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## EVENT REPORT

# ENHANCING THE ROLE OF BORDERLAND COMMUNITIES IN ETHIOPIA'S FOREIGN POLICY

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Ethiopia's borderland communities (BLCs) have historically influenced the country's relations with its neighbours. These peripheral regions often serve as hubs for cross-border trade, repositories of natural resources and, at times, flashpoints of conflict. Surrounded by six neighbouring countries – Djibouti, Eritrea, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan – Ethiopia has frequently leveraged its borderlands as buffer zones to reduce tensions, while also relying on local communities and administrations to build cross-border ties. Despite these contributions and, in many cases, sacrifices to safeguard Ethiopia's sovereignty, BLCs have been largely excluded from shaping the nation's foreign policy.

In April 2025, Rift Valley Institute (RVI), in partnership with the Institute of Foreign Affairs (IFA) and Bule Hora University, convened a one-day workshop to explore the role of BLCs in Ethiopia's foreign policy and international relations. The event brought together experts from the Afar, Somali, Gambella and Benishangul-Gumuz regions, alongside professionals from Addis Ababa, whose insights contributed to the development of this briefing, and are reflected in the analysis.

Post-presentation discussions provided participants with an opportunity to engage directly with panellists on the minimal role that BLCs have played in Ethiopian foreign policy. Drawing on the views and perspectives shared during the workshop, the briefing paper explores the limited role for BLCs from the regions within the foreign policy framework, and offers recommendations for better integrating them into regional engagement strategies.

## REGIONAL PROFILES

The Afar are among the oldest and most resilient ethno-national groups in the Horn of Africa. Their ancestral homeland lies at a strategic crossroads connecting Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti—an area commonly known as the Afar Triangle. This area is not only historically significant but also central to current geopolitical dynamics in the Horn. Prior to the colonial partitioning of the region, the Afar were organized under a semi-confederal system of five Sultanates: Gobad in the Middle Awash Valley, Rahayata in present-day Eritrea, Bidu and Awussa in the Lower Awash Valley, and Tadjoura in modern-day Djibouti. These political structures reflect a legacy of decentralized governance and offer valuable lessons for contemporary models of transboundary collaboration and regional integration.

While pastoralism remains the backbone of Afar livelihoods, their economy also includes fishing, agriculture and small-scale trade, highlighting the region's diverse economic capacity. Afar also holds significant potential for solar and geothermal electricity generation. The Ethiopian Afar maintain deep cross-border economic, social and cultural ties. Positioned along a vital corridor, the Afar region has over time provided Ethiopia critical

access to the Red Sea through Assab in Eritrea and via Djiboutian ports, which have recently handled most of the country's international trade. Moreover, Afar communities contribute significantly to Ethiopia's livestock exports, particularly camels and cattle to Djibouti and the Middle East.

Situated south-east of Afar, the Somali population has long been an important element in Ethiopia's foreign policy. The Somali Region borders Somalia, Djibouti and Kenya, underscoring its importance in external relations. The Somali people's proximity to the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden has historically enabled the diffusion of Islam, vibrant trade and cultural exchange between the Horn and the Arabian Peninsula. Inter-marriage across communities in the region remains common, strengthening cross-border social cohesion. Deep-rooted Somali kinship networks—anchored in intricate clan structures and customary law (*xeer*)—have nurtured resilient linkages that extend beyond national borders. These enduring social bonds create opportunities for informal diplomacy and community-led conflict resolution, particularly in areas where state authority is limited or contested.

Renowned for their livestock and mineral wealth, Somali communities are heavily engaged in cross-border trade. On the socio-cultural front, Somali communities have served as linguistic, cultural and religious connectors between Ethiopia, Somalia, Djibouti and Kenya, even reaching as far as Yemen. Economically, Somali communities have made significant contributions to Ethiopia through dynamic livestock trade, entrepreneurial commerce and natural resource exploitation. Nonetheless, state policies have historically overlooked these regions, resulting in persistent underdevelopment, limited infrastructure and inadequate access to basic social services.

Turning to Ethiopia's western frontier, Gambella region shares an international border with South Sudan. Domestically, it borders Oromia and Benishangul-Gumuz, a boundary that remains partially contested, as well as the newly formed Southwest Ethiopia and Southern Ethiopia regions to the south and south-east, respectively. This positioning not only gives Gambella geopolitical importance but also makes it a region of internal connectivity between other peripheral regions.

The region is home to five officially recognized indigenous ethnic groups: the Anywaa, Nuer, Majang, Opo and Komo. In addition, there is a considerable population of highlanders from various parts of Ethiopia who have settled in the region over the decades. Administratively, Gambella is divided into three nationality zones corresponding to its largest indigenous groups—the Anywaa, Nuer and Majang. Notably, both the Nuer and Anywaa share cross-border ethnic and kinship ties with communities in South Sudan, reinforcing a deep layer of transboundary interaction. Gambella serves as a crucial corridor for trade, cultural exchanges and people-to-people relations, linking Ethiopia with South Sudan. Its cultural diversity, informed by these cross-border communities, enhances its potential as a soft power asset in shaping Ethiopia's regional diplomacy.

To the north of Gambella, Benishangul-Gumuz Region (BGR) holds a position of strategic importance. Sharing a border with Sudan's Blue Nile State (BNS), this region forms one of the most active cross-border zones between the two countries, not to mention that it also hosts the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. The BGR-BNS frontier is home to over 1.6 million people, the majority of whom reside in rural areas. Generations of interaction, migration and mutual dependence have forged deep social and economic linkages that transcend official boundaries.

