



**BRIEFING PAPER**

# **CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS AND PEACEBUILDING IN ETHIOPIA**

**BY ZELALEM ESHETU DEGIFIE<sup>1</sup>**

**MARCH 2025**

This paper examines the roles of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Ethiopian peacebuilding, exploring change and continuity within the sector and how past events influence their activities. It discusses CSOs' involvement in peace initiatives, analysing their successes as well as the factors that have hindered their effectiveness.

## **PEACEBUILDING CONTEXT**

Ethiopia faces significant social divisions and violence, resulting in a decline in its peace status.<sup>2</sup> The 2024 Global Peace Index ranked Ethiopia 144th out of 163 countries, highlighting internal armed conflicts and rising ethnic tensions. The instability is driven by a mix of historical, ethnic, political and economic factors.<sup>3</sup> Competing ethnic nationalisms stemming from historical injustice and disputes contribute to the violence, as seen in the 2020–22 Tigray war and ongoing violence in Oromia and Amhara.<sup>4</sup> Various ethnic groups seek recognition, autonomy and more resources, leading to the emergence of armed ethnonationalist entities like the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) and Fano militias. Despite promises of democratic reform in 2018, authoritarian practices persist, particularly regarding elections, media freedom and civil society operations.<sup>5</sup> Economic challenges—including widespread poverty, the rising cost of living and resource competition—exacerbate tensions.<sup>6</sup>

The causes of conflict can also be categorized into structural and proximate factors. Structural issues include the state's historical marginalization of communities, a lack of inclusive governance and uneven

- 1 Zelalem Eshetu Degifie specializes in comparative constitutional law, federalism and human rights. He is an Assistant Professor of Law at Wollo University in Ethiopia.
- 2 Institute for Economics & Peace, 'Global Peace Index 2024: Measuring Peace in a Complex World'. Accessed 15 December 2024, <http://visionofhumanity.org/resources>.
- 3 Berihu Asgele Siyum, 'Underlying Causes of Conflict in Ethiopia: Historical, Political, and Institutional?', *World Conference on Social Science Studies*, Budapest, 15-17 October 2021; Tegbaru Yared, 'Conflict Dynamics in Ethiopia: 2019–2020', *East Africa Report* 44, December 2021, Institute for Security Studies; Semir Yusuf, 'Constitutional Design Options for Ethiopia: Managing Ethnic Divisions', Monograph 204, September 2020, Institute for Security Studies.
- 4 Dalaya Ashenafi, 'Building comprehensive peace in Ethiopia: Transforming the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement', *East Africa Report* 50, December 2023, Institute for Security Studies.
- 5 Getachew Assefa and Sisay A. Yeshanew, 'Revamping the Electoral Laws of Ethiopia: Major areas of Reform and Lessons Learned' in *Righting Human Rights through Legal Reform Ethiopia's Contemporary Experience*, Volume XII, edited by Sisay A. Yeshanew and Abadir M. Ibrahim, 277–308, Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University-School of Law, 2020; Semir Yusuf, 'Ethiopia's Democratic Predicaments: State–Society Dynamics and the Balance of Power', Monograph 209, Addis Ababa: Institute for Security Studies, 2022, 11–17.
- 6 Siyum, 'Underlying Causes of Conflict in Ethiopia'.

economic development.<sup>7</sup> Initiatives like the National Dialogue and the transitional justice policy have been established to address grievances, but persistent violence and distrust hinder such efforts.<sup>8</sup> Proximate causes include events like failed peace agreements and mishandled security sector reforms, which escalated violence in, respectively, Oromia and Amhara.<sup>9</sup>

In terms of key actors, the authorities aim to enforce control and stability, often resorting to repressive measures that provoke further resistance. Groups such as the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and OLA seek greater political power and regional autonomy, leading to adversarial relationships with the central government.<sup>10</sup> Fano militias initially allied with the government during the Tigray conflict, but turned against it following disarmament efforts, illustrating the fluidity of alliances. Political mobilization among minority groups, such as the Qemant and Agew, contribute to local conflicts, often as they seek greater self-administration rights.

Recurring trends include ethnic violence and political power struggles. There are also peacebuilding opportunities like the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement and the Tanzania peace talks, which require commitment from all parties for success.

In summary, Ethiopia's conflict dynamics are complex, shaped by historical grievances, ethnic nationalism and political instability. While structures exist to foster peace, persistent challenges and fragmentation complicate such efforts. A comprehensive approach addressing both structural and proximate causes, while promoting dialogue, is essential for achieving lasting peace.

## SITUATION OF CSOS

The situation of CSOs in Ethiopia has changed since the political reforms of 2018. Previously, regulations limited CSOs' ability to engage in human rights-related advocacy if they were reliant on foreign funding.<sup>11</sup> A 2019 proclamation marked a shift, lifting these restrictions and enabling the resurgence of organizations dedicated to human rights and peacebuilding.<sup>12</sup> The proclamation established the Ethiopian Civil Society Organization Council (ECSOC), which oversees self-regulation, coordination and representation within the sector.<sup>13</sup> Membership of ECSOC is mandatory for CSOs.

Approximately 250 CSOs are registered in Ethiopia that are mainly focused on peacebuilding, with many established between 2019 and 2022.<sup>14</sup> They range from local groups to international entities. This illustrates the varied approaches to peacebuilding, encompassing grassroots initiatives and broader global collaborations. In addition to peace-focused CSOs, many human rights, development-oriented

7 John Markakis, *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers*, Boydell & Brewer, 2011; Yusuf, 'Constitutional Design Options'.

