IDDIR IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL SCIENCE AND HUMANITIES RESEARCH IN ETHIOPIA
HISTORICIZING AND THEORIZING LOCAL INFRASTRUCTURES OF CARE

DESALEGN AMSALU, ANTENEH TESFAYE, YASMIN BUSHRA AND HELEN ZERU
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The second Ethiopian Women Researchers Network (EWNET) seminar was delivered by Desalegn Amsalu, Anteneh Tesfaye, Yasmin Bushra and Helen Zeru on 3 July 2025 at Addis Ababa University's Alle School of Fine Arts & Design. Entitled 'Iddir *in Contemporary Social Science and Humanities Research in Ethiopia: Historicizing and Theorizing Local Infrastructures of Care,*' the seminar examined how *iddir*, Ethiopia's traditional mutual assistance organizations, might be researched and expanded as a basis for alternative policy routes, civic involvement and institution-building. Grounded in archival and ethnographic research, the talks emphasized how indigenous social practices and daily urban life function as dynamic sources of theory-making, especially from the perspective of the Global South, by grounding research in local experiences. The seminar concluded with a gallery walk showcasing artworks reflecting iddir's material culture.

Opening remarks

The seminar began with welcoming remarks by Brook Abdu, Research Manager at the Rift Valley Institute (RVI). Drawing on his own experiences growing up in a rural community, Brook welcomed participants with a thoughtful reflection that wove his memory of delivering iddir contributions on behalf of his grandfather together with scholarly themes. Framing the day's programme, he invited participants to explore iddir not merely as a subject of study but as a lens through which broader questions about autonomy, justice and community infrastructure can be examined. He outlined the range of presentations to follow, covering perspectives from social science, architecture, urbanism, indigenous knowledge systems and artistic practice. Following this, Dr Semir Yusuf, Head of RVI's Ethiopia Office, delivered the opening remarks. He began by welcoming participants and acknowledging the growth of the EWNET Seminar Series as a significant platform

for critical engagement. Dr Semir described the seminar as an opportunity to reflect on traditional infrastructures such as iddir while connecting them to contemporary concerns, ranging from civic engagement and social trust to arts-based interventions and inclusive policy frameworks. In his remarks, Dr Semir underscored EWNET's potential as part of a growing knowledge ecosystem. He emphasized that the network not only supports academic collaboration but also provides a vital space for women researchers to reflect on pressing social and political realities. With initiatives such as EWNET and platforms such as these seminars, RVI seeks to nurture a more inclusive and critical research culture across the region. Dr Semir concluded by wishing the participants a productive seminar, expressing hope that the day's discussions would spark new insights, foster meaningful connections and deepen collective understanding of local care infrastructures such as iddir.

Figure 1. Dr Semir Yusuf, Head of RVI's Ethiopia Office, delivering opening remarks.

Key themes of the presentations

The presentation session featured talks delivered by Desalegn Amsalu, Anteneh Tesfaye, Yasmin Bushra and Helen Zeru. Dr Desalegn Amsalu is an Associate Professor of Social Anthropology at Addis Ababa University's Institute for Ethiopian Studies. Dr Anteneh Tesfaye is an architect who is currently a Delft Global Initiative Fellow at Delft University of Technology in the Netherlands. Yasmin Bushra is an architect and spatial justice researcher whose comparative study focuses on self-governance groups in Addis Ababa and Nairobi.
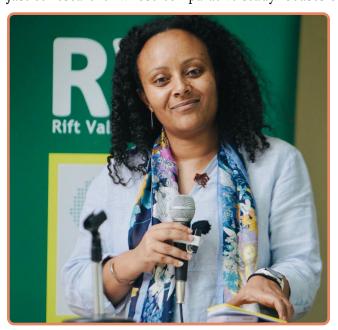

Figure 2. Dr Hewan Girma moderating the presentations.

Her work investigates how informal community organizations, such as iddir in Ethiopia and Residents' Associations (RAs) in Kenya, reshape the urban environment through grassroots engagement with state institutions. Helen Zeru is a multidisciplinary artist whose work interrogates the intersections of informality, memory and collective space in urban Ethiopia.

