POLITICAL ECONOMY AND PEACE ANALYSIS

Supporting the Ethiopian Peace Infrastructure

UNDP

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Upon submission of the PEPA Interim report, UNDP initiated a working session with key stakeholders, which included the UNDP Senior Management (SMT), the Technical Advisory Group comprised of representatives from various relevant organizations and several other counterparts, co-chaired by the Policy Studies Institute (PSI), The purpose of this consultative session was to understand how the PEPA can provide best value for UNDP in its efforts to support the Government of Ethiopia's reform initiatives across the peace, governance, and macroeconomic sectors. The check-in consultation meeting provided the platform that generated useful insights and perspectives on how to take PEPA forward in light of the complexities and sensitivities involved.

The government counterpart, the Policy Studies Institute, proposed a modular approach as an option, where the PEPA then becomes a set of smaller targeted studies, rather than one broad all-encompassing analysis. A compelling reason for such an approach is the need to ensure that PSI feels it can comfortably co-own PEPA outputs. From the bilateral discussions with members of the SMT, it seems that UNDP also favours a set of modular studies.

Taking these recommendations into account the consultants agreed to reframe and refocus the analysis with a set of focused, modular, well-evidenced, policy-relevant studies (drawing on the data gathered for the PEPA) as the best option for the reasons outlined above. In terms of thematic areas for the modular studies, the following two topics have been agreed upon the SMT: (a) study on the state of the Infrastructure of Peace in Ethiopia and how to strengthen it for lasting peace and long-term resilience; and (b) an analysis of governance, peace, and macroeconomic risks that need to be considered in programming to ensure that a conflict-sensitive and do-no-harm approaches are taken by UNDP and other development partners.

The methodology employed remains more or less unchanged, encompassing several key components:

- ▶ A comprehensive desk review of secondary data sources—academic studies, policy documents, and reports—will establish a foundational understanding of the issues at hand;
- ▶ Fieldwork across multiple stakeholders at the federal level involving state institutions, civil society groups, research think tanks and academia, development partners and the UN system, as well as individual key informants;
- ▶ In an effort to capture regional dynamics and perspective, we have also visited two purposely selected regions: Afar and Oromia. These regions have been chosen to capture the diversity inherent in Ethiopia's diverse cultures, federal structure and peacebuilding challenges. During the field visits, we carried out semi-structured interviews and group discussions with a diverse array of stakeholders, including government officials, traditional leaders, representatives from civil society, and actors from the private sector. Their perspectives have not only enriched but also validated the findings from the desk review, ensuring that local voices inform the analysis;
- ▶ Online consultations—including webinars, expert panels, and open forums—helped to expand the input from national and international analysts, tapping into specialised expertise.

This report is dedicated to the first thematic topic - the state of the Infrastructure of Peace in Ethiopia and how to strengthen it for lasting peace and long-term resilience. The report explores how Ethiopia's peace infrastructure can be supported to enable sustainable peace. It analyses formal, informal, and hybrid mechanisms alongside cultural practices, examining how they function as a system. Based on secondary sources, it maps national and sub-national peace actors, identifies strengths and gaps, and proposes strategies to strengthen system coherence. Key caveats include reliance on desk-based data, the vast and complex nature of Ethiopia's peace architecture, and a rapidly evolving context. The report is structured around conceptual framing, infrastructure mapping, cultural analysis, systemic insights, and actionable recommendations for the Government of Ethiopia and UNDP.

Conceptual Framework – The Ethiopian Peace Infrastructure

Peace infrastructure refers to the formal and informal institutions, networks, and mechanisms that help societies prevent and manage conflict while promoting social cohesion. These structures exist at national and subnational levels and combine state-led initiatives (such as the Ministry of Peace and National Dialogue Commission) with community-based mechanisms like councils of elders, women's groups, and national and local peace committees/Councils. Effective peace infrastructures link these levels, enabling early warning, mediation, and inclusive dialogue.

Culture plays a central role in shaping peace infrastructure, with traditions like *Shimglina*, *Gadaa*, and interfaith cooperation reinforcing consultative, restorative approaches to conflict resolution. In Ethiopia, national institutions are complemented by regional bureaus, kebele councils, and religious or traditional bodies. These mechanisms collectively form Ethiopia's peace infrastructure, though they operate with varying levels of integration. When aligned with cultural values and supported by institutional frameworks, peace infrastructures enhance societal resilience and help maintain sustainable peace.

Overview and Assessment – Key Elements of Ethiopia's Peace Infrastructure

A comprehensive analysis is provided of Ethiopia's peace infrastructure, spanning national, regional, and grassroots levels. It assesses formal state institutions, hybrid mechanisms, and deeply embedded cultural practices, highlighting both strengths and weaknesses across the system.

National-level and formal institutions

Ethiopia has a robust set of institutions that form part of the national-level peace infrastructure:

- The **Ministry of Peace** coordinates peace and security policy, engaging in reconciliation and local dialogue. However, overlapping mandates and limited agility constrain its effectiveness;
- The **House of Federation** offers constitutional mechanisms for resolving inter-regional disputes and has played a key role in peaceful referenda but suffers from slow procedures and limited enforcement capacity;
- The **Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission** is facilitating broad-based consultations but faces participation gaps and lacks authority to implement outcomes;
- The **Transitional Justice Initiative** aims to address historical abuses via policy frameworks, though it risks being seen as top-down and incomplete/or inadequate in addressing current challenges.
- The **DDR Initiative** is demobilising over 370,000 ex-combatants, supported by donors, but faces logistical, financial, and security risks;
- Broader **political reforms** have opened space for opposition and civil society but also triggered new tensions; and
- Independent bodies like the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (**EHRC)** and the National Elections Board of Ethiopia (**NEBE)** have strengthened accountability and electoral credibility, though both operate under difficult political conditions.

Hybrid institutions and subnational formal/informal mechanisms

At the subnational level, regional peace and security bureaus, local peace committees, customary courts, and community-based organisations all contribute to conflict prevention and resolution:

- **Hybrid actors** link formal and informal systems, but often operate without clear mandates or coordination;
- **Kebele and woreda councils**, **religious institutions**, and **community groups** (particularly women and youth) are vital early action actors but lack institutional capacity; and
- **Customary courts** and mechanisms like Shimglina, Gadaa, Xeer, and Makabantu provide culturally embedded conflict resolution, though gender exclusion and jurisdictional limits persist.

Culture and peace

Ethiopia's peace infrastructure is profoundly shaped by cultural traditions and values. Mechanisms such as:

▶ *Gadaa* (Oromia);
▶ *Shimglina* (Amhara and Tigray);
▶ *Xeer* (Somali);
▶ *Makabantu* (Afar and Benishangul-Gumuz); and
▶ *Yajoka-Kitcha* (Guraghe) are deeply rooted in norms of dialogue, reconciliation, and restorative justice. These traditions often prioritise social harmony over punitive measures and are reinforced by community institutions like *idir*, *mahber*, and *equb*.

Culture also underpins religious cooperation, intermarriage, and peace pacts between regions, which contributes to social cohesion and resilience. However, some traditional practices may exclude women, youth, or minority groups, and risk politicisation if co-opted by state actors.

Ethiopia's peace infrastructure is rich, diverse, and deeply embedded in society. Yet it remains fragmented, under-coordinated, and vulnerable to political pressures. While formal institutions have gained visibility, hybrid and cultural mechanisms remain under-recognised and under-utilized. Strengthening peace in Ethiopia requires investing in integration, legitimacy, and the cultural foundations of reconciliation.

Analysis: Strengthening the Peace Infrastructure

While Ethiopia's peace infrastructure is rich, diverse, and deeply embedded in both state institutions and society, it functions more as a collection of fragmented parts than as an integrated system. Formal institutions such as the Ministry of Peace and the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission often operate in isolation from informal and community-based mechanisms. Coordination between federal and regional actors is inconsistent, and many hybrid or local initiatives lack mandates, resources, and recognition.