Communities on both sides of the Ethiopia-Sudan border share ethnic, linguistic and cultural ties that span generations. On the Ethiopian side, key borderland groups include the Benishangul (historically known as the Berta), Gumuz, Boro (Shinasha), Mao and Komo. These communities have mirror populations in BNS, where similar groups—such as the Benishangul, Gumuz, Funj and Ingassana—also reside. More than ten ethnolinguistic groups populate the Sudanese side of the border, underscoring the diversity and interconnectedness of the region. Their bonds are reinforced through intermarriage, shared faith and common livelihood systems rooted in farming, herding and commerce.

## **HISTORICAL ROLE OF BORDERLAND COMMUNITIES IN ETHIOPIAN FOREIGN RELATIONS**

While foreign policy is an expression of national interest, it is shaped by a state's internal political structures, ideological orientations, leadership styles and socio-economic realities. Foreign policy encompasses a nation's objectives, strategic directions and approaches and is reflected not only in

formal negotiations but also in diplomatic conduct, strategic partnerships and political positioning on the global stage.

The forces that shape a state's foreign policy are both external and internal. Externally, it is influenced by global trends, regional dynamics and bilateral relationships. Internally, the character of the state plays a defining role—its military strength, internal governance system and economic status all contribute to how foreign policy is formulated and implemented. Within this context, the inclusion or exclusion of borderland communities (BLCs) must be viewed through the broader lens of state-building, institutional strength and democratic governance.

### *Afar*

The Afar people have historically played a role in safeguarding Ethiopia's territorial integrity and influencing its foreign relations, particularly along its north-eastern coastal frontiers. Known for their fierce resistance to foreign incursions, the Afar have consistently defended their homeland against external threats, asserting their autonomy and by implication (or by extension) protecting Ethiopia's national interests in the process. Their reputation as resilient defenders dates back centuries and includes resistance against Ottoman influence in the Red Sea region during the sixteenth century, a period marked by increasing attempts from foreign powers to control maritime and inland trade routes. Throughout the colonial era, the Afar were instrumental in repelling invasions and countering foreign encroachment along Ethiopia's Red Sea frontier, although it was an Afar chief who sold the area of Assab to an Italian company—enabling the Italian colonial authorities to include Assab into their colony, Eritrea.

Beyond their role as defenders, the Afar people and their homeland have historically functioned as economic and geopolitical bridges linking Ethiopia to the wider world. Strategically located between the Ethiopian highlands and the Red Sea, Afar has long served as a corridor for international trade and commerce. Historical trade routes that traversed Afar territory connected Ethiopia to the Arabian Peninsula and the broader Indian Ocean world. Through these routes, the Afar facilitated the flow of essential commodities such as salt, gold, ivory, coffee and livestock—enabling Ethiopia to engage in maritime commerce and linkages with Middle Eastern and South Asian markets.

The Afar region has long been a cornerstone of Ethiopia's foreign trade infrastructure, historically exemplified by the Port of Assab. Before the onset of the Eritrean conflict, Assab provided Ethiopia with a direct maritime outlet, reducing reliance on overland routes and enhancing the country's integration into global markets. Although Assab is no longer accessible, the Afar-inhabited corridor leading to Djibouti has assumed even greater significance. The Djibouti Corridor, Ethiopia's principal trade artery, passes through Afar and currently facilitates over 95 per cent of the nation's imports and exports. This underscores the region's enduring role in Ethiopia's economic diplomacy and international connectivity.

Beyond its logistical value, the Afar region contributes to Ethiopia's economy through long-standing traditional practices. The salt trade from the Danakil Depression is one such example, where Afar communities have engaged in salt extraction for centuries. Camel caravans transporting salt slabs across the desert remain emblematic of Ethiopia's historical trade networks, connecting local production to national and regional markets. Additionally, Afar pastoralists are vital players in Ethiopia's livestock export sector, supplying camels, cattle and goats to Djibouti and further afield to Gulf nations such as Qatar, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. These activities continue to link Afar livelihoods to wider regional economic networks and foreign trade flows.

The Afar also contribute to Ethiopia's foreign relations through their social and cultural networks, which operate as informal yet effective tools of soft diplomacy. One of the most distinctive features of

the Afar people is their transboundary ethnic identity. Spread across Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti, they share kinship ties, a common language, religion and cultural traditions. These cross-border affiliations often go beyond political boundaries, offering a stabilizing mechanism during periods of diplomatic tension between states. In times of regional strain, Afar communities have helped maintain people-to-people connections and reduce friction by leveraging shared heritage and mutual trust.

Traditional institutions within Afar society, particularly the mada'a (a council of elders), play a significant role in conflict resolution, inter-community negotiation and peacebuilding. In areas where the formal state apparatus is either weak or absent, these indigenous governance systems provide stability and order. They have often been utilized not only by the local communities but also by the Ethiopian government and regional stakeholders as credible and effective channels for mediating disputes and advancing peaceful co-existence. This unique role of the Afar elders highlights the potential of local actors in shaping peace diplomacy and sub-regional stability, positioning the Afar as key contributors to Ethiopia's broader foreign policy objectives in the Horn.

### *Somali*

Somali communities have also long been central to Ethiopia's border dynamics and foreign policy, particularly along its eastern and south-eastern frontiers. Like most other communities that straddle borders, Somalis have had to cope with borders that divide them, creating a legacy of contested spaces, and overlapping identities, that—in the absence of representative governance—contribute to tensions that continue to influence Ethiopia's external relations.