8 Tadesse Simie Metekia, Tessema Simachew Belay and Wubeshet Kumelachew Tiruneh, 'Without Peace in Ethiopia, Transitional Justice Will Be Difficult', Institute for Security Studies, 2024.

9 *Addis Standard*, 'Gov't, OLA Second Round Talks in Tanzania end without Agreement Again', 21 November 2023. Accessed 30 December 2024, <https://addisstandard.com/?p=39494>.

10 Ashenafi, 'Building comprehensive peace'.

11 Federal Negarit Gazeta of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 'Proclamation to Provide for the Registration and Regulation of Charities and Societies' aka 'Proclamation No. 621/2009', Addis Ababa, 13 February 2009; Nicky Broeckhoven et al, 'CSOs in Sustainable Development in Ethiopia: Past Practices and New Trajectories', *African Journal of Legal Studies* 13 (2020): 43–72. <https://doi.org/10.1163/17087384-12340063>.

12 Kidan Dires Demissie, 'The 2009 and 2019 CSO Laws in Ethiopia: From Hindrance to Facilitator of CSO Activities?' MA thesis, International Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, 2019; Dina Lupin, 'The Limits of "Good Law": Civil Society Regulation in South Africa and Ethiopia', *Journal of African Law* 1, (2022): 7–27.

13 Federal Negarit Gazeta of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 'Proclamation No. 1113/2019, Organizations of Civil Societies Proclamation', Addis Ababa, 12 March 2019.

14 Data from FDRE Authority for Civil Society Organizations (ACSO). Correct as of 16 December 2024.

and women's organizations are engaged in peacebuilding. These organizations address broader social, economic, gender and human rights issues that are often intertwined with conflicts. This highlights the comprehensive nature of peacebuilding, which includes not just conflict prevention but also the promotion of human rights and sustainable development.

Despite some improvements since 2018, the relationship between the government and CSOs remains at times contentious. Tensions can arise when CSOs criticize government policies. For instance, on 6 August 2022, security forces prevented 35 local CSOs from holding a press conference advocating for peace amid escalating hostilities in northern Ethiopia centred on Tigray region.<sup>15</sup> This shows that the government can act repressively when it sees CSOs as challenging its stance.

Another example is when the Center for Advancement of Rights and Democracy's (CARD) critical report on the National Dialogue raised government concerns.<sup>16</sup> The authorities viewed the report as disruptive, contributing to a shift from a supportive to a more controlling regulatory stance.<sup>17</sup> This resulted in the suspension of five relatively vocal CSOs, including CARD, in November 2024, creating an atmosphere of fear and self-censorship within the sector.<sup>18</sup> Such developments undermine the spirit of the 2018 reforms and the role of CSOs in peacebuilding.

Financial sustainability also poses challenges for the sector. Many emerging CSOs struggle to secure adequate funding.<sup>19</sup> Most donors favor established organizations, sidelining newer CSOs that lack project experience. Additionally, established CSOs often depend on international donors, making them vulnerable to shifting priorities. This limits their strategic focus and effectiveness in addressing critical peacebuilding issues.<sup>20</sup> This funding landscape also contributes to fragmentation as competition for scarce resources undermines collaboration among CSOs.<sup>21</sup>

The Tigray war exposed identity-driven divisive behavior among CSOs, obstructing the development of a cohesive peace advocacy voice.<sup>22</sup> The lack of solidarity among local organizations, especially following the suspension of human rights CSOs, contrasts with support from counterparts in other

15 *Wazema Radio*, 'Ethiopian Minister Warns Representatives of Local Civil Society Organizations for their Recently Issued "urgent call for peace" Statement', 10 September 2023. Accessed 20 December 2024, <https://umdmmedia.com/2022/09/ethiopian-minister-warns-representatives-of-local-civil-society-organizations-for-their-recently-issued-urgent-call-for-peace-statement/>.

16 Sisay Sahlu, 'CARD questions legitimacy and inclusivity of National Dialogue Commission', *The Reporter*, 24 August 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/41603/>.

17 Interview with senior CSOs leaders, 29 December 2024, Addis Ababa; Interview with representatives from recently suspended CSOs, 27 November 2024, Addis Ababa. In their discussions with ACSO, some of these organizations have been accused of ridiculing national initiatives such as the national dialogue and transitional justice processes.

18 The Ethiopian Human Rights Council, Ethiopian Human Rights Defenders Center (EHRDC), Center for the Advancement of Rights and Democracy (CARD), Lawyers for Human Rights (LHR) and Association for Human Rights in Ethiopia (AHRE) have been suspended. The latter's suspension has been revoked with a warning. As to its effect, see Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, 'Caution Should be Exercised Regarding Measures Suspending CSOs by ACSO to Ensure that Civic Space and Freedom of Association are not Adversely Affected', 27 December 2024.

19 Interviews with CSOs and networks, 15–20 December 2024; Debebe Hailegebriel et al, 'Mapping Study of Civil Society Organisations in Ethiopia', 2021.

20 This is evident in the recent USAID funding cuts, which led many CSOs focused on peacebuilding to halt their activities.

21 Zelalem Eshetu, 'The Role of CSOs in Peace-Building Process: Lessons to Ethiopia', workshop presentation prepared by ActionAid Ethiopia, 11–12 August 2022, Addis Ababa.

22 Interview with senior CSO Leaders, 29 December 2024, Addis Ababa. Some CSO leaders who referred to the conflict as a 'civil war' were accused by their colleagues in the sector of supporting the TPLF and found themselves in vulnerable positions. Additionally, some CSO leaders were providing logistical support, such as food, to the Ethiopian National Defense Forces.