There are several key system-level enablers that could be built upon. These include Ethiopia's strong cultural traditions of conflict resolution, growing institutional pluralism, ongoing international support, and a track record of innovation in response to crises. However, these enabling factors are undercut by major systemic risks: fragmentation between federal and regional institutions, a mismatch between political decentralisation and weak local administrative capacity, the erosion of trust in both state and customary institutions, and a heavy reliance on short-term, project-based donor funding.

To address these issues and transition toward a more coherent and resilient peace infrastructure, five strategic pathways are proposed. First, deepening hybridity by linking formal and informal mechanisms through legal and operational frameworks. Second, reinforcing legitimacy and local ownership by ensuring inclusive participation, particularly from women, youth, and marginalised groups. Third, protecting peace institutions from political capture by promoting transparency and establishing oversight mechanisms. Fourth, investing in resilience and adaptability by building institutional capacity, securing long-term resources, and enabling learning and responsiveness. Finally, addressing the peace-development nexus by aligning peacebuilding with inclusive development, job creation, and the economic reintegration of ex-combatants. This will amplify the peace dividends and attract more interest and deliberate investments in peace-generating economic activities.

Together, these pathways offer a roadmap for transforming Ethiopia's fragmented peace landscape into a more integrated and durable system capable of supporting the country's broader vision for total peace.

Recommendations

Recommendations for UNDP

UNDP is advised to take a strategic role in enabling system-wide coherence and sustainability through three key actions:

▶ **Support the development of a National Peace Infrastructure Strategy:** UNDP should assist the government in preparing a comprehensive national strategy that includes a peace policy, maps existing mechanisms, defines integration pathways between formal and informal actors, and establishes coordination and monitoring bodies.

▶ **Develop a Programme to support hybrid mechanisms and the "Missing Middle":** A dedicated programme should be created to strengthen local peace actors—such as peace committees, religious councils, and women's networks—while improving coordination between grassroots and regional systems. Emphasis should be placed on inclusivity, flexible funding, and community ownership.

▶ **Promote conflict-sensitive development:** All development programming should integrate peace infrastructure assessments, ensuring that investments in livelihoods, governance, and services reinforce local peace capacities and contribute to social cohesion.

Recommendations for the Government of Ethiopia

The government is encouraged to lead a national effort to build a unified, inclusive, and resilient peace infrastructure through three core priorities:

▶ **Prepare a National Peace Infrastructure Strategy:** This strategy should involve diverse stakeholders, establish clear institutional mandates across governance levels, and set out a roadmap for legal, institutional, and resource reforms.

▶ **Identify, recognize and empower hybrid actors; protect institutions from politicisation:** Legal recognition, mandates, and resources should be provided to local peace actors while safeguarding institutions from elite influence through transparent appointments and oversight mechanisms. The neutrality of hybrid peace actors would enable them to effectively bridge the trust gap/deficit.

▶ **Integrate peace infrastructure into development planning:** Peacebuilding should be embedded within national development plans, linked with economic inclusion, land governance, and youth employment, and operationalised through whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches, with commensurate budgetary allocations.

1. Introduction

How can Ethiopia's peace infrastructure be supported to enable sustainable peace in the country?

This report provides an in-depth political economy and peace analysis of Ethiopia's peace infrastructure, responding directly to the above research question. It assesses how formal institutions, informal mechanisms, hybrid arrangements, and cultural practices collectively shape Ethiopia's capacity to prevent, manage, and transform violent conflict. The approach taken identifies not only the individual components of the peace infrastructure but also examines how they function—or fail to function—as a system.

To answer the research question, the report draws on an extensive desk review of secondary literature, policy documents, legal frameworks, and academic and practitioner sources. It maps the architecture of Ethiopia's peace infrastructure across national and sub-national levels and offers a critical analysis of its strengths, gaps, and vulnerabilities. The report also identifies enabling factors and systemic risks and proposes strategic pathways for strengthening the peace infrastructure to support a more coherent and inclusive vision of "total peace" in Ethiopia.

Readers should note **several important caveats** with the report:

▶ **Secondary source-based:** This analysis is based on secondary sources, including published research, grey literature, and public data. While efforts were made to draw from a wide range of high-quality and up-to-date materials, this poses limitations.

▶ **Scope of Ethiopia's peace infrastructure:** Ethiopia's peace infrastructure is vast and complex. It includes formal state institutions, traditional authorities, religious networks, local committees, civil society, and cultural practices. Given the scale and diversity of actors, this report does not claim to be exhaustive but rather offers a strategic synthesis of key components and dynamics.

▶ **Rapidly evolving context:** Ethiopia's political and security landscape is fluid. Some institutions and initiatives described may have changed significantly since the time of writing. The findings should therefore be understood as a snapshot within a fast-moving environment.

▶ **Peace infrastructure versus peace process:** While the report also references national peace initiatives (e.g., transitional justice, national dialogue, DDR), its core focus is on the underlying infrastructure—that is, the system of actors, mechanisms, and relationships that enable or inhibit peace across Ethiopia.

Structure of the Report The report is structured as follows:

▶ Section 2 presents the conceptual framework, defining peace infrastructure and contextualising its application in Ethiopia;

▶ Section 3 offers an overview and assessment of Ethiopia's peace infrastructure at national and sub-national levels, across formal, informal, and hybrid mechanisms;

▶ Section 4 analyses the role of culture in peacebuilding, highlighting both national symbols and local traditions that support social cohesion;

▶ Section 5 synthesises the findings into a system-level analysis, identifying structural enablers, systemic risks, and strategic pathways for strengthening the peace infrastructure; and

▶ Section 6 concludes with recommendations for the Government of Ethiopia and UNDP, outlining actionable steps to support a more coherent, inclusive, and resilient infrastructure for peace.

2. Conceptual Framework: The Ethiopian Peace Infrastructure

Peace infrastructure, sometimes called "infrastructure for peace" (I4P), refers to the networks of people, institutions, and mechanisms that help societies prevent and manage conflict sustainably ([12 Organizations Building Infrastructure for Peace](#)). This framework combines formal institutions and informal societal efforts devoted to conflict prevention, resolution, and social cohesion[1].

2.1. Defining peace infrastructure

A frequently cited definition describes peace infrastructure as "a dynamic network of interdependent structures, mechanisms, resources, values, and skills which, through dialogue and consultation, contribute to conflict prevention and peace-building in a society" (UNDP, 2016). Essentially, it is the social architecture for peace, bringing together government agencies, community mediators, and other actors to address conflict before it turns violent and to bridge societal divides ([12 Organizations Building Infrastructure for Peace](#)[2]).

Such infrastructures include both formal and informal elements at multiple levels. Formal elements may be mandated by law (e.g., national peace councils or a ministry of peace), while informal elements emerge from community-driven efforts—like local peace committees, councils of elders, or traditional dispute-resolution practices (UNDP, 2015). Coordination and inclusivity are crucial: by connecting stakeholders from government ministries down to village-level committees, peace infrastructures can share information and respond collaboratively to disputes (Peace Infrastructures – UNDP, 2016; African Journal on Conflict Resolution, 2012).

2.1.2. National and subnational peace infrastructures

At the national level, peace infrastructures often take the form of formal bodies or policies devoted to peace. Many countries have created national peace councils, commissions, or even ministries of peace to coordinate conflict prevention and reconciliation (Peace Infrastructures – UNDP, 2016). Ghana's National Peace Council, for example, was legally established in 2011 and spans national, regional, and district levels to facilitate dialogue and reconciliation. Ethiopia, Nepal, Costa Rica, and the Solomon Islands have similarly created high-level agencies or ministries focused on peacebuilding (African Journal on Conflict Resolution, 2012). These bodies typically provide policy guidance, engage in early warning, and support local peace initiatives by linking government agencies, security forces, and civil society.

Subnational peace infrastructure generally refers to community-based, traditional, or district-level mechanisms—such as local peace committees, councils of elders, mediator networks, youth and women's groups, or peace education centres. Working on the front lines, these grassroots bodies often feed information upward into national early-warning systems (African Journal on Conflict Resolution, 2012). For instance, Togo established 37 Local Peace Committees in 2016, uniting religious leaders, traditional chiefs, retired police, and teachers to mediate conflicts at the community level (Peace Infrastructures – UNDP, 2016). Ideally, national and local structures form a continuum, exchanging information, resources, and support in both directions (African Journal on Conflict Resolution, 2012).