The Somali contribution to the historical and political development of the Horn, and Ethiopia in particular, is both profound and enduring. One key milestone in this shared history is the rise of the Adal Sultanate in the sixteenth century, whose leadership was predominantly composed of Somali and Afar elites. Ethnic Somalis held crucial positions in the Sultanate's military and administrative structures, shaping regional politics and Ethiopia's interactions with the wider Muslim world. The Adal Sultanate, under the leadership of figures such as Imam Ahmed ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi (Ahmed Gragn), not only influenced the religious and geopolitical balance of the region but also left a legacy on the political consciousness and security posture of the northern kingdom. Fast-forwarding to the twentieth century, the birth of the Somali Republic in 1960 marked a new era in Somali nationalism, culminating in the Ogaden War of 1977–78, which became a defining moment in Ethiopia–Somalia relations and the confrontation between pan-Somali aspirations for the unification of Somali-inhabited territories across the Horn, and the principles of territorial integrity of Ethiopia with all the diversity of its multi-ethnic population.

Cross-border trade and relations have also long been a cornerstone of Somali–Ethiopian interactions. Ethiopia's economic ties with its neighbours—particularly Djibouti, Somalia (including Somaliland and southern/central Somalia) and Kenya—are vital for regional stability and development. Somali border communities have played a critical role in facilitating trade flows, people-to-people ties and cultural exchange. However, for these relationships to truly flourish, there must be a shift away from top-down, hierarchical control toward models of mutual respect, fair partnerships, and equitable engagement. A cooperative approach that honours historical ties and economic interdependence is key to fostering sustainable peace and development across the region.

### *Gambella*

Similarly, Gambella has played a significant role in Ethiopia's foreign relations, particularly with neighbouring Sudan and now South Sudan. One of the region's major assets is its economic utility as a transit point for trade. The Baro River, which flows into South Sudan where it is known as the Sobat, long served as a major commercial route, facilitating the exchange of goods and people between the two

countries. During the nineteenth century, Gambella—alongside Metemma and Kurmuk—was a central hub for the flourishing Ethio-Sudan trans-frontier trade, serving as one of three key routes through which Ethiopia maintained commercial ties with the broader Nile Basin region.

Communities living along the Ethiopian-South Sudanese border pursue diverse livelihoods including fishing, pastoralism, agriculture and informal trade, making them natural actors in fostering cross-border economic exchanges. Their deep-rooted ties with similar ethnic groups across the border also allow them to serve as cultural intermediaries and peace brokers during times of political or military tension.

In contemporary terms, Ethiopia's foreign policy emphasizes economic diplomacy and regional integration. Within this framework, Gambella's location offers a strategic advantage for advancing economic interests, particularly in tapping into South Sudan's emerging markets and oil resources. Ethiopia's ambition to position itself as a regional economic hub includes increasing its footprint in South Sudanese trade and infrastructure development.

Ethiopia's commitment to deepening ties with South Sudan is reflected in the 2017 bilateral agreement that emphasized cooperation in trade, border development and security. A tangible outcome of this partnership is the ongoing construction of road networks linking Ethiopia's Gambella region with South Sudan's Jonglei and Upper Nile states, underscoring a strategic effort to transform shared geography and ethnic continuity into opportunities for regional integration and diplomacy. Far from being a remote periphery, Gambella serves as a pivotal frontier for advancing Ethiopia's foreign policy and economic outreach.

Historically, Gambella has also functioned as a stabilizing buffer during times of regional conflict—particularly throughout Sudan's civil war and the subsequent unrest in South Sudan. By absorbing refugee flows and containing the spillover effects of violence, the region has played a key role in shielding Ethiopia's interior from regional instability. Today, one of the most pressing responsibilities of the Ethiopian state in Gambella is the management and integration of South Sudanese refugees, the bulk of whom hail from the Nuer community (with implications for the demography of Gambella). Hundreds of thousands of people displaced by conflict and humanitarian crises have sought refuge in the region. Balancing the competing needs of refugees and host communities for land, water and essential services is vital to maintaining social cohesion and preventing localized tensions. Ethiopia's approach to refugee management in Gambella thus embodies a critical intersection between domestic governance and foreign policy strategy.

### ***Benishangul-Gumuz***

The foreign relations of Ethiopia, while often conducted by central authorities, have also been shaped significantly by the agency of BLCs. Border communities in Benishangul-Gumuz Region (BGR), though often overlooked in mainstream historical narratives, have played an instrumental role in shaping Ethiopia's international engagements, particularly in the western frontiers with Sudan. Their contributions span economic, political, social and security dimensions, and complement the broader history of Ethiopia's foreign relations since the late nineteenth century.

BGR border-region residents, particularly under the leadership of the influential early twentieth-century local ruler Sheikh Khojali al-Hasan, were active agents in shaping Ethiopia's relations with Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and beyond during the same era. Shek Hojele's leadership stands out as a historic example of decentralized diplomacy. He cultivated strong and peaceful cross-border relations with both the people and the government of Sudan, engaging in trade, cultural exchange and defence alliances. His role in Ethiopia's international affairs, though often underreported, demonstrates how





subnational actors contributed to the consolidation of Ethiopia's sovereignty and regional presence. The past roles of BGR BLCs in Ethiopia's foreign relations illustrate a multidimensional approach to diplomacy. Their political alliances, economic integration, cultural engagement and military support significantly bolstered Ethiopia's regional standing. These contributions, particularly those led by Shek Hojele, challenge a capital-centric narrative of Ethiopian diplomacy and underscore the enduring importance of BLCs in the making of Ethiopia's foreign policy.