African nations.<sup>23</sup> Ongoing conflicts in regions including Amhara and Oromia exacerbate challenges, including risks such as kidnapping and attacks on humanitarian workers.<sup>24</sup>

Therefore, while the status of CSOs in Ethiopia has improved, their operational environment continues to face significant challenges.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

Primary data was gathered from interviews with representatives of 13 organizations involved in peacebuilding in Amhara, Tigray, Oromia, Benishangul-Gumuz and Gambella regions, as well as the city administrations of Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa.<sup>25</sup> Most interviews were conducted from 15–22 December 2024. Also interviewed were representatives of two CSOs that the authorities recently suspended, key informants from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), a senior peacebuilding expert from the Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations Council (ECSOC) and a senior expert from the Ministry of Peace, along with two senior CSO leaders.

Organizations were selected through purposive sampling based on their experience of peacebuilding in conflict-affected areas. In order to capture a range of perspectives, the process considered participants' backgrounds and geographic distribution. Standardized interview protocols and data triangulation were used to reduce bias in data collection. Qualitative data analysis methods were used including thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes and content analysis to examine the context and meaning of information.

## ANALYSING PEACEBUILDING PRACTICES

The study synthesizes contributions from Thania Paffenholz, Catherine Barnes and John Paul Lederach regarding how CSOs can help foster sustainable peace.<sup>26</sup> The resulting integrated framework recognizes four main peacebuilding functions of CSOs as it emphasizes an inclusive approach that engages grassroots, mid-level and elite actors and tackles both immediate and underlying causes of conflict.

The first is protection, ensuring citizen safety during and after conflicts through mechanism such as providing emergency assistance, establishing 'peace zones' and demining. While the responsibility for citizen security typically lies with the state, its ability to fulfil this duty is undermined if it is a conflict

23 Defend Defenders, 'Ethiopia: Defend and Strengthen the Human Rights Movement Against Erosion', 13 January 2025. Accessed 20 January 2025, <https://defenddefenders.org/ethiopia-defend-and-strengthen-the-human-rights-movement/>.

24 In 2023, UN OCHA reported 93 incidents affecting aid workers such as kidnappings and attacks. From January to June 2024, 5 humanitarian workers were killed, 10 assaulted and 11 kidnapped by unidentified groups. See OCHA, 'Ethiopia: Humanitarian Snapshot–February 2024', 12 March 2024. Accessed 23 December 2024, <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-humanitarian-snapshot-february-2024>.

25 The organizations include Benishangul-Gumuz Development Associations Network (BGDAN), Chura Abugida Artistic Association, Community Opportunity for Development Organization, Empathy for Life Integrated Development Association, East Africa Initiative For Change (I4C), Ghion Peace, Reconciliation, and Development Association, Development for All, Pro-Development Networks (PDN), Redeem the Generation, Resource Center for Sustainable Change, Save Your Holy Land Association, Tamra for Social Development and The Alliance for Civil Society Organizations in Tigray (ASCOT). Among these, BGDAN, PDN and ACSOT are networks comprising 15, 56 and 72 member CSOs, respectively.

26 Thania Paffenholz and Christoph Spurk, 'Civil Society, Civic Engagement, and Peacebuilding', *Social Development Papers: Conflict Prevention and Reconstruction*, Paper No. 36, 2006; Thania Paffenholz and Christoph Spurk, 'A Comprehensive Analytical Framework' in *Civil Society & Peacebuilding: A Critical Assessment*, edited by Thania Paffenholz, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2010; Catherine Barnes, 'Civil Society and Peacebuilding: Mapping Functions in Working for Peace', *The International Spectator, Italian Journal of International Affairs*, 44/1 (2009): 131–147; Catherine Barnes, 'Agents for Change: Civil Society Roles in Preventing War & Building Peace', Paper No. 2, The Hague: Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict, 2006; Emily E. Stanton, *Theorising Civil Society Peacebuilding: The Practical Wisdom of Local Peace Practitioners in Northern Ireland, 1965–2015*, New York and London: Routledge, 2021.

actor. In such scenarios, civil society may be well-placed to help protect civilians.

Another key role for CSOs is assisting with accountability, acting as watchdogs, providing early warning systems and human rights reporting. They engage in private and public advocacy to influence peace processes through, for example, agenda-setting and mobilization.

A third function is that CSOs can facilitate and support peace initiatives, engaging actors such as the state, citizens and armed groups, and also by providing services such as psychosocial support and job training. Intermediation in peacebuilding involves facilitating negotiations.<sup>27</sup> While this role is typically filled by states and international organizations like the United Nations, CSOs have emerged as ‘citizen third parties’, contributing to conflict resolution through both formal and informal means. CSOs create platforms for open dialogue among conflicting parties. They act as ‘friends of the peace process’, serving as watchdogs, providing critical feedback and suggesting alternative solutions to overcome deadlocks. Additionally, CSOs maintain communication between parties and offer venues for dialogue when needed.

Lastly, and tightly linked to the support for peace processes, CSOs enhance social cohesion by building trust and cooperation among conflicting groups through collaborative workshops and projects. This involves facilitating dialogue to shift conflict attitudes and mobilize community support for peace initiatives. CSOs implement strategies to reduce violence and engage in community-level peacemaking, addressing local issues that could escalate into wider violence. CSOs also try and address the root causes of conflict through education and reconciliation initiatives.