2.1.3. Formal and informal mechanisms

A key feature of peace infrastructures is the blend of formal and informal mechanisms. Formal

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1   Some writers also use the phrase **"infrastructure of peace,"** generally with the same meaning of a societal framework that underpins peace ([Building Peace from the Grassroots with Informal Peace Infrastructures: Experience from Ojoo Community, Ibadan, Nigeria – ACCORD](#))

2   https://everydaypeacebuilding.com/infrastructure-for-peace/#:~:text=Here%20is%20a%20simple%20definition,for%20 peace%2C%20or%20peace%20infrastructure

mechanisms, such as ministries of peace, peace councils, or peace secretariats, have official mandates and resources. Their legitimacy stems from legal or political authority, enabling them to set strategies, convene dialogues, and institutionalize conflict resolution (African Journal on Conflict Resolution, 2012). Ghana's National Peace Council and Nepal's Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction are prime examples (Peace Infrastructures – UNDP, 2016). The creation of a stand-alone Ministry of Peace by the Ethiopian government is also another example.

Informal mechanisms, on the other hand, arise from the grassroots. These include village peace committees, elders' councils, inter-faith dialogue groups, and other community-led interventions that build on trust and culturally rooted conflict-resolution practices. A well-known example is Kenya's Wajir Peace and Development Committee, initiated by local elders, women, and officials to curb clan clashes (African Journal on Conflict Resolution, 2012).

Effective peace infrastructures integrate formal and informal elements. Formal bodies supply resources, training, and legal recognition, while informal initiatives address conflicts in culturally appropriate ways and facilitate real-time mediation. Ideally, there are clear channels linking local committees to higher-level authorities, ensuring that communities can call on national bodies for support and that policymakers remain informed by local realities (African Journal on Conflict Resolution, 2012).

2.1.4. Culture

Culture profoundly shapes peace infrastructures, influencing how communities prevent, manage, and resolve conflicts, although it remains a largely under-researched topic in this regard. Societies with strong traditions of consultative decision-making, reconciliation, and truth-telling tend to develop more effective local peace infrastructures. These cultural norms determine the legitimacy of mediators, the acceptability of justice mechanisms, and the degree of public participation in peace processes (Richmond, 2011).

Many African societies, for instance, prioritise reconciliation over punitive measures in conflict resolution. The Gacaca courts in post-genocide Rwanda allowed communities to engage in restorative justice, focusing on truth-telling and reintegration rather than strict punishment (Clark, 2010). Similarly, South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) provided a platform for victims and perpetrators to engage in open dialogue, reinforcing the cultural importance of truth-telling in national healing (Tutu, 199). In Ethiopia, the Shimglina process, led by elders, fosters social cohesion through dialogue-based mediation (sometimes accompanied by material compensations), rather than retributive justice (Pankhurst, 2008).

Consultative decision-making is also a hallmark of many peace infrastructures. The Gadaa system among the Oromo people in Ethiopia involves structured deliberations before any major political or judicial decision is made, ensuring broad consensus (Tuso, 2001). In Papua New Guinea, the Wantok system encourages extended kinship networks to collectively resolve disputes, preventing social fragmentation (Dinnen, 2001). These approaches highlight how deeply ingrained cultural traditions enhance the legitimacy and sustainability of peace efforts.

In regions where transitional justice is central to peacebuilding, cultural respect for truth and accountability strengthens reconciliation efforts. The Mato Oput ritual of the Acholi people in Uganda blends spiritual reconciliation with material compensation, ensuring that both personal and communal healing occur after conflict (Baines, 2017). Similarly, Sierra Leone's post-civil war peace process incorporated traditional cleansing ceremonies to help reintegrate former child soldiers into their communities (Shaw, 2005). These culturally embedded mechanisms often prove more effective than externally imposed models because they are rooted in local values and traditions.

When peace infrastructures align with cultural norms, they gain greater legitimacy and community trust. Societies with strong traditions of dialogue, truth-telling, and reconciliation often have more effective, community-driven peace mechanisms, reducing reliance on external interventions (Mac Ginty, 2011).

2.1.5. Contributions to conflict prevention, resolution, and social cohesion

Peace infrastructures help societies prevent and manage conflict while promoting social cohesion. Operating at multiple levels, they collect local information and address tensions before they escalate. Local peace committees or community monitors act as "eyes and ears," detecting early warning signs— such as inflammatory rhetoric—and alerting authorities. In Ghana and Kenya, for example, peace councils

and committees have intervened in land disputes and chieftaincy conflicts to avert violence (UNDP, 2016). National bodies also run programmes that bring together potentially rival groups (UNDP, 2016), thereby enhancing "social resilience" (UNDP, 2015). Alongside reactive approaches, proactive trust-building initiatives—such as cultural exchanges and peace education—tackle root causes of conflict, lowering the likelihood of violence over time (African Journal on Conflict Resolution, 2012).

When conflicts arise, peace infrastructures supply mediation mechanisms. National councils or community elders can intervene swiftly because these structures are permanent. In Ghana, the National Peace Council frequently mediates political or ethnic tensions (UNDP, 2016). Malawi's peace architecture trains women and youth as mediators, enabling them to resolve community-level disputes (UNDP, 2016). By institutionalising peaceful conflict resolution, these bodies offer reliable forums for dialogue. In South Africa during the 1990s, for instance, local peace committees brokered ceasefires in township clashes (UNDP, 2016). Such mechanisms reduce the chances of violence by providing an alternative to force (UNDP, 2015).

Equally significant is fostering social cohesion. By bringing together a diverse range of stakeholders, peace infrastructures nurture a culture of cooperation. Over time, this promotes trust and reduces suspicion between different groups. In Togo, local peace committees unite community members from various backgrounds to tackle shared challenges (UNDP, 2016). On a national scale, Costa Rica's Ministry of Peace and Justice institutionalises peace values through education and crime-prevention programmes (African Journal on Conflict Resolution, 2012). Inclusive national dialogues—such as Tunisia's Quartet—can also rebuild trust and social capital after political turmoil (UNDP, 2016). In effect, these frameworks act as social glue, encouraging collaboration and showing communities the concrete benefits of working together. Where local peace committees succeed, as they have in South Africa, public confidence in non-violent solutions increases, further strengthening the societal commitment to peace (UNDP, 2016).

2.2. Contextualising peace infrastructure to Ethiopia

2.2.1. National and formal institutions and mechanisms

Ethiopia's peace infrastructure at the national level consists of key formal institutions mandated with conflict prevention, resolution, and peacebuilding. These institutions include the Ministry of Peace (MoP), the House of Federation (HoF), the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission (ENDC), the Transitional Justice Initiative (in the making), the Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) Initiative, and other governance reforms supporting peace.

After Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed took office in 2018, new policy and legal frameworks, institutions and initiatives were launched to foster national reconciliation and conflict resolution. The timeline of 2018–2024 thus features the creation or reform of key institutions and legal frameworks dedicated to preventing conflict and sustaining peace in Ethiopia.

These efforts, alongside strengthened independent bodies like the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE), comprise Ethiopia's evolving national-level and formal peace infrastructure.

There are also several non-state actors such as Inter Religious Council of Ethiopia (IRCE). Destiny Ethiopia (MIND), Network of Women in Dialogue, UN and INGO supported initiatives, which can be considered as track two infrastructures for peace.

2.2.2. Sub-national and formal/informal institutions and mechanisms

Ethiopia's sub-national peace infrastructure comprises formal and informal institutions operating at regional, zonal, district, and local levels. Regional Peace and Security Bureaus oversee conflict prevention and coordinate security forces, while regional and local courts provide legal mechanisms for dispute resolution, though they face resource constraints and political interference. Customary courts and traditional dispute resolution mechanisms, such as the Gadaa system in Oromia, Sharia courts in Somali and Afar, and Shimglina in Amhara and Tigray, offer culturally embedded approaches, often preferred in rural areas.