This session was moderated by Dr Hewan Girma, Assistant Professor of African American and African Diaspora Studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She holds a PhD in Sociology from Boston University and has published on topics related to global migration, diaspora, intersectionality and epistemic justice. Dr Hewan has contributed to various interdisciplinary volumes and brings a strong background in African and transnational studies.

'I Have Risen from the Place I Always Used to Be': Mapping the literature on iddir and grounding research in history, Dr Desalegn Amsalu

In his presentation, Dr Desalegn offered a quantitative and historical analysis of the extensive literature on iddir across three political regimes in Ethiopia: the Imperial period, the Derg era and the EPRDF period. Drawing on a total of 143 works, including academic theses, journal articles, NGO reports and newspaper archives that are featured in his 2018 publication, Annotated Bibliography on Iddir, Dr Desalegn presented a detailed chronology of scholarly and institutional engagement with iddir. The earliest source he cited was a 1958 article by Richard Pankhurst and Andreas Eshete titled 'Self-help in Ethiopia', published in The Ethiopia Observer, which marked one of the first documented studies of indigenous mutual aid associations in the country.

Using Addis Ababa as a case study, he traced the proliferation of iddir institutions over time. In 1968, records show that the city had approximately 300 iddirs. By 1973, that number had increased to 1,947, and by 2014—when Dr Desalegn was conducting his research—the figure had risen to around 7,000. Today, the average number of iddirs in a single woreda is estimated to be 65, illustrating the remarkable expansion and entrenchment of iddir as a national social infrastructure. The presentation then moved into a comparative framework that examined how iddir institutions evolved and adapted under different political regimes:

- **Imperial period:** Approximately 28 works (20 per cent of his sources) covered this era, many of them drawing from newspaper articles and sociological accounts. During this time, iddirs were largely tolerated and operated autonomously. They were seen as complementary to formal governance structures and often functioned as expressions of communal self-help and dignity.
- **Derg period:** Only 22 works (15 per cent) addressed this period. Dr Desalegn noted that while the Derg was ambivalent toward iddir, the regime's heavy centralization and suspicion of independent social organizing restricted iddir's operations in certain contexts. Nonetheless, many iddirs survived, often adapting by assuming less politically visible roles.
- **EPRDF period:** The majority of the literature he analyzed (more than 60 per cent of the total) focused on the post-1991 period, with a noticeable increase in NGO reports and development-oriented studies. This period saw an institutional shift as iddirs were increasingly recognized by the state and development actors as partners in service delivery and urban governance. Yet, this also raised questions about co-optation, formalization and the erosion of iddir's autonomous character.

A notable point in his presentation was the persistent scholarly claim that iddir originated in Gurage communities before becoming a national institution. Dr Desalegn used this historical observation to highlight the fluid cultural life of indigenous institutions and their capacity to scale across ethnolinguistic and administrative divides.

He concluded his presentation by identifying **five priority areas for future research:**

1. **The role of women in iddirs:** A topic largely underexplored despite women's visible presence and labour within these institutions.

2. **Iddir and urban transformation:** How mutual aid is adapting in rapidly changing urban settings.

3. **Global comparative perspectives:** Situating iddir within the worldwide conversation on informal institutions, mutual aid and social protection.

4. **Technology and modernization:** Investigating the digital transition of iddir practices, including mobile contributions and online communication.

5. **Formalization and state intervention:** Understanding the implications of increasing state involvement in traditionally autonomous practices.

Figure 3. Dr Desalegn Amsalu during the presentation.

Through a rich combination of numerical data, archival mapping and institutional analysis, Dr Desalegn emphasized that iddir is not a static tradition, but a dynamic and evolving institution shaped by political context, societal needs and community agency. His work not only situates iddir within broader historical and political trajectories but also challenges researchers to expand the thematic and methodological boundaries of how such institutions are studied.