### **Protection**

Civilians across Ethiopia often suffer violence and displacement, while landmines pose a threat in Somali, Tigray, Amhara and Afar.<sup>28</sup> Local CSOs primarily focus on providing lifesaving relief during conflicts, with international organizations often leading protection initiatives.<sup>29</sup> Due to a lack of technical expertise, local CSOs are not involved in demining, which is managed by the Ministry of Defense (MOD) and the Ethiopian Mine Action Office (EMAO) in collaboration with international partners.<sup>30</sup> Recently, the MOD accredited organizations including DanChurchAid (DCA) and the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) to conduct mine action projects.

CSOs have faced difficulties negotiating safe zones or peace corridors during conflicts due to limited leverage over conflicting parties and attendant challenges in accessing conflict areas.<sup>31</sup> For example, during the Tigray war, the government restricted humanitarian organizations’ movements, accusing them of supporting the TPLF.<sup>32</sup> Local human rights CSOs reported staff arrests due to accusations of collaborating with armed groups. This fosters an environment of suspicion that complicates their

- 27 Soliman M. Santos, JR. Esq, ‘The Role of Civil Society in Peace Processes in the South and South East Asian Regions’, Background Paper, The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 21 November 2005. Accessed 12 March 2025, <https://hdcentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/TheRoleofcivilsocietyinpeaceprocessesintheSouthandSouthEastAsianregions-November-2005.pdf>; Desirée Nilsson, ‘Anchoring the Peace: Civil Society Actors in Peace Accords and Durable Peace’, *International Interactions: Empirical and Theoretical Research in International Relations* 38/2 (2012): 243–266.
- 28 Ashenafi Endale, ‘Defense Ministry, UN Coordinate to Clear Landmines Affecting 7 Million Ethiopians’, *The Reporter*, 6 April 2024; Mine Action Review, ‘Ethiopia: Clearing The Mines 2024’. Accessed 25 December 2024, [https://www.mineactionreview.org/assets/downloads/Ethiopia\\_Clearing\\_the\\_Mines\\_2024.pdf](https://www.mineactionreview.org/assets/downloads/Ethiopia_Clearing_the_Mines_2024.pdf).
- 29 Interviews with CSOs and networks, 15–22 December 2024, Addis Ababa.
- 30 Pascal Simon, ‘Transitioning Mine Action Programmes to National Ownership Ethiopia’, Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining, March 2012.
- 31 Interview with OCHA Senior Expert, 20 January 2025, Addis Ababa.
- 32 Mulugeta Gebrehiwot and Alex de Waal, ‘Humanitarian Priorities for Tigray, Ethiopia, after the Cessation of Hostilities’, World Peace Foundation, January 2023. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://worldpeacefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Humanitarian-Priorities-for-Tigray-FINAL.pdf>.



protective functions.<sup>33</sup> This trend of distrust is evident in the Pretoria Agreement that ended the Tigray war, as it does not acknowledge the protective roles of CSOs.<sup>34</sup> Conflict has severely impacted CSO operations, particularly in Tigray, where many local organizations have been unable to resume activities in the post-war period.<sup>35</sup> Humanitarian workers in Ethiopia often face targeted attacks; in 2024, for example, eight were killed, and at least 14 incidents of aid worker kidnappings for ransom were reported, primarily in Amhara.<sup>36</sup>

This insecurity hinders CSOs' protective roles. In mid-2024, OCHA initiated a civil-military coordination platform (CM Coord) to establish safe humanitarian corridors in Amhara.<sup>37</sup> The informal nature of this initiative, however, limits its effectiveness, and it relies heavily on military leaders' commitments.

### **Accountability**

CSOs can also contribute to civilian protection through monitoring and pressing for accountability. CSOs face challenges in performing their watchdog functions, which can include early-warning systems and human rights monitoring.<sup>38</sup> Human rights reporting during conflicts is mainly carried out by international organizations and the government-funded Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC). Together, for example, they have reported serious human rights violations committed by all conflict parties in the Tigray war.<sup>39</sup> The EHRC has monitored human rights violations in the Amhara, Oromia, Afar and Benishangul-Gumuz.<sup>40</sup> While some local CSOs utilize these monitoring reports for advocacy, few engage in independent monitoring as part of their broader missions. For instance, CARD monitors human rights violations related to the conflict between the Ethiopian government and the OLA in the Guji zone of Oromia.<sup>41</sup>

In Ethiopia, CSOs are not involved in monitoring peace processes as seen elsewhere in the form of consultations with official bodies and independent assessments.<sup>42</sup> The Pretoria Agreement, for example, does not recognize CSOs as part of the monitoring and verification teams. In part, researchers suggest this is because the two signatories, the federal government and the TPLF, maintain a controlling and