Local administrative councils at the kebele and woreda levels mediate community disputes and often

coordinate grassroots peace efforts. Regional offices of national institutions, including the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, National Electoral Board, strive to bridge national peace policies but often face coordination challenges. Unlike many other similar institutions, ENDC has no meaningful local presence which undermines its effectiveness in understanding local realities and positioning itself accordingly.

Religious institutions, such as the Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia, play a crucial role in promoting inter-faith understanding, cooperation and peaceful co-existence, reconciliation, leveraging moral authority and community trust. Women's and youth-led initiatives actively promote social cohesion, while civil society organisations facilitate dialogues and advocate for policy reforms.

2.2.3. Culture and peace in Ethiopia

Ethiopia's cultural traditions play a crucial role in peacebuilding, complementing formal mechanisms with community-based conflict resolution. Interfaith cooperation, embodied by the Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia, promotes unity, with religious leaders mediating conflicts. Consensus-based decision-making (megbabat) is embedded in traditional forums like idir and mahber, which reinforce social cohesion.

At the sub-national level, customary dispute resolution mechanisms, such as Shimglina (Amhara & Tigray), Gadaa (Orom), Xeer (Somali), Makabantu (Afar & Benishangul-Gumuz), Yejoka-Qicha (Guraghe), Arara (Sidama), Chako (Wolayta) effectively mediate local conflicts.

Community-based associations, including idir (mutual aid groups) and equb (savings cooperatives), strengthen grassroots social cohesion. Cross-regional cultural traditions, such as Afar-Somali and Somali-Oromo peace pacts, interfaith pilgrimages, and widely practised intermarriage promote inter-ethnic ties.

3. Overview and Assessment: Key Elements of Ethiopia's Peace Infrastructure

3.1. National-level and formal institutions and initiatives

3.1.1. Ministry of Peace

Overview

The Ministry of Peace (MoP) was established on 16 October 2018 through Proclamation No. 1097/2018 as part of a wider government restructuring (FDRE, 2018). It replaced the former Ministry of Federal Affairs and was given a broadened mandate centred on conflict prevention and peacebuilding (Berhe, 2023).

The MoP's stated purpose is to "ensure the prevalence of all-encompassing peace" across Ethiopia, serving as a federal focal point for promoting national cohesion, managing inter-regional tensions, and supporting equitable development. Its creation marked a significant shift by elevating peace to ministerial status—symbolising the government's recognition of peacebuilding as a national priority (Borchgrevink & Gebremichael, 2022).

From its inception, the MoP was assigned oversight of key security and administrative bodies, including the National Intelligence and Security Service, the Federal Police, the Information Network Security Agency, and offices dealing with refugees and disaster management (FDRE, 2018). Some hoped this would give the Ministry a powerful institutional base from which to coordinate federal peace and security strategies (Berhe, 2023). But there was also a counter-argument, that the Ministry is overstretched; managing this broad portfolio requires strong internal coordination and administrative capacity, which has not always been evident (UNDP, 2023c). More importantly, the Ministry was expected to deal with competing, if not mutually exclusive mandates: promoting peace and coordinating coercive institutions, which in the end resulted in further Insuring peacebuilding efforts. The Ministry has seen its mandates scaled-down and some of the institutions are now directly accountable to the Prime Minister's Office.

The MoP has implemented a range of peace initiatives. In December 2020, it convened a joint reconciliation committee composed of community representatives from Benishangul-Gumuz and Amhara to address violence in the Metekel Zone (RVI, 2022). It has also collaborated with international partners such as GIZ and UNDP to promote peace education, train women and youth in conflict transformation, and support development efforts in conflict-prone areas (UNDP, 2023a). Furthermore, a National Youth Volunteer Programme has been initiated by MoP with funding from UNDP and SIDA. The objective, among other things, was to promote social cohesion and enhance youth participation in peace-making. Through its partnerships with religious and civil society leaders, the Ministry has positioned itself as both an early warning actor and a facilitator of post-conflict reconciliation (UNDP, 2023c).

The Ministry is led by a cabinet-level minister (initially W/ro Muferiat Kamil and, from 2021, Ato Binalf Andualem and currently Ato Mohammed Idris) and has broad reach due to its oversight of federal peace and security institutions (FDRE, 2018). Its structure allows it to mobilise information and coordinate responses across multiple sectors, from policing and intelligence to migration and disaster relief. It also acts as a central coordinating body with regional peace bureaus—formerly known as federal affairs bureaus—helping to align regional initiatives with federal strategies (RVI, 2022; UNDP, 2023c).

Assessment

Strengths: The MoP provides high-level political coordination and legitimacy to peace and security policy. By consolidating several agencies under one institutional umbrella, it can design integrated approaches that link enforcement with long-term peacebuilding and development (FDRE, 2018; UNDP, 2023c). This is especially relevant in Ethiopia, where conflicts often stem from overlapping political, economic, and ethnic tensions.

The Ministry has played a key role in mainstreaming peacebuilding activities across different levels of government. Its support for local reconciliation efforts and community dialogues has helped bring attention to local grievances (UNDP, 2023b). For instance, peace education programmes and capacity-building initiatives for women and youth have expanded the number of actors involved in peace processes (UNDP, 2023a).

Another significant strength is its bridging role between federal and regional authorities. In a decentralised federal system like Ethiopia's, this function is essential to ensure that local conflicts receive federal attention and that federal peace efforts are sensitive to regional dynamics (FDRE, 2018). The MoP also supports national-level planning through its collaboration with other federal bodies, such as the Ministry of Justice and the House of Federation (Borchgrevink & Gebremichael, 2022).

The Ministry's integration of refugee, pastoralist, and disaster management institutions enables it to address root causes of conflict, including competition over natural resources, displacement, and exclusion. Its collaboration with development partners such as UNDP has led to targeted interventions in hotspot areas (UNOCHA, 2023).

Furthermore, its cabinet status enhances its political visibility and ensures that peacebuilding is seen as a cross-sectoral government priority. According to Borchgrevink and Gebremichael (2022), the Ministry's elevation to this status marked a turning point in recognising peace as a fundamental pillar of state policy, not just an extension of security operations. It also enables the discussion of peace as an enabler for all development strides to enjoy cabinet attention on a regular basis.

Weaknesses: Despite these strengths, the MoP's wide mandate (especially at the initial stage) also presented challenges. With responsibilities ranging from security coordination to development programming, there is a risk of institutional overstretch.

Overlapping mandates with other federal institutions—such as the Office of the Prime Minister, security agencies, and the House of Federation—have also limited its effectiveness. In some cases, security forces under MoP oversight remain accountable directly to the Prime Minister, diminishing the Ministry's influence over operational decisions (FDRE, 2018). There is therefore the need to clarify and streamline lines of communication.

The Ministry has also faced criticism for delayed responses to localised violence, raising concerns about its agility and bureaucratic responsiveness. Some regional stakeholders have expressed frustration at what they perceive as slow or insufficient federal engagement, particularly in rapidly escalating situations (RVI, 2022). Assigning the Ministry with broad response capacities and coordination capabilities is crucial.

A further challenge lies in the MoP's dual role as both a promoter of peace and an overseer of coercive state institutions. In areas affected by state violence or police abuses, communities may not view the Ministry as a neutral actor. This dual identity can undermine local trust, especially when peacebuilding is seen as entangled with security enforcement (UNDP, 2023b). This challenge epitomizes the challenge of addressing conflict using securitized and cajoling approaches (carrot and stick) in a complex setting such as Ethiopia.

3.1.2. House of Federation

Overview

The House of Federation (HoF) is the upper chamber of Ethiopia's Federal Parliament, established by the 1995 FDRE Constitution and first convened in 1995 (FDRE, 1995). While not a new institution, the HoF remains a cornerstone of the formal peace architecture (RVI, 2022).

