governance literature – exemplified by Menkhaus (2024) and Hagmann and Péclard (2023) – the HCEFF framework shifts emphasis from institutional fragility to



epistemological fragility: not the fragility of state institutions, but the fragility of knowledge production processes that operate under conditions of constrained access, structural bias, and inadequate reflexivity. Governance literature acknowledges hybrid social orders but does not systematically address the methodological consequences of studying them through available rather than representative populations. The HCEFF framework's five principles are designed precisely to operationalise this methodological concern.

Second, relative to classical Somali ethnography – including the tradition associated with I.M. Lewis and its focus on clan as a primary organising principle – this paper advances a post-essentialist position that treats clan as one among several overlapping and situationally activated identity axes rather than as a foundational social determinant. Where classical Somali ethnography tended toward synchronic, holistic accounts of a relatively bounded society, the HCEFF framework insists on diachronic, multi-sited, and intersectional analysis that can capture social change, generational transformation, and diaspora influence.

Third, relative to critical humanitarian research – including work by Enria and Shepler (2023) and Abdi (2023) on logistics-driven knowledge and sampling bias – the HCEFF framework moves from diagnosis to prescription. Critical humanitarian research has convincingly documented the pathologies of fragile-context knowledge production, but its methodological recommendations have tended to remain at the level of general principles. The HCEFF framework's five operational principles and illustrative research design template are intended to provide the practical concreteness that critical humanitarian scholarship has not yet fully supplied.

A critical note on the literature this paper draws on: Menkhaus's (2024) governance without government framework, while analytically powerful, risks overstating the stability of clan governance in ways that underplay the exclusions it reproduces – particularly for women, minority clans, and the rural poor who are governed by these structures without having meaningfully consented to them. The HCEFF framework's intersectional sampling and participatory co-production principles are partly a corrective: they insist that governance research must ask who is excluded by informal arrangements, not only how those arrangements function. Researchers should engage governance literature critically rather than treating accounts of informal order as stable descriptive baselines.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has critically examined the myth of homogeneity in ethnographic research in fragile contexts, using Somalia as the primary illustrative case. The conclusion distils three precise claims regarding the paper's contribution.

Conceptually, the paper names and unpacks the myth of homogeneity as a specific methodological and epistemological bias that operates across four levels of the research process (sampling, gatekeeping, interpretation, and policy translation) and systematically distorts knowledge production in fragile contexts. This naming is more than terminological: it provides researchers, reviewers, and funders with a common analytical vocabulary to identify and challenge homogenising assumptions in research design.

Empirically, the paper provides a structured reading of Somali heterogeneity across six axes—clan, gender, livelihood, geography, generation, and diaspora. This multi-axis framework demonstrates that Somalis cannot be adequately represented by any single dimension of social identity, and that the intersections among these axes generate lived experiences of significant variety. This structured reading serves as both an analytical resource for researchers working on Somalia and a methodological model for analysing heterogeneity in other FCAS.



Methodologically, the paper proposes the Heterogeneity-Centred Ethnographic Framework for Fragile Contexts (HCEFF), built on five operational principles – intersectional sampling, multi-sited ethnography, reflexive positionality, participatory co-production, and attention to access economies. Unlike previous critical accounts that diagnose the problem without prescribing practical responses, the HCEFF framework provides a design-oriented toolkit accompanied by an illustrative research design template. Rigorous qualitative research in fragile settings must not only abandon simplified representations but treat complexity as a methodological and moral value – not only because it produces better scholarship, but because false representation in contexts where research informs policy and humanitarian intervention carries direct consequences for communities already made vulnerable by fragility.

Two caveats qualify these claims. First, the HCEFF framework was developed on the Somali case and its transferability to other FCAS – including Yemen, the DRC, or Myanmar – requires contextual validation; the axes of heterogeneity most analytically generative in Somalia (clan, diaspora, xeer) may not be equivalent to those most salient in other fragile contexts. Second, this review draws on scholarship from 2023–2026, meaning its theoretical genealogy is necessarily thin: the foundational work of Crenshaw (1989), Marcus (1995), Haraway (1988), and Chambers (1994) underpins the HCEFF framework but is not engaged at the depth it warrants. Future work should situate the framework more explicitly within these theoretical traditions while testing its applicability across diverse FCAS.

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