- 33 Aklilu Aderajew, 'Assessing the Capacity of Human Rights-Focused CSOs in Ethiopia: Focus on Conflict-Affected Areas,' presented at the First Annual CSO Conference on Peacebuilding organized by the Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations Council and the Institute for Security Studies, 30 November 2023, Addis Ababa.
- 34 Government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and the Tigray People's Liberation Front, 'Agreement for Lasting Peace through a Permanent Cessation of Hostilities between the Government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and the Tigray People's Liberation Front', Pretoria, South Africa, 2 November 2022.
- 35 Ashenafi Endale, 'Almost Half of CSOs in Tigray Remain Inactive', The Reporter, 28 January 2023. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/30276/>.
- 36 OCHA, 'Statement on the Killing of a Humanitarian Worker in the Amhara Region', 14 August 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/ethiopia/statement-killing-humanitarian-worker-amhara-region>.
- 37 Interview with OCHA senior expert, 20 January 2025, Addis Ababa. The initiation took place in Bahir Dar, Gondar and Dessie, with the effort in Gondar being particularly successful.
- 38 Interviews with CSOs and networks, 15–20 December 2024, Addis Ababa.
- 39 UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'Report of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC)/ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Joint Investigation into Alleged Violations of International Human Rights, Humanitarian and Refugee Law Committed by all Parties to the Conflict in the Tigray Region of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia', 2021. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3947207?v=pdf>.
- 40 EHRC, 'The Human Rights Situation in Conflict Areas of Ethiopia', 25 September 2024. EHRC, 'Annual Ethiopia Human Rights Situation Report from June 2023 to June 2024: Submitted to the House of Peoples Representatives', 2024.
- 41 CARD, 'Voice for Guji: Grave Human Rights Situation in Oromia's Guji Zone', 2024. Accessed 20 December 2024, <https://www.cardeth.org/sites/default/files/Voice%20for%20Guji.pdf>.
- 42 Nick Ross, 'Civil Society's Role in Monitoring and Verifying Peace Agreements: Seven Lessons from International Experiences', Inclusive Peace & Transition Initiative, January 2017.

distrustful stance toward civil society.<sup>43</sup> The Tigray Peace Building Network requested inclusion in the monitoring team from both the African Union (AU) and Tigray Interim Regional Administration but received no response.<sup>44</sup> Tigray's interim government is focused on internal crises, while the AU said the request should be made to the federal government. The lack of response to previous advocacy efforts led the network to refrain from further requests.

De facto restrictions imposed by state and non-state groups create unsafe conditions for monitoring in conflict zones.<sup>45</sup> Threats of detention and violence severely limit the ability of CSOs to report effectively. Many organizations also face limited funding and technical capacity, making it challenging to document human rights abuses promptly.<sup>46</sup>

Additionally, CSOs do not formally participate in the early-warning system established by the Ministry of Peace, further limiting their monitoring functions in peacebuilding.<sup>47</sup> While the ministry has engaged informally with CSOs, their contributions to early warning conflict prevention mechanisms are constrained by the informal nature of participation, lack of coordination among CSOs and the ministry, insufficient resources and a lack of ownership of the system.<sup>48</sup>

### **Advocacy**

CSOs in Ethiopia have advocated for peace during conflicts. For example, in January 2021, 25 local and international CSOs urged the government to fulfill its obligation to protect civilians, particularly women and children, and called for safe corridors for humanitarian access.<sup>49</sup> The ECSOC and various local CSOs have issued statements promoting dialogue and conflict resolution, particularly in Tigray, Amhara and Oromia.<sup>50</sup> Between 2021 and 2023, a coalition of CSOs called for an end to hostilities in their Ethiopian New Year statements. For example, on 6 September 2022, a coalition of 35 local CSOs presented a ten-point peace agenda that included calls for a national peace convention and independent investigations into human rights abuses.<sup>51</sup> The Alliance of Civil Society Organizations of Tigray (ACSOT) also pushed for a peaceful resolution to the conflict and adherence to the Pretoria

43 Gebrehiwot and de Waal, 'Humanitarian Priorities for Tigray'.

44 Interview with Tigray Peace Building Network Member, 20 January 2025, Addis Ababa.

45 OCHA, 'Ethiopia: Humanitarian Snapshot-February 2024'.

46 Interview with CSOs and networks, 15-20 December 2024, Addis Ababa; Abera Hailemariam Weldeyesus and Kurabachew Tirfesa Dabesa, 'Report on the Assessment of Gaps and Needs of Human Rights CSOs in Ethiopia', Civil Society Resource Center, January 2021.

47 Delegates from the Ministry of Peace, the House of Federation, the Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations Council, federal police and regional security bureaus agreed to create an inter-party initiative for establishing an early warning and rapid response system. Yet progress on this initiative has not moved forward because of lack of ownership. See, Semir Yesuf, 'Spotlight: Guiding Ethiopian Peace Policy Initiatives', Institute for Security Studies, 8 November 2023.

48 Interview with Ministry of Peace senior expert, 20 January 2025, Addis Ababa.

49 Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA) Network, 'Civil Society Organizations in Ethiopia Call for Urgent Humanitarian Assistance, Redress and Prosecution for the Protection of Human Rights, and Searching for a Durable Conflict Resolution in Areas Affected by Repeated Attacks of Various Motivations', 22 January 2021. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://sihanet.org/statement-civil-society-organizations-in-ethiopia-call-for-urgent-humanitarian-assistance-redress-and-prosecution-for-the-protection-of-human-rights-and-searching-for-a-durable-conflict-resolution/>.

50 ECSOC, 'The Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations Council Remains Deeply Concerned the Death, Displacement and Suffering of Citizens in Western Oromia, East Wellega and Calls on the Government to Fulfill its Responsibility of Ensuring the Security of the Citizens', 6 December 2022, Addis Ababa. Accessed 20 December 2024, [https://www.ecsoc.net/images/Resource/Dec\\_06\\_2022\\_Eng.pdf](https://www.ecsoc.net/images/Resource/Dec_06_2022_Eng.pdf); SIHA, 'Civil society organizations in Ethiopia Call for Urgent Humanitarian Assistance'.

51 *Addis Standard*, 'Civil Society Groups Call for Peace, Reform and Accountability in Joint New Year Appeal', 6 September 2023. Accessed 24 December 2024, <https://addisstandard.com/news-civil-society-groups-call-for-peace-reform-and-accountability-in-joint-new-year-appeal/>; CARD, '2016 E.C New year's Peace Call', 6 September 2023. Accessed 20 December 2024, <https://www.cardeth.org/2016-New-Year-Peace-Call>.