The HoF's mandate is defined in Article 62 of the Constitution. It represents the nations, nationalities, and peoples of Ethiopia and is empowered to interpret the Constitution and decide on issues of

self-determination (FDRE, 1995). Critically, the HoF is entrusted to "strive to find solutions to disputes or misunderstandings" that arise between regional states (FDRE, 1995, Art. 62). If regions cannot resolve a border or jurisdictional disagreement, the HoF arbitrates and renders a final decision (per Article 48 of the Constitution) within two years (FDRE, 1995, Art. 48). It also decides on the creation of new regional states and oversees the equitable distribution of federal subsidies to regions (Berhe, 2023; ICG, 2023). The legal basis for its functions comes directly from the Constitution and subsequent proclamations defining its procedures (FDRE, 1995).

The HoF took on various initiatives including developing Inter-Governmental Relations (IGR) policy inter-governmental dialogue and coordination/cooperation, and mapping of conflicts to better inform response strategies (Borchgrevink and Gebremichael, 2022). Notably, it undertook a national conflict mapping study around 2019–2020, in collaboration with academic institutions and partners, to identify the roots and trends of conflicts across Ethiopia (RVI, 2022). The conflict mapping was intended to inform a comprehensive conflict prevention strategy (UNDP, 2023c).

The HoF also exercised its role in approving or facilitating peace processes for regional disputes. For example, it oversaw the constitutional process for the Sidama referendum in 2019, helping channel a potentially volatile demand for statehood into a legal referendum (thus avoiding violence) (ICG, 2023). Internally, the HoF operates through standing committees; the Committee for Regional & Constitutional Affairs can form ad-hoc committees to mediate inter-state disputes that local negotiations failed to settle (FDRE, 1995; Berhe, 2023).

Such committees report back to the HoF and recommend interventions if a state's actions endanger the constitutional order (ICG, 2023). In practice, the HoF during this period was involved in addressing boundary disputes (such as Oromia-Somali region border issues) and adjudicating constitutional questions (often via the Council of Constitutional Inquiry) (RVI, 2022). It also partnered with the Ministry of Peace in convening joint forums between federal and regional officials to defuse tensions (Berhe, 2023; UNDP, 2023b).

The HoF comprises representatives of each ethnic community (at least one per ethnicity, with larger groups having more seats), currently totalling over 100 members (FDRE, 1995). Its institutional capacity lies in its constitutional authority – decisions of the HoF on disputes are binding (ICG, 2023). The House can summon expertise through the Council of Constitutional Inquiry for complex legal interpretations (FDRE, 1995). However, the HoF does not have an executive arm; it relies on cooperation with the federal government and regional governments to implement its decisions (Berhe, 2023).

The conflict mapping exercise conducted by the House of Federation suggests the HoF has developed the analytical capacity to understand conflict drivers, aided by think tanks and donor support (RVI, 2022; UNDP, 2023a). The Secretariat of the HoF and its committees provide administrative support for its peace and conflict resolution functions (ICG, 2023). Overall, while the HoF is primarily a deliberative body, its constitutional powers and collaborative initiatives form a critical part of Ethiopia's peace infrastructure, offering a formal mechanism to handle disputes that might otherwise turn violent (Berhe, 2023; ICG, 2023). Speaking of conflict mapping and analysis, and peacebuilding more generally, there seems to be a lack of coordination and synergy among the various actors. The draft Peace Policy initiated by MoP, for instance, remains inaccessible to partners. UN and bilateral agencies (such as GiZ), and other civil society organizations (such as Rift Valley Institute) too, have conducted conflict analyses of their own but these are not always coordinated with the government.

Assessment

Strengths: The HoF serves as a critical constitutional arbiter in Ethiopia's peace architecture (FDRE, 1995; Berhe, 2023). One of its chief strengths is its legitimacy in addressing inter-regional disputes (ICG, 2023; RVI, 2022).

Because the HoF represents all ethnic groups and is constitutionally empowered to handle issues of self-determination and federal-regional conflicts, resolutions passed through this body carry a sense of ownership by the diverse Ethiopian polity (Berhe, 2023; FDRE, 1995). The mechanism for settling state border disputes via the HoF has provided a peaceful alternative to violence (ICG, 2023).

For example, ethnic groups seeking more autonomy (like the Sidama) followed the constitutional process overseen by the HoF rather than resorting to armed struggle, leading to a peaceful referendum (ICG, 2023).

The HoF also strengthens unity by ensuring equitable resource distribution – its role in allocating federal budget subsidies to regions helps pre-empt conflicts over resources or perceptions of marginalisation (Berhe, 2023; UNDP, 2023c).

Another strength is the HoF's ability to convene joint sessions with the lower house in national crises, such as to approve emergency interventions in regions as allowed by the constitution (FDRE, 1995). This ensures that any drastic measures have a multi-ethnic consensus, vital for national peace (ICG, 2023). The conflict mapping exercise initiated by the HoF indicates it has become more proactive in peacebuilding beyond its adjudicatory role – by identifying conflict drivers, the HoF can inform policy to mitigate them (UNDP, 2023c; RVI, 2022).

Furthermore, the presence of elders and influential regional figures among HoF members means it has informal clout; they can use their standing to mediate before issues formally escalate to the House (Borchgrevink and Gebremichael, 2022).

Weaknesses: Despite its mandate, the HoF has weaknesses that limit its effectiveness (ICG, 2023; Berhe, 2023).

One major issue is politicisation. For instance, when violence erupted between certain regions (like Amhara and Tigray in 2020; Oromia and Amhara in later years), the HoF did not assert a strong conflict-resolution presence – possibly because the conflicts had political sensitivities beyond the HoF's capacity to resolve (ICG, 2023; RVI, 2022).

Its constitutional dispute resolution mechanism can also be slow and cumbersome (the constitution allows up to two years to decide border disputes). Such delays can be detrimental as conflicts evolve faster on the ground (FDRE, 1995; Berhe, 2023).

Another weakness is the HoF's reliance on other bodies to implement its decisions. It does not have an executive arm; if a region ignores a HoF ruling, the enforcement depends on the federal government's will (ICG, 2023).

This was seen in protracted issues like the Oromia-Somali border clashes (the HoF made recommendations, but local tensions persisted, requiring executive intervention) (RVI, 2022). Additionally, while the HoF includes representatives of all groups, smaller ethnic communities might feel overshadowed by larger ones within the consensus-building process (Borchgrevink and Gebremichael, 2022). HoF's constitutional interpretation function is also challenged because its members may not always be popularly elected, and it lacks independence. Finally, as an institution, the HoF convenes infrequently (periodic sessions rather than a continuous operation), which might limit sustained engagement on a conflict issue (Berhe, 2023; FDRE, 1995).

3.1.3. Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission

Overview

The Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission (ENDC) was established in late 2021 to address growing national divisions through inclusive dialogue (FDRE, 2021). The House of Peoples' Representatives passed Proclamation No. 1265/2021 on 29 December 2021, formally creating the commission. Eleven commissioners were appointed and sworn in by February 2022, marking the beginning of Ethiopia's first large-scale national dialogue process (UNDP, 2023a).

The ENDC's mandate is to facilitate inclusive, countrywide dialogue on fundamental national issues and to forge consensus for sustainable peace (FDRE, 2021). The proclamation outlines objectives such as identifying root causes of conflict, promoting broad-based public discourse, and issuing actionable recommendations for long-term solutions (Berhe, 2023; UNDP, 2023c). As an independent institution with a three-year mandate (2022–2025), the ENDC has legal powers to organise dialogues at both local and national levels, recruit staff, and publish final reports (FDRE, 2021; RVI, 2022). However, ENDC was far from conducting the national dialogue, let alone publishing the final results, and so the House of People's Representatives has just extended its term by one more year upon writing this report.

In 2022, the Commission laid the groundwork by establishing a secretariat, consulting experts, and designing its dialogue methodology (UNDP, 2023b). A multi-phase roadmap was initiated in 2023, starting with grassroots consultations and agenda setting. Participants were selected across districts (woredas), organised by social sectors—such as elders, women, youth, civil servants, and the business community—with around 50 participants per sector per woreda, totalling about 450 participants per district (Berhe, 2023; UNDP, 2023a).