Historically, economic ties between the BLCs of BGR and Blue Nile State of Sudan have been especially robust. Gizen, a village located along the border, traditionally functioned as a major market hub for the exchange of goods between communities. It served as a vital centre for bartering: Sudanese merchants brought salt and other goods, while Ethiopian traders offered grains from Metekel and elsewhere. This exchange not only supported local economies but also cultivated social bonds and mutual interdependence across the border.

The transformation of Gizen over time, however, reflects both the opportunities and challenges of cross-border trade. In recent years, it has become increasingly associated with informal and illicit economic activity, particularly the smuggling of gold and other contraband. The growth of this shadow economy highlights the absence of effective regulation and formal trade mechanisms. Other border towns and villages, such as the now more prominent Kurmuk, share similar historical trajectories. They began as centres of legitimate trade and evolved into hotspots for smuggling due to weak institutional presence and limited economic alternatives.

In recent years, Ethiopia has witnessed significant political transformation and accompanying internal conflicts, and these developments have had notable repercussions in BGR for its BLCs. In response to rising instability, both BGR and BNS governments have taken steps to institutionalize cooperation and conflict mitigation. Migration dynamics have also shifted during the last decade. Ethiopia has been a key destination for Sudanese refugees, especially since the South Kordofan and BNS conflicts intensified in 2011. Conversely, Sudan began hosting Ethiopian refugees following the outbreak of violence in BGR and other regions after 2020. This bidirectional flow of refugees reflects the interconnection between the two countries and the vulnerabilities of BLCs caught in the middle of these shifting dynamics.

## **ABSENCE OF BORDERLAND COMMUNITIES IN ETHIOPIAN FOREIGN POLICY MAKING**

To assess the presence or absence of BLCs in Ethiopia's foreign policy, several guiding parameters should be considered. First is their role in the policy-making process itself: Are BLCs present where foreign policy is shaped, debated and decided? Second is their level of political representation within the national government: Do BLCs possess the political capital and institutional access needed to influence foreign affairs? Third is the constitutional framework. Article 51 of the constitution assigns foreign policy responsibilities exclusively to the federal government. Yet in practice, regional states—especially those along international borders—act as *de facto* participants in cross-border diplomacy due to their proximity and cultural ties with neighbouring countries. This raises a key question: Does the exclusion of regional actors from formal foreign policy reflect constitutional intent, or is it a form of political marginalization?

BLCs have nominal representation in legislative or executive bodies, although these structures are often not cognizant of the need for proper representation of these communities in policy-making—leaving little space for meaningful input on foreign policy matters. Symbolic and descriptive representation—the appearance of diversity through political appointments—rarely translates into substantive representation, where the actual interests, concerns and perspectives of borderland populations influence national policy.

On one hand, Ethiopia has a pluralist heritage that recognizes the historical significance of borderlands in nation-building through trade, resistance to colonization and cultural diplomacy. Yet BLCs often experience what might be called a 'presence of absence': their marginalization is neither hidden nor accidental, but visible and structural. While there have been efforts to include BLCs in national dialogues, this inclusion is frequently symbolic rather than meaningful.

Moreover, the tendency to view borderland regions through an orientalist lens—as exotic, dangerous or resource-rich frontiers—has reinforced their marginalization. Such narratives reduce BLCs to instruments of state interest, stripping them of agency, voice and dignity. This exclusion has damaged trust between borderland communities and the state, leading some groups to seek affirmation and solidarity elsewhere, ultimately weakening national cohesion. It has also contributed to the underutilization of resources generated in these regions and left BLCs vulnerable to conflict, often placing them on the frontlines during periods of unrest.

In a number of cases, border peoples have been viewed by the centre as potential enemies that are under the influence of neighbouring governments. In time, and particularly since the adoption of a federal constitution in 1995, the view has begun to gradually shift toward seeing border communities as bridges to neighbouring countries. Ethiopia's political transition since 2018 has also seen unfinished and uneven attempts to integrate the periphery into central policymaking.

### *Afar*

Afar BLCs have long experienced both the advantages and disadvantages that come with living at the crossroads of states and empires. However, the geopolitical fragmentation of the Afar people, divided among Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti, has also had profound negative consequences. The legacy of colonial borders has subjected Afar communities to political and socio-economic marginalization within the modern states they inhabit.

In Ethiopia, this marginalization manifests in limited access to infrastructure, healthcare and education, as well as exclusion from national political representation and strategic decision-making. Despite the Afar region's immense strategic value—spanning geography, resources and transboundary linkages—its representatives have been largely excluded from Ethiopia's foreign policy and regional diplomacy. The region also remains underdeveloped compared to other parts of the country, perpetuating cycles of poverty and disempowerment.

The Afars' location at a politically sensitive and often volatile border region exposes them to recurring security threats. Their territory lies at the intersection of Ethiopia's frontiers with Eritrea and Djibouti, two states with complex and, at times, tense relations with Addis Ababa. This positioning makes the Afar region vulnerable to geopolitical tensions, including border skirmishes, militarized conflicts and international rivalries playing out in the Horn. In addition, local frictions over scarce resources such as water and grazing land are increasingly becoming internationalized, especially as state and non-state actors exploit ethnic and territorial grievances for strategic gain.

Furthermore, the porous nature of the Afar borderlands has turned the region into a corridor for illicit activities such as human trafficking, arms smuggling, drug trade and contraband commerce. The absence of effective and coordinated border management policies has allowed criminal networks to flourish, often at the expense of local security and economic stability. While informal trade sustains many borderland livelihoods, the lack of formal market integration and infrastructure investment has left Afar communities dependent on unregulated and often exploitative systems. Poor state presence and ambiguous jurisdiction across the tri-border area have further weakened the capacity of BLCs to advocate for legal protections or development interventions.