Agreement.<sup>52</sup>

Many CSOs, however, often rely on press releases and workshops for advocacy, primarily due to state repression and weak constituency building.<sup>53</sup> This limits their ability to influence public opinion and garner broader community support.

Some women's organizations, such as the Network of Ethiopian Women's Associations (NEWA), have successfully organized peace marches in Addis Ababa, advocating for women's roles in peacebuilding and denouncing sexual violence with slogans like 'A woman's body is not a battlefield'.<sup>54</sup> While these groups cannot single-handedly end conflict, they have significantly influenced transitional justice policies to be more gender-sensitive.<sup>55</sup> Their success is attributed to strong collaboration, international support and prior advocacy experience.<sup>56</sup> The state has also shown more tolerance towards their agenda compared to others.

Despite these efforts, the effectiveness of CSOs in advocating for peace is constrained by government actions. After the September 2022 peace call from 35 CSOs, the government warned them to alter their messages, perceiving their advocacy as a threat.<sup>57</sup> This resulted in a decline in participation from CSOs in subsequent New Year statements. Recently, some vocal human rights organizations within the peace advocacy coalition faced suspension due to government allegations of political bias and 'compromising the national interest', further illustrating the shrinking space for CSOs.<sup>58</sup>

The sector has also experienced political divisions. In a politically polarized environment, these influences permeate the sector, with a divide between ethnic-based and pan-Ethiopian groups.<sup>59</sup> Successive regimes have used cooptation as a strategy to manage the CSO sector, exacerbating suspicion and distrust among organizations.<sup>60</sup> This fragmentation became particularly evident during the Tigray war, where differing agendas hindered unified action among CSOs.

### **Intermediation**

In Ethiopia, CSOs have had a limited role in national-level peace processes.<sup>61</sup> They were not formally involved in significant events such as the federal government-TPLF Pretoria Agreement, the government-OLA Tanzania talks, or the Amhara Region Peace Council. Local CSOs often lack the financial resources, expertise and trust required to facilitate complex negotiations involving the state and armed groups.

52 ACSOT, 'ACSOT Advocacy Statements'. Accessed 23 December 2024, <https://acsot.org/website/coordination/>.

53 Interviews with CSOs and networks, 15–20 December 2024, Addis Ababa.

54 *Addis Standard*, 'Women March in Capital Adds to Growing Calls for Peace in Ethiopia', 9 September 2022. Accessed 23 December 2024, <https://addisstandard.com/news-women-march-in-capital-adds-to-growing-call-for-peace-in-ethiopia/>.

55 Network of Ethiopian Women's Associations and International Centre for Transitional Justice, 'Towards A Gendered Transitional Justice Policy and Implementation Processes in Ethiopia'. Accessed 24 December 2024, <https://newaethiopia.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Policy-Brief-Gender-focused-English.pdf>.

56 Interviews with CSOs and networks, 15–20 December, 2024, Addis Ababa.

57 *Wazema Radio*, 'Ethiopian Minister Warns Representatives'.

58 The suspended CSOs have formally rejected the allegations.

59 Interview with senior CSOs Leaders, 29 December 2024, Addis Ababa. During the establishment of the ECSOC, there was considerable debate over its name, specifically whether to include 'Ethiopian'. This discussion highlights the divisions within civil society regarding narratives of nation building, a concern also prevalent among political elites. Additionally, CSO networks and coalitions are often established along ethnic lines. For example, the Network of Civil Society Organizations in Oromia and the Alliance of Civil Society Organizations in Tigray.

60 Camille Louise Pellerin, 'Unpacking "public silence": Civil society activism under authoritarian rule in Ethiopia', *Public Administration and Development* 43/5 (2023): 331–342.

61 Interviews with CSOs and networks, 15–20 December 2024, Addis Ababa.





Despite this trend, a local CSO in Oromia, with the support of an international organization, has successfully facilitated dialogue between the government and the OLA.<sup>62</sup> This organization engaged regularly with high-level officials and influential Oromo figures to build trust. It identified key negotiation topics, preparing a report outlining fundamental issues and possible participants and agendas for inclusive talks. There were, however, concerns about too many actors complicating the process. Nonetheless, this groundwork helped pave the way for the Tanzania talks. The CSO's success was bolstered by its trust among Oromo elites and technical and financial support from its international partner.

Similarly, other CSOs have pursued facilitative roles at the regional level. For instance, ACSOT has attempted to mediate internal disagreements within the TPLF, albeit with limited success.<sup>63</sup> The Community Opportunity for Development Organization (CODO) proposed mediation to end the conflict in Amhara, but the regional government has preferred top-down processes, collaborating with the federal government to hold peace conferences in a process led to the formation of the Amhara Region Peace Council.<sup>64</sup>

### *Promoting peace*

Some CSOs in Ethiopia focus on improving socialization and social cohesion, educating communities about peace values and fostering interactions between ethnic groups, particularly in conflict-affected areas.<sup>65</sup> Engaging with local leaders, youth, women and elders, CSOs treat promoting social cohesion and socialization as interconnected. CSOs utilize dialogue platforms, town hall meetings, and public forums to encourage understanding and coexistence. They organize inter-community discussions to improve relationships and they support reconciliation between conflicting groups through collaborative problem-solving workshops, strengthening local institutions like peace committees and training local leaders in conflict resolution. Education initiatives raise awareness about peace values and conflict resolution, often leveraging media, including community radio, to disseminate messages. Artistic initiatives, such as theatre and visual arts, can also play a significant role in promoting social cohesion. Overall, CSOs aim to create open dialogue, equip individuals with conflict resolution skills and raise awareness about the importance of peace at the grassroots level.