These local forums contributed to zonal and regional dialogues, shaping the national agenda from the bottom up. In May 2023, a National Advisory Council of Eminent Persons was established to provide strategic guidance (UNDP, 2023a). By the end of 2023, the Commission had launched participant selection and agenda collection forums in Addis Ababa and several regions, after completing participant selection in six regional states (RVI, 2022).

The ENDC also implemented public outreach efforts, including town halls and media campaigns, to raise awareness and encourage community engagement (Berhe, 2023; RVI, 2022). Its agenda includes addressing historically contentious issues—such as identity politics, federalism, governance, and social cohesion—based on community input rather than a pre-set agenda (UNDP, 2023b).

While the Commission has no enforcement powers, its output will be a set of consensus recommendations to guide policymakers and the public (FDRE, 2021). Its legitimacy derives from both its legal foundation and its broad outreach, though it relies heavily on public trust and voluntary cooperation.

The ENDC is funded by the state but operates independently, with the authority to engage all levels of government (FDRE, 2021; UNDP, 2023a). The eleven commissioners, led by Commissioner General Professor Mesfin Araya, include professionals from academia, civil society, and former public institutions (Berhe, 2023). A secretariat handles technical and logistical support, and regional offices or liaison points are planned to manage subnational dialogues (UNDP, 2023a; RVI, 2022).

International organisations, including UNDP and the African Union, have supported the Commission with technical guidance based on global experience in inclusive dialogue (UNDP, 2023a). The ENDC's legal mandate enables it to request cooperation from regional authorities, but its effectiveness largely depends on the participation of key stakeholders and public confidence.

By 2024, the Commission had built a framework reaching the grassroots level, engaging thousands of citizens in preparatory discussions—a notable achievement given Ethiopia's complex federal context and ongoing insecurity (UNDP, 2023a; RVI, 2022).

Assessment

Strengths: The ENDC is a bold initiative aimed at resolving Ethiopia's national challenges through dialogue rather than coercion or top-down decrees (Berhe, 2023). One of its main strengths lies in its inclusive structure. By selecting participants from every district and social category, the Commission has designed a uniquely participatory process (FDRE, 2021; UNDP, 2023a).

Its credibility is further bolstered by the independence and reputation of its Commissioners, who include respected scholars and civil society representatives (Berhe, 2023). The clarity of its mandate, timeframe, and outputs—namely, the development of actionable recommendations—ensures focus and avoids the risk of an open-ended or symbolic process (FDRE, 2021; RVI, 2022).

The Commission also fills a critical gap in Ethiopia's peace infrastructure by providing a forum for addressing difficult topics that other institutions may avoid, including ethnic federalism, historical grievances, and political representation (UNDP, 2023b).

Weaknesses: Despite its potential, the ENDC faces significant limitations. One major challenge is the lack of participation by some key actors. As of mid-2023, some major opposition groups and affected communities had declined to engage, raising concerns about inclusivity and legitimacy (Berhe, 2023; UNDP, 2023a).

Another concern is the ambiguity surrounding the scope of dialogue. While the Commission's process is intended to be bottom-up, there are concerns that some critical topics may be informally excluded from discussion (RVI, 2022).

Moreover, the political and emotional intensity surrounding many of the issues—especially after years of conflict—requires highly skilled facilitation, which may be in limited supply (Berhe, 2023). The lack of executive authority also poses a structural constraint: while the ENDC can issue recommendations, it cannot enforce their implementation, which ultimately depends on the willingness of political actors to act on its findings (FDRE, 2021; UNDP, 2023a).

Finally, persistent violence and instability in regions such as Oromia and Amhara have made it difficult to conduct consultations safely or fully (UNDP, 2023a). ENDC has managed to reach out to those two regions in its recent attempts but the concern is that influential groups (both political parties and armed groups) from these regions are not part of the process, which undermines the inclusivity and legitimacy

of the process. The Tigray region is not covered at all. However, this gap was being filled as this report was in the process of its finalization, with ENDC visits to the aforementioned regions, with plans to also receive agenda proposals from armed groups.

3.1.4. Transitional Justice Initiative

Overview

Ethiopia's Transitional Justice Initiative (TJI) took shape in two phases. Initially, the Reconciliation Commission was established in late 2018. The House of Peoples' Representatives adopted Proclamation No. 1102/2018 on 25 December 2018 to create this Commission (FDRE, 2018). The Reconciliation Commission operated from early 2019 for a three-year term. In 2022, as that Commission's term lapsed, a new approach to transitional justice emerged. In November 2022, following the peace agreement between the Federal Government and the Tigray Liberation Front (TPLF), the government launched a comprehensive Transitional Justice Initiative under the Ministry of Justice (FDRE, 2022; UNDP, 2023c). This included developing a policy framework (often referred to as a "green paper") on options for transitional justice, which was released in January 2023 (ICG, 2023).

The TJI (from 2022) has a broader policy-based mandate than its predecessor (FDRE, 2022; UNDP, 2023c). Its foundation is a commitment in the November 2022 Pretoria peace accord to implement transitional justice in line with international standards (ICG, 2023; UNDP, 2023c).

The Ministry of Justice, with input from the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and civil society, developed the "Ethiopia Policy Options for Transitional Justice" document to guide this process (EHRC, 2023; FDRE, 2023). This draft policy, which has been approved by the Cabinet, but is yet (at the time of writing) to be tabled to the House, outlined possible approaches – truth-seeking, accountability (including prosecutions), reparations, amnesty criteria, and institutional reforms – tailored to Ethiopia's context (ICG, 2023). The legal framework and institutional arrangements are still to be agreed.

While not a Commission per se, the initiative's mandate is to design and eventually implement a holistic transitional justice policy (FDRE, 2023; UNDP, 2023c). The legal basis for the ongoing initiative is less a single law (as of 2024) and more a policy framework; however, legislation is expected to follow the consultations to formally establish transitional justice mechanisms (ICG, 2023; UNDP, 2023c).

The Reconciliation Commission (2019–2022) carried out research and consultations on Ethiopia's historical conflicts and human rights violations (FDRE, 2018). It had eleven members and reportedly held public meetings to hear testimony from victims of past atrocities (such as the Red Terror of the Derg era and ethnic violence under the previous regime) (EHRC, 2023; ICG, 2023).

The Commission faced challenges in scope and resources, and by the end of its three-year term, it had not produced a high-profile public report (RVI, 2022). In early 2022, rather than extending its mandate, the government allowed the Reconciliation Commission to lapse and transferred its remaining resources to the newly formed National Dialogue Commission (FDRE, 2022).

This indicated a shift in strategy: broad national dialogue was prioritized, and transitional justice would be pursued in a different format (ICG, 2023; UNDP, 2023c). Subsequently, the Transitional Justice Initiative (2022–2024) began with the drafting of the Policy Options green paper (FDRE, 2023; UNDP, 2023c).

In early 2023, the Ministry of Justice launched nationwide consultations on this draft policy. Town-hall meetings, focus groups, and expert workshops were organised in various regions (including conflict-affected areas) to gather input on how Ethiopia should deal with past human rights violations (EHRC, 2023; UNDP, 2023c).

Assessment

Strengths: Ethiopia's Transitional Justice Initiative (TJI), especially as manifested after 2022, is an important step toward addressing past atrocities and preventing future ones through accountability and reconciliation (ICG, 2023; EHRC, 2023).

A key strength of the initiative is that it is locally owned and tailored (FDRE, 2023; UNDP, 2023c). By developing a "Policy Options for Transitional Justice" green paper and holding extensive stakeholder consultations across the country, the Ethiopian government signalled an approach that seeks domestic solutions rather than importing a one-size-fits-all model (ICG, 2023; EHRC, 2023).

Another strength is the government's acknowledgement of the need for holistic justice – after years of

conflict and human rights abuses, this initiative recognised that simply moving on without addressing grievances could sow seeds for future conflict (UNDP, 2023c; ICG, 2023).

The TJI also benefits from the involvement of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, which by 2022 had built credibility and provided a bridge between the state and civil society in designing the process (EHRC, 2023; UNDP, 2023a).