Overall, while the Afar borderland position has offered them economic openings and diplomatic leverage, it has also subjected them to systemic marginalization and persistent insecurity. The dual nature of being a BLC, benefitting from transnational exchanges while bearing the brunt of geopolitical neglect, continues to shape the lived experiences and aspirations of the Afar people.

### *Somali*

Somali region has also faced significant internal challenges, particularly because of contested land rights and what many perceive as unfair and exclusionary federal institutions. These tensions have fueled inter-communal land disputes, often exacerbated by weak governance, political favouritism and uneven development policies. The result has been not only localized violence but a broader sense of disenfranchisement among Somali communities within Ethiopia. Security remains a major concern. Somali region continues to grapple with terrorist threats, as well as the proliferation of arms smuggling, human trafficking and cross-border tribal conflicts. These challenges are further complicated by the growing presence of external actors, including Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, whose competing interests are reshaping the geopolitics of the region. While these engagements can bring investment and strategic cooperation, they must be carefully managed to avoid exacerbating local tensions or fuelling proxy conflicts.

The post-1991 introduction of ethnic federalism and the establishment of the Somali Regional State were intended to empower Somali communities by granting them autonomy within the federal structure. While this arrangement has provided a platform for Somalis to engage in governance at the regional level, in practice their influence on national foreign policy and federal decision-making has remained limited. Some Somali scholars and political actors argue that the federal system has entrenched power imbalances, limiting the region's role in shaping Ethiopia's strategic priorities.

Adding to these challenges is the widespread perception that counterterrorism efforts have been conflated with a broader campaign against Islam. This has contributed to the marginalization of Muslim voices across national, regional and international policy arenas. As a result, mistrust has grown, religious and ethnic divisions have widened, and efforts to advance inclusive and representative governance have been undermined.

Cross-border trade has been a lifeline for Somali communities for centuries, forming intricate economic networks that link cities and families across Ethiopia, Somalia, Djibouti and Kenya. Despite its endurance and scale, this trade has frequently been labelled 'illegal', largely because formal state mechanisms have failed to accommodate or regulate it adequately. In fact, it is this so-called informal trade that has often sustained the local administration and economy of peripheral cities in Somali region, especially in the absence of meaningful public investment.

Critically, outside of the significant development of the Berbera Corridor and investment in the one-stop border infrastructure at Moyale, for decades there has been little investment in the development of cross-border trade infrastructure in other parts of Somali region. This neglect has forced communities to rely on informal channels, which, though resilient and resourceful, often invite state scrutiny and criminalization. The formalization of cross-border trade would not only reduce tensions but also provide a stable economic base for Somali communities and generate substantial revenue.

The birth of the Somali Republic in 1960 significantly altered Ethiopia's foreign policy posture. Yet to this day, the Ethiopian state appears uncertain about its engagement with the Somali population: Is it speaking to Somali citizens within its own borders, or negotiating with the Somali authorities across the national frontier? This ambiguity has created a persistent gap in policymaking, often leading to confusion, mistrust and under-engagement with local Somali actors who could otherwise play a constructive role in regional diplomacy.





### *Gambella*

The strategic location of Gambella and its involvement in Ethiopia's relations with South Sudan have brought several benefits to the region. Yet the people of Gambella also face challenges because of their region's international significance. One of the most pressing issues is the rise of inter- and intra-community tensions between host populations and refugees. The influx of South Sudanese refugees, while necessary for humanitarian reasons, has at times strained local resources, led to competition over land and water and sparked conflicts over access to services and employment. These tensions have created a fragile social environment that requires sustained dialogue, mediation and policy attention. Another significant concern is the inadequate provision of socioeconomic services. Public services such as healthcare, education and water remain limited, both for host communities and refugees. This scarcity undermines social cohesion and fuels perceptions of neglect and inequality, particularly when external support is perceived to benefit refugees more than local populations. Without a concerted effort to expand and equitably distribute basic services, grievances may deepen and social stability could be compromised.

Additionally, trade imbalances and unequal access to resources remain persistent challenges. The non-reciprocal sharing of natural resources, especially from South Sudan, reveals a structural economic disparity that disadvantages local communities. Compounded by weak infrastructure and limited institutional capacity, these imbalances hinder the full realization of economic benefits from cross-border trade.

### *Benishangul-Gumuz*

Lastly, the deep-rooted historical connections between the BLCs of BGR and BNS—while fostering cross-border cooperation—have also contributed to marginalization and conflict. These communities have long been geographically and politically distant from the central government in Addis Ababa, which has exacerbated their exclusion from national development agendas. This marginalization has created fertile ground for the emergence of armed opposition groups such as the Benishangul People's Liberation Movement and the Gumuz People's Democratic Movement, which have used BLC territories as safe havens and operational bases.

Moreover, these regions have borne the brunt of internal conflicts, particularly in the last four years, which have claimed thousands of civilian lives. The central government's limited presence and administrative shortcomings in the borderlands have contributed to lawlessness and violence. At times, diplomatic tensions between Ethiopia and Sudan have disrupted the cross-border ties between BLCs, including border closures that cut off social and economic lifelines. These disruptions further isolate the communities and deepen their grievances.

The cyclical nature of violence and underdevelopment in these areas has made BLCs increasingly vulnerable. Long-term marginalization has not only diminished their socio-economic capacities but has also eroded trust in state institutions. Consequently, many young people in the BLCs have been drawn into rebel movements, perceiving armed struggle as the only viable means of addressing historical injustices and achieving self-determination.