A good example of a successful intervention is a *Mahibere Hiwot* for social Development (MSD) program to support women, youth, elders, religious leaders and local officials rebuild relationships between Amhara and Qemant communities in Central Gondar.<sup>66</sup> This involved both victims and perpetrators, fostering dialogue and exploring solutions. By engaging women's networks and indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms, MSD recruited leaders from both groups to condemn ethnic hatred, helping to restore amicable relations. Markets that had previously been segregated were reopened and religious leaders resumed joint worship.

Similarly, the Ghion Peace, Reconciliation, and Development Association (GPRDA) provided awareness-raising education and training, empowering individuals with the necessary skills for peace and reconciliation.<sup>67</sup> GPRDA focused on enhancing societal values for peaceful coexistence, promoting dialogue and civility. Their project aimed to restore social networks between the Amhara and Qemant

62 Interview with a CSO representative who requested anonymity, 25 January 2025, Addis Ababa.

63 Interview with ACSOT, 17 December 2024, Addis Ababa.

64 Interview with CODO, 21 December 2024, Addis Ababa.

65 Interviews with CSOs and networks, 15–20 December 2024, Addis Ababa.

66 MSD, 'Peace Matters: Dialogue for Peaceful Coexistence Project'. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://mahiberehiwot.org/strongpeace-matters-dialogue-for-peaceful-coexistence-strong/>.

67 Interview with GPRDA, 21 December 2024, Addis Ababa.

communities, facilitating the return of displaced persons and reviving communal activities. GPRDA also trained local peacebuilders and psychosocial support providers to address community needs and trauma.

In conflict-affected areas like West Arsi and Bale, the East Africa Initiative for Change (I4C) identifies root causes of conflicts and fosters mutual understanding among divided communities.<sup>68</sup> Engaging with political parties, I4C conducts dialogue workshops that explore issues like the marginalization of Oromo Muslims and disempowerment among urban Amhara Christians, promoting tolerance and understanding. By addressing these underlying issues, I4C's efforts have contributed to relative peace in the area.

### CHALLENGES TO PEACEBUILDING

Ethiopian CSOs face significant challenges in delivering protection services due to a lack of technical skills in critical areas like demining. Additionally, restrictions put in place by conflict actors diminish their role. Distrust between the government and CSOs exacerbates the challenges, with accusations that CSOs support insurgents. Peace agreements often overlook CSOs. This limits their involvement in protection efforts and decision-making processes. Furthermore, CSOs struggle with their limited influence over state and non-state actors, complicating negotiations for safe zones and humanitarian access.

CSOs in Ethiopia also encounter significant limitations in monitoring peace agreements and human rights. Their absence from formal peace processes diminishes their influence and effectiveness. Pervasive distrust from both the government and conflicting parties limits their role, while security risks in conflict areas hinder effective oversight of human rights violations. These risks can lead to reluctance to operate in certain regions. Moreover, their informal role in early-warning systems lacks the necessary coordination and authority. This combination of factors significantly weakens CSOs' critical monitoring functions.

When CSOs do get involved in peace processes, some struggle with monitoring and evaluation systems to assess the impact of their programs, often finding it difficult to establish clear baselines and indicators.<sup>69</sup> As a result, the benefits of initiatives may not be immediately identified, particularly when focusing on long-term changes in attitudes and behaviors.

State repression poses significant obstacles for CSOs advocating for peace in Ethiopia. Efforts to promote peace can provoke government harassment, as authorities view these initiatives as threats to national security. This occurred with the Tigray war when the government classed its action as a law-enforcement operation. Therefore, CSO efforts to promote peace could be seen by the government as undermining its objectives and legitimizing those who violated the law.

These government tendencies create a chilling effect, stifling open discussions on peace issues and constraining advocacy efforts, particularly on non-sanctioned agendas. Consequently, many CSOs resort to advocacy methods such as issuing press releases that neglect meaningful community involvement. Internal divisions and ethnic polarization within the CSO sector further weaken their ability to present a unified front. The suspension of vocal human rights organizations exacerbates the challenges.

68 Interview with I4C employee, 25 January 2025, remote.

69 Interviews with CSOs and networks, 15–20 December 2024, Addis Ababa.



The lack of trust from conflicting parties diminishes CSOs' credibility and ability to facilitate dialogue. Many also struggle with limited financial and human resources. Additionally, a lack of specialized negotiation skills hampers effectiveness. Together, these factors significantly undermine their potential to act as intermediaries and facilitate dialogue.

CSOs encounter significant challenges in building social cohesion. The absence of effective monitoring and evaluation systems limits their ability to assess the macro-level impact of their initiatives. Short-term, project-based interventions restrict their capacity for enduring societal change, while limited reach in peace education often targets a narrow audience. Existing social institutions may inadvertently perpetuate divisions, undermining CSO efforts. Linking grassroots initiatives with higher-level political processes (Track I and Track II) presents additional obstacles, and a militarized culture further hinders social cohesion and dialogue.