Weaknesses: Despite good intentions, the TJI faces significant challenges (ICG, 2023; EHRC, 2023).

A major critique has been that the process appears rushed and top-down (UN Commission of Experts, 2023; EHRC, 2023). Some international human rights experts have warned that the consultations and policy drafting were driven by the government's timeline rather than the pace of genuine community engagement (ICG, 2023).

Another weakness is the lack of trust some stakeholders have in the government to oversee a fair process (EHRC, 2023; UNDP, 2023a).

There's also ambiguity on implementation: by 2024, Ethiopia has a policy draft but no actual truth commission or special court has been established yet (ICG, 2023). This gap could result in a loss of momentum or public cynicism (EHRC, 2023; UNDP, 2023c).

3.1.5. Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) Initiative

Overview

Ethiopia's latest DDR initiative took shape in 2022–2023, in the aftermath of a peace agreement that ended a major internal conflict (FDRE, 2022; UNDP, 2023b). The formal National Rehabilitation Commission (NRC) was established by the federal government in late 2022 to coordinate DDR, and planning began soon after (FDRE, 2022). The DDR program was officially launched in 2023, with demobilisation operations kicking off by late 2023. A high-profile demobilisation ceremony took place in Mekelle in November 2024, marking a milestone in the process (ICG, 2023; UNDP, 2023b).

The DDR initiative's mandate is to disarm former combatants from various armed groups, demobilise them from military structures, and support their reintegration into civilian life (FDRE, 2022; UNDP, 2023b). This mandate was largely derived from the terms of a November 2022 peace agreement, which called for the disarmament of rebel forces and their reintegration following a cessation of hostilities (ICG, 2023).

The legal framework for DDR also interacts with security sector reforms – for instance, amendments to laws were made to allow former combatants to join national security forces or civilian agencies as appropriate, and to manage firearms collection legally (FDRE, 2023; ICG, 2023). By design, the DDR initiative aligns with United Nations standards for DDR, emphasising a transition from conflict to peace (UNDP, 2023b; UNDP, 2023a).

The DDR process began with disarmament, where thousands of TPLF fighters surrendered heavy weapons under monitoring (this phase was largely completed in late 2022) (ICG, 2023; UNDP, 2023b). An attempt is underway to include armed groups in the Benishangul-Gumuz region but the DDR process is very slow and the security situation across Amhara and Oromia regions particularly remains precarious due to several reasons. The more prominent armed groups, such as *Fano*, and *Shenee* in Amhara and Oromia regions, respectively, are out of the DDR process at this stage.

Following disarmament, the demobilisation phase commenced. In practical terms, demobilisation involved gathering ex-combatants at designated centres for a short-term programme (FDRE, 2023; UNDP, 2023b). The NRC, in partnership with the Tigray Interim Regional Administration and the United Nations, opened demobilisation camps in regions like Tigray, and later in Amhara and Oromia for other armed groups (ICG, 2023; UNDP, 2023b).

By November 2024, an initial 75,000 former fighters from Tigray had been demobilised at the Mekelle centre as part of the first phase (FDRE, 2023; UNDP, 2023b). The full programme aims to demobilise over 371,000 combatants across seven regions over two years (ICG, 2023). This scale makes it one of the largest DDR efforts globally (UNDP, 2023b).

Each participant at the demobilisation camps undergoes a short rehabilitation program, averaging one to two weeks, including:

- ▶ Psychosocial counselling;
- ▶ Civic education (to ease their transition to a civilian mindset); and
- ▶ Vocational guidance (ICG, 2023; UNDP, 2023a)

Upon completion, they receive a reinsertion support package – typically a financial stipend (a reintegration allowance) and sometimes toolkits or training opportunities (UNDP, 2023b). By 2024, the DDR initiative had mobilised significant international support – a multi-partner trust fund managed by UNDP is funding reintegration projects, and countries such as Canada, Japan, and South Korea have pledged financial assistance (UNDP, 2023b; ICG, 2023).

Assessment

Strengths: The DDR initiative launched in Ethiopia is a cornerstone for stabilising post-conflict society and has several strengths (FDRE, 2023; ICG, 2023). Firstly, its scale and ambition, targeting over 370,000 ex-combatants, demonstrates the government's commitment to remove weapons from circulation and reduce the number of potential fighters drastically (2023; UNDP, 2023b). Secondly, the DDR process is comprehensively structured and supported internationally. The formation of the NRC provides a dedicated body to manage DDR, ensuring focus and accountability (FDRE, 2023; ICG, 2023).

The programme's phased approach (demobilising 75,000 in the first phase, then scaling up) allows learning and adjustment, making it practically strong (2023; UNDP, 2023a).

Weaknesses: Despite positive aspects, Ethiopia's DDR initiative faces serious challenges (ICG, 2023; UNDP, 2023b).

One major concern is the ambitious timeline and numbers involved – demobilising over 370,000 individuals across multiple regions in two years is an enormous task requiring significant resources (FDRE, 2023; ICG, 2023). Another weakness is the dependency on political and security conditions:

- ▶ Ongoing conflicts (e.g., insurgencies in Oromia or militia mobilisations in Amhara) have persisted.
- ▶ These ongoing conflicts complicate DDR – ex-combatants might be drawn into new conflicts if reintegration falters (ICG, 2023; UNDP, 2023b).

Financial sustainability is another issue. While $760 million has been budgeted, it is highly reliant on donor funds (UNDP, 2023b). If international attention wanes or Ethiopia's economy struggles, funding shortfalls could interrupt reintegration programmes. Reintegration is perennially the hardest phase. The Ethiopian economy must absorb a huge influx of ex-fighters, but:

- ▶ High unemployment nationwide makes this difficult (ICG, 2023; FDRE, 2023).
- ▶ There have been reports of communities fearing the return of ex-combatants (UNDP, 2023b).
- ▶ Security guarantees are fragile:
- ▶ DDR works on trust that the conflict is truly over (ICG, 2023; UNDP, 2023b).
- ▶ Verification of complete disarmament is challenging, and any doubt weakens confidence in the process (FDRE, 2023).

3.1.6. Ethiopian Human Rights Commission

Overview

The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) was established by Proclamation No. 210/2000 as an independent national human rights institution. However, for much of its early existence, it remained weak and underutilised (FDRE, 2000). A major turning point occurred in 2019 with the appointment of new leadership and accompanying legal reforms, which revitalised the EHRC and positioned it as a more active player within Ethiopia's peace and justice infrastructure (FDRE, 2019; UNDP, 2023a).

The EHRC's mandate, defined in its founding legislation and strengthened by Proclamation No. 1224/2020, is to promote and protect human rights throughout Ethiopia (FDRE, 2020; EHRC, 2023). Its responsibilities include monitoring and investigating rights violations, providing policy advice to the government, public education, and overseeing Ethiopia's compliance with international human rights obligations (EHRC, 2023; RVI, 2022). The Commission is legally empowered to conduct unannounced visits to detention facilities, undertake research, and issue public reports on the human rights situation (FDRE, 2020; UNDP, 2023c). Its establishment is rooted in Article 55 of the Ethiopian Constitution, which authorises parliament to create such an independent body (FDRE, 1995).

Between 2018 and 2024, the EHRC became considerably more proactive and visible. A pivotal moment was the appointment of Dr Daniel Bekele as Chief Commissioner in July 2019. A former political prisoner and respected human rights advocate, Dr Bekele significantly raised the Commission's profile (EHRC, 2023; UNDP, 2023a). Under his leadership, the EHRC investigated politically sensitive issues, including ethnic violence and mass atrocities in Oromia, Amhara, and Benishangul-Gumuz (EHRC, 2023; RVI, 2022). For the first time, the EHRC named perpetrators and issued public calls for accountability, enhancing transparency and public trust (FDRE, 2020; UNDP, 2023a).

One landmark initiative was the 2021 joint investigation by the EHRC and the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) into alleged violations during the Tigray conflict (EHRC, 2023; UNDP, 2023a). This unprecedented collaboration between a national human rights institution and an international body reflected growing confidence in the EHRC's independence and professionalism.