## **WAY FORWARD AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Foreign policy thinking in Ethiopia should not be centred exclusively in Addis Ababa; it must also emerge from the capitals and localities of neighbouring regional states. Borderland communities are not simply buffer zones—they are also dynamic spaces of exchange, dialogue and interconnection between Ethiopia and its neighbours. As such, the state's engagement with these regions must go beyond crisis management and security operations.

The inclusion of BLCs in central decision-making bodies and the federal bureaucracy should be commensurate with their population size, strategic importance and economic (or other) contributions. Their perspectives, identities and nationalist narratives must be integrated into the broader Ethiopia story. Development initiatives should prioritize these regions, not as peripheral zones, but as integral parts of the country, and should safeguard them from the vulnerabilities associated with their borderland location.

Rather than viewing the internal diversity of BLCs as a complication, Ethiopia must embrace it as a national asset. Their meaningful participation in foreign policy should not be justified solely in terms of their utility to the state, but grounded in principles of justice, citizenship and democratic inclusion. Public engagement must be genuine. BLCs should be actively and consistently consulted on policies that impact them, not as a symbolic gesture, but as an exercise of their democratic rights. Moreover, their inclusion in key federal decision-making institutions, particularly those concerned with foreign affairs and national security, is essential for crafting inclusive and responsive policy.

At the same time, Ethiopia must cultivate a more nuanced foreign policy, one that upholds territorial sovereignty while acknowledging the complexities of cross-border kinship, informal trade networks and population movements. Integrating the lived realities and transnational connections of BLCs into foreign policy would not only enhance diplomatic effectiveness but also deepen national cohesion. As a vital arm of national policy, foreign policy must reflect the voices, needs and aspirations of all Ethiopians, especially those who live in regions that serve as gateways to the wider world.

### *Afar*

In recent years, developments in the Horn—particularly those involving Ethiopia, Somalia, Djibouti and Eritrea—have introduced new dynamics that directly impact the Afar people and their homelands. These emerging trends present both opportunities and challenges, positioning the Afar as central actors in regional connectivity and diplomacy.

The deepening economic and infrastructural interconnection between Ethiopia and Djibouti has the potential to significantly benefit the Afar communities that span both countries. These initiatives are not only vital to Ethiopia's access to the sea but also pass directly through Afar-inhabited areas, potentially offering employment, infrastructure and service improvements to local populations. Furthermore, there are growing opportunities for Afar communities to serve as logistical and economic intermediaries, facilitating cross-border trade and enhancing their role in Ethiopia's maritime commerce. However, for these benefits to be fully realized, it is essential that the Afar people are not sidelined in the planning and implementation of these integration projects. Meaningful inclusion and benefit-sharing mechanisms are crucial to ensure that the local communities become stakeholders rather than bystanders.

Ethiopia's historically fraught relationship with Eritrea carries significant consequences for the Afar communities residing on both sides of the border. The Afar region, especially areas near Assab and Bure, remains a highly sensitive zone where geopolitical tensions often manifest as social and economic instability for local populations. The Afars' long-standing ties to Assab and their geographic presence along this critical frontier underscore both their strategic importance and their vulnerability in the ongoing rivalry between the two nations. In the absence of sustained diplomatic engagement and locally driven confidence-building efforts, Afar communities risk bearing the brunt of any renewed hostilities. To navigate these complex realities, Ethiopia must adopt a more inclusive and integrated approach to national security and foreign policy, one that actively incorporates the perspectives, priorities and strengths of borderland communities such as the Afar. Elevating their voices in strategic decision-making would not only empower the Afar but also strengthen Ethiopia's credibility and resilience in regional diplomacy. At the same time, security operations along the frontier must be balanced with



initiatives that promote legitimate cross-border trade, facilitate mobility and encourage conflict-sensitive governance across Afar territories.

Ethiopia would also benefit from proactively incorporating the perspectives of Afar communities beyond its borders in Eritrea and Djibouti, especially in discussions around port access, trade corridors and regional security frameworks. Their lived experiences, historical memory and cultural interconnectedness make them valuable partners in any regional integration or cooperation effort. Recognizing and leveraging these connections could help Ethiopia foster more constructive and people-centred diplomacy with its neighbours.

Finally, targeted investment in infrastructure and human development within the Afar region is imperative. Enhancing roads, railways, education, healthcare and market access would not only improve local wellbeing but also reinforce Ethiopia's strategic objectives related to maritime access and trade competitiveness. Political empowerment, especially through meaningful roles in foreign policy forums and security institutions, would ensure that the Afar people are not merely seen as borderland dwellers but as central contributors to Ethiopia's sovereignty, stability and integration into global markets.

### *Somali*

Moving south of Afar, Somali intellectuals and academics have offered recommendations to address similar longstanding challenges. First, there is an urgent need for genuine public engagement, beyond the confines of local administrations and government-affiliated actors. Public debates, forums and community gatherings should include a broad spectrum of voices—academics, independent thinkers, elders and religious leaders—who can shape public opinion and influence policy from the grassroots level. These discussions should take place not just in formal institutions but in public spaces where ideas can circulate freely. Second, there must be equitable distribution of wealth from mega projects, particularly those involving natural resource extraction. Transparent revenue-sharing mechanisms are essential to ensure that local communities benefit from these resources, both economically and socially. Finally, Ethiopia must invest in inclusive and equitable economic development. This includes major infrastructure projects, such as roads, energy and telecommunications, that directly benefit Somali communities. Policies should prioritize local employment, skill development and support for community-led initiatives to ensure that growth is not only rapid but also just and sustainable.