Addis Ababa's Sefer, Iddir and Gebbi: Nuanced reading of complex urban forms, Dr Anteneh Tesfaye Tola

In the second virtual presentation, Dr Anteneh offered a layered reading of Addis Ababa's urban form by investigating the intertwined histories and functions of *sefer* (neighbourhood units), iddir and *gebbi* (walled compounds). Although the broader study spans these three interdependent institutions, Anteneh focused on the role of iddir as an indigenous urban infrastructure of care, framing iddir not as an isolated or traditional survival mechanism but as a dynamic institution embedded within the spatial and social fabric of the *sefer*. In his view, the iddir operates as a mechanism for both resilience and memory, enabling communities to sustain mutual support through collective practices of reciprocity, obligation and trust. He emphasized that iddirs are spatially situated, not simply voluntary associations, and that their functioning depends heavily on the integrity of the neighbourhoods they inhabit.

Drawing on social capital theory, Dr Anteneh presented an adapted model of access and outcomes, originally based on Julia Häuberer's refined social capital framework. His presentation illustrated how iddir networks are shaped by a set of preconditions such as cultural norms, collective histories and neighbourhood demographics. These factors influence the character of the social network, its size, diversity, openness and density—which in turn determine whether communities can access resources for expressive (relational and symbolic) or instrumental (material and functional) action.

He stressed that the physical continuity of *sefer* neighbourhoods enables iddirs to thrive. The rupture of this continuity, particularly through forced resettlement and urban redevelopment, threatens the embedded nature of these associations. Urban interventions have led to the dislocation of families, the scattering of long-standing iddir members and the weakening of trust-based reciprocal structures. This impact is especially pronounced in women-led iddirs, which often rely on geographic proximity and consistent participation.

Another important insight from his presentation was the epistemological value of iddir as a form of urban knowledge. Dr Anteneh argued that these associations carry with them a vernacular logic of belonging,

solidarity and spatial memory. They constitute not just a social service but an alternative mode of organizing urban life, rooted in local histories and collective practices.

Spatial Manifestation of Self-Governance Groups, Yasmin Bushra

Yasmin's presentation concentrated on the iddir as a central actor in neighbourhood-based governance and service delivery in Addis Ababa. Drawing on a broader comparative study on self-governance groups in Addis Ababa and Nairobi, Yasmin employs a constructivist grounded theory approach, alongside ethnographic mapping, to analyse how iddirs engage with the state in three distinct ways: co-creating, co-operating and co-opting. These engagement modes reflect varying degrees of collaboration, autonomy and formalization. She illustrated each through case studies based on extended fieldwork in several low- and middle-income neighbourhoods in Addis Ababa.

In the **co-creating** model, *The Twenty-five* Mahiberat Iddir (with approximately 478 households) had transformed unused public spaces into shared community assets. A vacant basketball court was adapted for meetings and youth sports, while an abandoned lot was converted into an edible garden producing vegetables both for consumption and for generating income to sustain the space. This iddir negotiated directly with authorities to gain temporary access to fenced-off land and took collective responsibility for maintaining security and infrastructure. This example highlighted how iddirs and the state could jointly shape urban space in mutually beneficial ways.

In the **co-operating** model, represented by Andinet Iddir (around 260 households), the focus was on shared maintenance of existing resources. The iddir operated under a historic building. maintaining a community library and functioning as a collection point for monthly dues. The site received minimal but symbolic support from government offices, including an annual stipend and book donations. Here, the iddir provided consistent social and infrastructural upkeep while depending only partially on the state, reflecting a collaborative but asymmetrical dynamic.

Figure 4. Yasmin Bushra during the presentation.

The **co-opting** model was exemplified by Ye Hiwot Meseret Iddir (approximately 325 households), which demonstrated a high degree of formalization. This iddir has not only managed member contributions and meetings with strict record-keeping since 1978 but also held a formal title deed for the land it occupies. It pays taxes on behalf of its members and performs functions akin to a small municipality. This example raised questions about how community groups take on responsibilities typically assigned to the state, particularly in underserved neighbourhoods.

Yasmin's comparative lens also drew contrasts with Nairobi, where Residents' Associations typically originate as spatial service providers—organizing infrastructure, waste disposal or public space maintenance—and gradually incorporate social roles. In Addis Ababa, by contrast, iddirs begin with

a social protection role and expand into spatial interventions when needs arise. This distinction underscored the context-specific evolution of grassroots governance models.