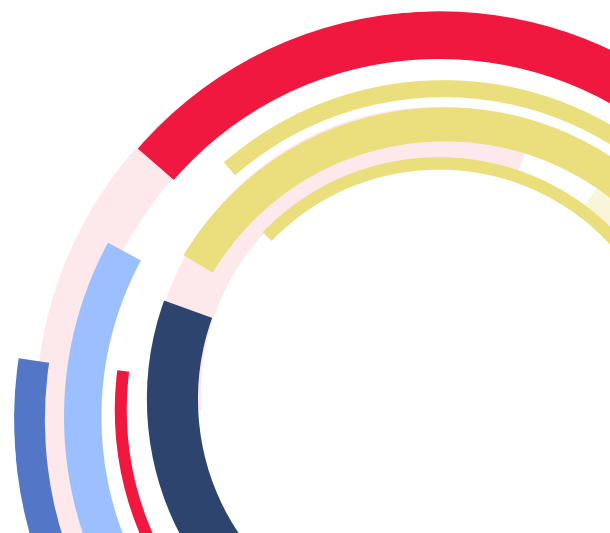
Moreover, societal peace culture is influenced by other institutions, such as schools, religious organizations and media, which can exacerbate divisions. The root causes of many local conflicts in Ethiopia are structural and political, necessitating higher-level political consensus and reforms involving a broad base of political elites rather than relying solely on grassroots efforts.

### **SOCIAL COHESION SUCCESSES**

Despite these challenges, several approaches have helped CSOs effectively promote social cohesion and socialization. One key factor is grassroots engagement, which fosters trust and allows CSOs to better understand local needs. Culturally relevant approaches, including indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms and creative expressions like theatre and visual arts, resonate with local populations, promoting empathy and making peace initiatives more impactful.

Engaging youth and women is also crucial for fostering a culture of peace, as their involvement cultivates future leaders in conflict resolution and ensures diverse perspectives. Collaborative platforms, such as dialogue sessions and town hall meetings, facilitate constructive conversations among diverse groups.

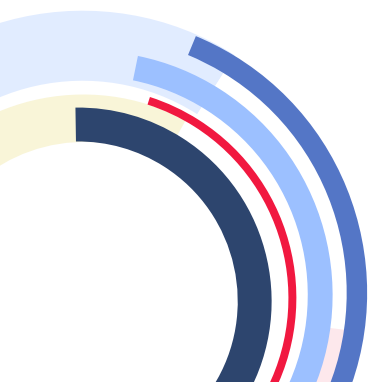
The success of CSOs in rebuilding social cohesion stems from their familiarity with local contexts, engagement with local actors, collaboration with authorities, demonstrated neutrality and community ownership of initiatives. This local knowledge allows for tailored approaches that fit the unique cultural, social and political dynamics of communities. Engaging local actors, including religious leaders and women, fosters greater community buy-in. Collaboration with local authorities creates a supportive environment for organizations, while maintaining neutrality helps build trust among conflicting communities. Furthermore, support from international organizations, along with the government's engagement, empowers CSOs to take on facilitation roles effectively.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

Moving forward, CSOs in Ethiopia should try and emulate these successful approaches and address challenges by leveraging collaboration, grassroots connections and innovative approaches. The study suggests the following policy recommendations directed towards key stakeholders:

1. **Enhancing recognition:** The government should recognize the valuable role of CSOs in peacebuilding and create a more enabling environment for their operations. This includes legal protections and institutional recognition in early warning and response mechanisms.
2. **Strengthening frameworks:** The government should strengthen legal frameworks governing CSOs, ensuring that they are conducive to free and safe operations while safeguarding the rights and autonomy of civil society.
3. **Promoting state-CSOs dialogue:** The FDRE Authority for Civil Society Organizations, in coordination with ECSOC, should foster an enabling environment for ongoing dialogue between the government and CSOs. This can be achieved by revitalizing existing platforms like the GO-CSOs Forum and CSOs Week. Institutionalizing the Civil-Military Coordination (CM-Coord) initiative would improve coordination between civil humanitarian actors and military entities.
4. **Utilizing local knowledge:** Peacebuilding initiatives and policies should support the integration of culturally relevant conflict resolution methods and creative expression in peacebuilding initiatives.
5. **Promoting community engagement:** All peace stakeholders, including the government, international organizations and community leaders, should promote grassroots initiatives that actively involve communities in peacebuilding.
6. **Addressing internal divisions:** Initiatives aimed at fostering unity and collaboration among CSOs should be prioritized. This could include dialogue platforms and joint training programs.
7. **Better coordination:** There is a pressing need for coordinated peacebuilding strategies that integrate both state-led and CSO-led interventions. Governments, donors and CSOs should encourage such collaboration.
8. **Facilitating partnerships:** ECSOC, Consortiums and CSOs networks, along with international organizations and donors, should promote collaborations between local CSOs and international entities.
9. **Sharing best practice:** Successful interventions from organizations like MSD, GPRDA and I4C provide valuable templates for other CSOs, inspiring best practices in social cohesion and peacebuilding.
10. **Increasing resources:** Increased funding for local CSOs, including emerging ones, is essential. This should include direct financial support, capacity-building programs and access to international funding.
11. **More training:** International organizations, local CSOs, networks, coalition of CSOs and ECSOC should invest in training programs focused on enhancing the capacity of local CSOs.
12. **Improving security:** The government should implement measures to enhance the safety of CSO workers, especially in the humanitarian sector.





## ABOUT THE PRF

This report was written for the Ethiopia Peace Research Facility (PRF).

The PRF is an independent facility combining timely analysis on peace and conflict from Ethiopian experts with support for conflict-sensitive programming in the country. It is managed by the Rift Valley Institute (RVI) and funded by the UK government.

The Rift Valley Institute works in Eastern and Central Africa to bring local knowledge to bear on social, political and economic development.

Copyright © Rift Valley Institute 2025. This work is published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).