In conclusion, the Somali perspective offers crucial insights into Ethiopia's past and future. Recognizing the historical significance, contemporary struggles and untapped potential of Somali communities is essential for building a more united, resilient and equitable Ethiopia. Somali communities are not merely borderland dwellers—they must be enabled to play their role as key actors in Ethiopia's historical, economic, political and diplomatic narratives. Recognizing and integrating their contributions and concerns into national and foreign policy discourse is essential for building a more inclusive, resilient and regionally connected Ethiopia.

### *Gambella*

For Ethiopia's foreign policy to be truly inclusive and strategic, it must explicitly account for the security and development needs of the peoples of Gambella. A primary concern is the protection of border districts from cross-border incursions, especially from armed groups such as Murle militia, whose repeated attacks on Ethiopian territory have resulted in loss of life and displacement. Strengthening border security through community-based policing and bilateral defence mechanisms is crucial to safeguarding lives and promoting peace.

In addition, investing in infrastructure such as roads, health centres and schools in remote border areas would not only improve livelihoods but also strengthen the state's presence and legitimacy in these



regions. Enhancing service delivery and public infrastructure can serve as a foundation for long-term peacebuilding and economic integration. Similarly, conducting scientific assessments of Gambella's natural resources, including arable land and biodiversity, can attract responsible investment and drive sustainable development.

To ensure that the perspectives of local communities are meaningfully integrated into foreign policy, it is crucial to empower local governance structures. Enhancing the capacity and autonomy of zonal and woreda-level administrations will promote more responsive and participatory governance. This approach enables borderland development initiatives to align not only with national priorities but also with the lived realities and aspirations of local populations.

Institutionalizing cross-border cooperation through the establishment of an Ethio–South Sudan border development commission would be a significant step forward. This commission should be tasked with addressing the specific security, trade and development needs of borderland communities. It must advocate for the protection and inclusion of historically marginalized groups such as the Nuer and Anywaa, ensuring their voices are reflected in both national and bilateral policymaking processes. Moreover, cultural diplomacy offers a powerful yet underutilized avenue for fostering regional cooperation. Strengthening people-to-people ties through cultural exchanges, joint festivals, educational programmes and heritage initiatives can build trust, nurture mutual understanding and lay the groundwork for long-term reconciliation and collaboration between Ethiopia and its neighbours, especially South Sudan.

### ***Benishangul-Gumuz***

Unlocking the full strategic potential of BLCs in BGR also requires deliberate interventions that integrate their roles into Ethiopia's overarching national agenda. A key starting point is the urgent need for infrastructure development, particularly the expansion of road networks linking BGR with BNS of Sudan. Another vital area of intervention involves deepening and institutionalizing the existing people-to-people relations across the Ethiopia-Sudan border. These historical social and cultural connections are a foundation upon which stronger bilateral relations can be built. By leveraging familial, linguistic and religious ties, Ethiopia and Sudan can enhance cross-border collaboration in ways that benefit both states and their border populations.

Cross-border cooperation must also be broadened and strengthened across multiple sectors—economic, social, political and security. For example, cultural exchange programs could be institutionalized between BGR and BNS to promote mutual understanding and preserve shared heritage. Social cooperation should be enhanced in critical areas such as education and healthcare. Furthermore, strengthening local government structures, including their ability to manage peace and development projects, will empower BLCs to become proactive agents in Ethiopia's foreign policy landscape.

The role of BLCs in foreign relations can also be elevated by promoting citizen diplomacy where community leaders, elders, youth groups and civil society organizations engage in dialogue and peacebuilding with their counterparts across the border. Ethiopia should also adopt a constituent diplomacy approach, allowing regional governments to engage in select aspects of foreign relations, especially those that directly impact their cross-border communities. While the federal government retains primacy over foreign affairs, a more inclusive and decentralized model could enable regional states like BGR to take leadership in localized cross-border diplomacy.

## CONCLUSION

Ethiopia's foreign policy remains largely elite-driven and technocratic—shaped by experts, bureaucrats and diplomats. While this multi-actor approach offers some institutional depth, it falls short in reflecting the full diversity of the nation. This lack of pluralism is especially problematic given that BLCs have their own intellectuals, analysts and community leaders whose perspectives are seldom included in formal foreign policy discussions. Despite their central role in the ideological contestation between dominant and alternative narratives within Ethiopia, BLCs are often relegated to the margins of national dialogue. It would be beneficial to promote the creation of forums, the development of curricula, inclusive hiring practices and other mechanisms through which the centre can engage peripheral communities and local elites in the formulation and implementation of foreign policy.

Furthermore, policymakers must reconceptualize development through the lens of pastoralist and mobile societies. Too often, pastoralism is mischaracterized as backward or underdeveloped, when it is a resilient and adaptive livelihood strategy, finely tuned to challenging environmental conditions. Its mobility is not a symptom of underdevelopment but a deliberate, strategic adaptation.

True development must be defined in partnership with the communities it intends to support. Imposing urban-centric or centralized models onto mobile populations disregards their lived experiences and deepens marginalization. Policies that overlook Ethiopia's socio-economic diversity—particularly those originating from the centre without local adaptation—are unlikely to succeed in peripheral regions. Inclusive governance and locally informed strategies are essential for equitable development and more representative foreign policy making.