Throughout her presentation, Yasmin argued that iddirs act as stabilizing institutions in the absence of reliable state services. They negotiate space, provide informal welfare, and cultivate collective belonging. Yet this resilience also invites ethical concerns, particularly when community groups are expected to shoulder long-term public service responsibilities without adequate support. In reflecting on this, she framed iddirs not simply as social institutions, but as key actors in the everyday negotiation of urban citizenship and spatial justice.

The Institutionalization of the Informal, Helen Zeru

The final presentation of the seminar was delivered by Helen Zeru. Entitled *'The Institutionalization of the Informal'*, Helen's talk explored how grassroots practices—such as those associated with iddirs—become gradually formalized through repeated use, social recognition and spatial occupation. Through a lens grounded in artistic practice and critical urbanism, Helen invited participants to reflect on how institutions that emerge outside the state framework generate meaning, structure and visibility in everyday life.

Focusing on Addis Ababa as her primary context, Helen argued that iddirs are not only mutual aid groups but also spatial and cultural actors that leave visible traces in the city. These traces may take the form of stacked chairs, repurposed open spaces, handwritten ledgers or mourning banners—objects and arrangements that hold institutional memory and perform social order. Her presentation suggested that these material and visual artifacts, though informal, contribute to a form of public archiving, one that is both ephemeral and deeply rooted in everyday collective experience.

Helen warned, however, that increased visibility and recognition can bring pressure for iddirs to adopt bureaucratic forms of legitimacy. In some cases, this includes acquiring land titles, paying taxes or formalizing governance structures. While such developments may protect iddirs from displacement or legal vulnerability, they also risk eroding the flexibility, autonomy and imagination that define their informal strength. The presentation encouraged a careful reading of institutionalization, not as a neutral administrative process, but as a shift with cultural, political and ethical implications.

Figure 5. Helen Zeru giving her presentation.

A significant portion of her presentation was dedicated to **Netsa Art Village**, an artist collective formerly active in Ferensay Park. Through a series of powerful images, Helen illustrated how this informal art space fostered community participation, aesthetic experimentation and spatial negotiation. Photographs showed children engaged in open-air painting sessions, a geodesic dome used for gathering and exhibitions, and performances featuring musicians and a figure dressed in a white, astronaut-like suit. The collective's flexible structure and

temporary occupation of urban space echoed the self-organized logic of iddirs, where necessity, creativity and cooperation produce shared meaning and infrastructure.

By aligning the practices of iddirs with those of informal artistic communities, Helen emphasized that informal institutions are not peripheral but central to how urban citizens navigate survival, visibility and identity. They represent alternative models of belonging, care, and knowledge production, worthy of serious attention both in academic discourse and urban policy.

Q&A session

The Q&A session offered an engaging and thought-provoking close to the seminar's formal program. Moderated by Dr Hewan, the discussion created a space for participants to reflect on the presentations, draw out conceptual linkages and raise new lines of inquiry. While the exact sequence of questions was fluid, several recurring themes and insights stood out across the exchange.

One line of questioning touched on the possible interconnectedness of iddirs and whether they form communication networks or federations beyond the neighbourhood scale. This prompted reflections on how iddirs typically operate as hyper-local structures, but also how certain moments—such as funerals involving prominent community members or larger-scale negotiations with local authorities—can produce informal linkages or collective action across multiple iddirs. The idea of scaling mutual aid was raised, with some participants noting that these decentralized systems offer both strengths and limitations.

Another recurring concern centred on the changing relationship between iddirs and younger generations. Some participants observed a growing disconnection, suggesting that many young people do not perceive iddirs as relevant to their everyday lives, even as they indirectly benefit from their support systems through family membership. This raised questions about institutional continuity, generational memory and how traditions adapt or risk decline amid shifting urban and social landscapes.

The participants were also able to consider the political and ethical aspects of iddirs, raising the question of whether these institutions could be placed in a context of social justice, especially in the city where inequalities and disengagement of the state (that is, in terms of non-existent delivery of public services particularly in terms of providing welfare, resolving disputes or supplying basic infrastructure) were prevalent. Although presenters agreed that iddirs were typically used as informal sources of welfare and as a source of representation in underserved populations, they also pointed out that these structures are subject to internal power structures. Top positions in society are often out of reach for older men, membership access may be denied to new migrants or poor families, and the decision-making process lacks transparency and participation.

Figure 6. Q&A session and a panel for open discussion.

This resulted in a subtle debate on how iddirs can be turned into the arena of conflict over who should act on behalf of the community, whose grievances are met, how to equally distribute the shared resources,

and what principles to follow in collective involvement. The negotiation was also a major theme, especially where it has to bargain with local authorities when seeking services or recognition, and also between members of the group who may have conflicting concerns. Instead of considering iddirs as collectively social safety nets that protect people, presenters described iddirs as symbolic and political spaces through which citizenship is performed and redefined through encounters of inclusion, exclusion, interest representation and daily governing rules. In this regard, iddirs are not only expressions of solidarity but of activism as well: of legitimacy, voice and justice.

The discussion returned at several points to the challenge of theorizing iddir as a concept. There was interest in how iddirs might be situated within academic frameworks that speak to mutual aid, everyday governance, or spatial justice, without reducing them to static categories. Participants and speakers alike emphasized that theorization must remain grounded in the lived realities and fluid practices of these institutions and that their informal character resists easy classification.

While the range of questions was diverse and the exchanges informal in tone, the Q&A session served as a valuable moment of synthesis. It underscored the seminar's commitment not only to documenting community infrastructures such as iddir but also to thinking critically about their futures in changing political, generational and spatial contexts.

Closing remarks

The formal presentations were concluded with closing remarks by Brook Abdu. He extended his sincere thanks to all speakers, moderators, organizers and participants for their thoughtful contributions and active engagement throughout the afternoon. Acknowledging the intellectual richness of the seminar, he emphasized EWNET's continued commitment to fostering dialogue across disciplines, generations and forms of knowledge.

With that, Brook invited attendees to proceed to the final segment of the day: a gallery walk led by Helen Zeru. This closing event, he noted, would offer a more experiential and visual reflection on the themes explored in the seminar, particularly the intersections of memory, space and informal infrastructures of care.

Gallery walk

The seminar concluded with a compelling and visually immersive gallery walk, showcasing the work of Helen Zeru, one of Ethiopia's most thought-provoking contemporary artists. Her installation served as both a culmination and a spatial echo of the day's discussions, blending aesthetic inquiry with cultural memory.

Figure 7. A panel from Helen Zeru's gallery walk.

Helen's large-scale, textile-based works occupied the gallery space with a commanding presence. Rendered on raw, unframed canvas, her pieces depicted symbolic objects drawn from the everyday life of iddirs: The iconic chairs stacked for gatherings, aluminium cooking pots, ration booklets and contribution ledgers. These familiar yet often overlooked materials were not only representations of communal practices but also visual metaphors for shared care, resource pooling and informal infrastructures of resilience.

In one panel (Figure 7, see page 8), a concentric blue ring resembling a large serving tray hovers above two green-tented enclosures filled with handwritten text. In another (Figure 8), a burnt-orange sun rises over a cityscape of ledgers, pots and chairs—all set against a textured, black-and-white background that evokes both shadow and structure. In the third panel (Figure 9), a large serving tray is shown hovering above a red (quey) injera, which is the staple food at iddir gatherings and illustrates how the food is served. These layered compositions evoke themes of memory, obligation, mobility and space-making—central concerns in the broader discourse on iddirs explored during the seminar.

By incorporating both material culture and archival references, Helen's work repositions iddir not merely as a social instrument but as a site of aesthetic and epistemic production. Her installation functions as a narrative canvas, mapping the textures of collective survival and social architecture. Participants lingered to engage with the artworks, offering reflections and informal conversations that extended the formal discussions of the seminar into more personal and contemplative registers.

Figure 8. A panel from Helen Zeru's gallery walk.

Figure 9. A panel from Helen Zeru's gallery walk.

ABOUT EWNET

This report was produced by the Ethiopian Women Researchers Network (EWNET) within the Peace Research Facility (PRF).

EWNET is dedicated to creating a vibrant and supportive network for Ethiopian women researchers in the social sciences and humanities. EWNET uses platforms such as podcasts and seminar series to disseminate and amplify the voices, work and research journeys of Ethiopian women researchers. Check the EWNET website for more information about the network and its activities: https://ewnethub.net

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