To fully harness the potential of Ethiopia's borderlands for national security and foreign policy, it is essential to redefine the concept of 'borderlands'. Borderlands are not merely measured by geographic distance from the political centre; rather, they reflect deeper dimensions of political, social and economic proximity to the state. In this context, being a borderland is more about the degree of connection—or disconnection—with the national project. It is about belonging, historical ties and the extent to which communities feel integrated within or alienated from the state.

Ethiopia's nation-building project has historically been violent and exclusionary, resulting in a contested sense of 'Ethiopianness'. This contested identity continues to shape the relationship between the centre and peripheral regions. If Ethiopia is to build a more cohesive and resilient polity, it must nurture a sense of belonging that emerges organically rather than being imposed through force or ideology. This requires acknowledging the diverse historical experiences and grievances of BLCs.

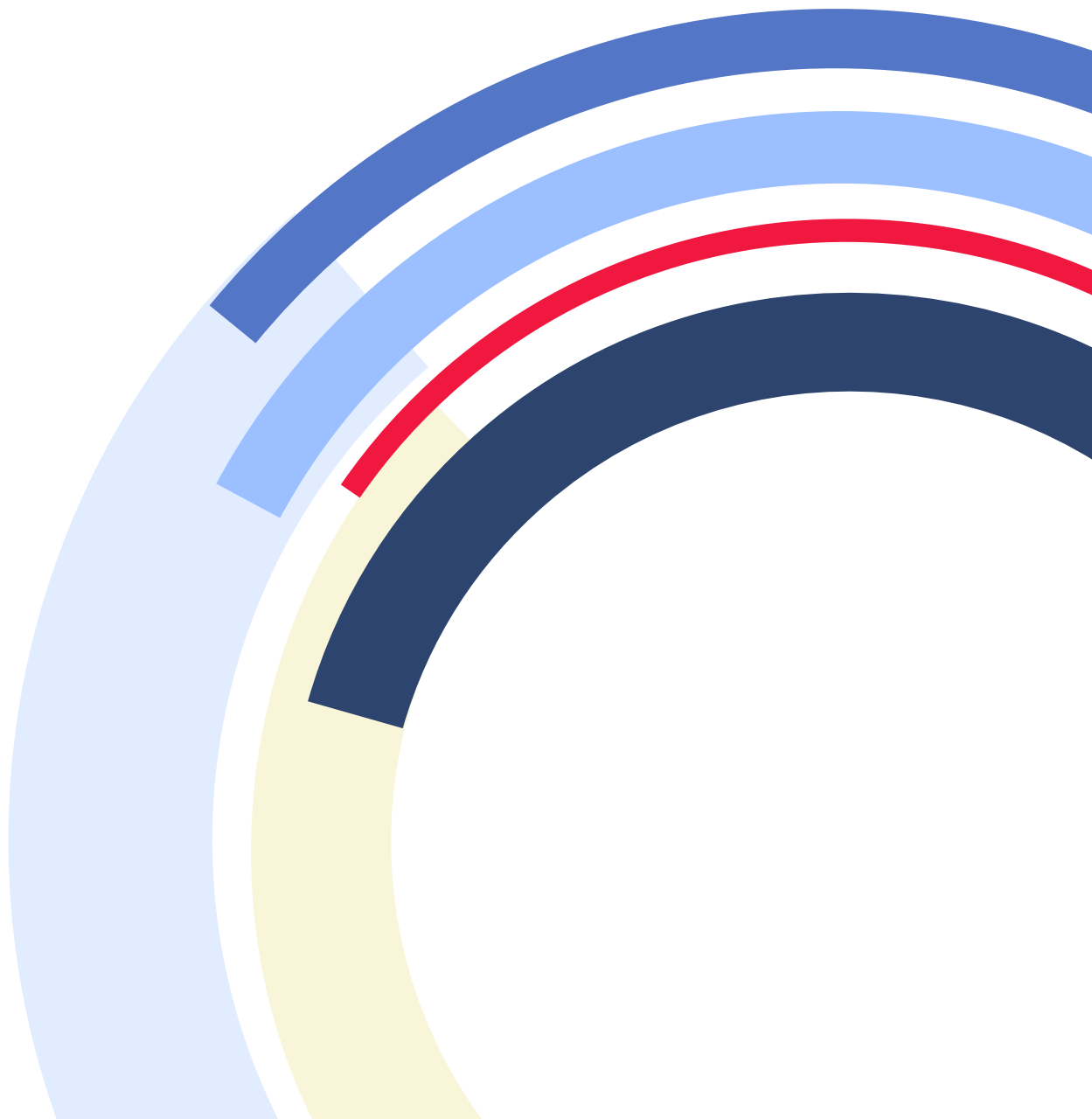
It is also important to distinguish between nationalism and citizenship. While nationalism in Ethiopia often evokes ethno-cultural loyalty and historical grievances, citizenship should be rooted in legal equality, political inclusion and shared prosperity. The four regions often categorized as peripheries are rich in natural resources and cultural capital, yet they have been subjected to an extractive relationship with the central state. Moving forward, it is crucial that local elites in these regions can effectively bargain for the political, economic and social rights they deserve within the federal framework.

Ultimately, the Ethiopian government must develop a forward-looking policy that prioritizes peace and cohesion. This includes crafting an assertive and coherent foreign policy that recognizes the strategic value of borderlands, not as vulnerabilities, but as assets. Importantly, this policy must not alienate or marginalize BLCs. Instead, it should incorporate them as key stakeholders in Ethiopia's national security and regional diplomacy. By affirming their roles and addressing their unique circumstances, Ethiopia can transform its borderlands from sites of tension and neglect into anchors of stability and growth.



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## ABOUT THE PRF

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