The Commission also deployed rapid response teams to document atrocities in conflict zones such as Mai Kadra and Metekel, providing timely and credible reporting (EHRC, 2023; UNDP, 2023c). Beyond investigations, the EHRC contributed to transitional justice processes. In mid-2022, it co-organised a national conference on transitional justice options, informing the Ministry of Justice's policy development (FDRE, 2022; UNDP, 2023c).

During political unrest—such as the June 2020 Hachalu Hundessa protests—the Commission issued public statements calling for restraint by security forces and respect for human rights (EHRC, 2023). It also worked closely with civil society organisations, accrediting local monitors and expanding human rights education campaigns (RVI, 2022; UNDP, 2023a).

By 2023, the EHRC had institutionalised its reporting through regular annual publications, highlighting both progress and areas of concern. It expanded its regional offices, reducing its former dependency on a centralised structure in Addis Ababa and improving its ability to respond to violations nationwide (EHRC, 2023; UNDP, 2023a). Support from donors, including the European Union and UNDP, strengthened the Commission's technical capacity in areas such as investigative techniques and digital evidence gathering (UNDP, 2023a).

International recognition came in December 2021 when the EHRC achieved "A" status re-accreditation from the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI), confirming that it met international standards of independence, pluralism, and operational effectiveness (GANHRI, 2021; EHRC, 2023).

In 2024, the EHRC entered a transition phase as Dr Bekele's term concluded, with a new Chief Commissioner expected in 2025 (EHRC, 2023). Despite this change, the EHRC remains central to Ethiopia's human rights and transitional justice efforts, contributing to accountability, prevention, and reconciliation. The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission has received a new Commissioner very recently, and time will tell if EHRC will stay on course.

Assessment

Strengths: The revitalised EHRC is widely regarded as one of Ethiopia's most credible institutions for human rights and peacebuilding. Its enhanced domestic and international legitimacy—demonstrated by its GANHRI "A" status—ensures its findings are taken seriously by stakeholders (GANHRI, 2021; EHRC, 2023).

The Commission's work has promoted greater accountability, with reports on extrajudicial killings and ethnic violence prompting action from the Attorney General's Office in some instances (FDRE, 2022; UNDP, 2023a). Its rapid response mechanisms—deployed during crises—have helped counter disinformation, build public awareness, and lay the foundations for future transitional justice processes (EHRC, 2023; UNDP, 2023a).

The EHRC has also made strong contributions to human rights education and civic engagement, reinforcing a culture of rights and the rule of law (RVI, 2022; EHRC, 2023). Through partnerships with civil society, it has decentralised its monitoring and expanded public access to its findings.

Weaknesses: Despite its improvements, the EHRC faces key limitations. Foremost is its lack of enforcement power. While the Commission can recommend legal action, actual accountability depends on the willingness of state authorities to act—something not always guaranteed (EHRC, 2023; UNDP, 2023a).

Its impartiality is occasionally questioned by different political actors. In Ethiopia's polarised context, government critics may perceive it as too soft, while others view it as undermining national unity by publicising abuses (EHRC, 2023).

Although regional offices have been expanded, Ethiopia's large population and multiple conflict zones stretch the EHRC's ability to investigate violations promptly (EHRC, 2023; RVI, 2022). The upcoming leadership transition also raises concerns about continuity and the preservation of independence.

Lastly, while the EHRC plays a vital role in documenting violations, the broader accountability ecosystem in Ethiopia remains weak. Without functioning transitional justice mechanisms—such as special courts or a truth commission—many EHRC findings risk going unaddressed (EHRC, 2023; UNDP, 2023b).

3.1.7. National Electoral Board of Ethiopia

Overview

The National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) was initially established in 1992 through Proclamation No. 64/1992, with its mandate later reaffirmed under Article 102 of the 1995 Constitution (FDRE, 1992; FDRE, 1995). However, the institution underwent significant reform between 2018 and 2019 to address longstanding credibility concerns. These reforms culminated in the adoption of Proclamation No. 1133/2019, which reconstituted NEBE as an independent and autonomous body with strengthened operational and legal foundations (FDRE, 2019; UNDP, 2023b).

NEBE is mandated to organise and oversee all elections in Ethiopia—including federal, regional, and local elections, as well as referenda—ensuring they are conducted impartially and transparently (FDRE, 2019; EHRC, 2023). Its responsibilities span voter and candidate registration, managing polling processes, counting votes, and declaring results. Its legal basis lies in both the Constitution and specific electoral laws, including the Electoral and Political Parties Proclamation No. 1162/2019 (FDRE, 2020).

The 2019 reforms enhanced NEBE's independence by introducing a merit-based and inclusive appointment process involving civil society and political parties (FDRE, 2019; RVI, 2022). The Board gained control over its own staffing and budget, further insulating it from political interference (EHRC, 2023; UNDP, 2023a). Although accountable to the House of Peoples' Representatives, NEBE operates autonomously in decision-making (FDRE, 2019).

In November 2018, Birtukan Mideksa—a former judge and opposition leader—was appointed as Chairwoman of NEBE, a move widely seen as boosting public confidence in the Board's impartiality (UNDP, 2023a). Under her leadership, NEBE managed complex electoral operations between 2018 and 2024. These included preparations for the 2020 general election, which was later postponed to June 2021 due to COVID-19 and security concerns. NEBE oversaw renewed voter registration and the re-licensing of political parties under new legal frameworks (FDRE, 2021; RVI, 2022).

Despite challenges, the 6th General Election held in June 2021 involved over 37 million registered voters and more than 50,000 polling stations (NEBE, 2021; UNDP, 2023a). While some opposition parties boycotted the vote and parts of the country faced security-related disruptions, NEBE's management of the process was broadly accepted and marked an improvement in credibility (EHRC, 2023).

Beyond national elections, NEBE administered referenda on regional statehood, offering peaceful outlets for ethnic self-determination (FDRE, 2019; RVI, 2022). The November 2019 Sidama referendum, for example, led to the creation of Ethiopia's tenth regional state and was widely regarded as peaceful and credible (NEBE, 2019; UNDP, 2023a). Similar referenda followed in 2021 and 2023, including the creation of the Southwest Ethiopia Peoples' Region (UNDP, 2023a; EHRC, 2023).

Throughout these activities, NEBE undertook civic and voter education campaigns in multiple languages and worked with political parties and civil society to promote non-violent participation (NEBE, 2021; EHRC, 2023). The Board also developed formal complaints mechanisms to address electoral grievances. For example, it investigated allegations of irregularities in several constituencies in 2021 and re-ran elections in affected areas (RVI, 2022; NEBE, 2021).

By 2024, NEBE had begun preparing for long-overdue local elections, aiming to extend its reach to the municipal level (UNDP, 2023a). Institutional capacity was further strengthened through partnerships with international actors, including the European Union and UNDP, which provided financial and technical support (UNDP, 2023a).

Assessment

Strengths: The reformed NEBE has played a key role in stabilising Ethiopia's electoral landscape by enhancing the integrity and transparency of elections (UNDP, 2023a). A core strength has been the merit-based and independent appointment of its leadership, particularly Chairwoman Birtukan Mideksa, whose credibility helped restore public trust (FDRE, 2019; UNDP, 2023a).

NEBE introduced modern electoral systems, such as tamper-resistant registration and transparent result-posting mechanisms, reducing the risk of fraud (NEBE, 2021; EHRC, 2023). Its administration of regional referenda—especially the Sidama case—demonstrated that ethnic and political aspirations could be addressed peacefully through democratic means (RVI, 2022; UNDP, 2023b).

Another strength is NEBE's increased engagement with political parties and civil society, which fostered a more inclusive and consultative political process (EHRC, 2023). Its ability to rerun elections in response to complaints also demonstrated a willingness to rectify problems and improve electoral legitimacy (NEBE, 2021; RVI, 2022).

Weaknesses: Nonetheless, NEBE continues to face important challenges. Persistent insecurity in regions such as Tigray, Oromia, and Amhara has impeded universal electoral participation (FDRE, 2021; NEBE, 2021). Some constituencies were unable to vote due to armed conflict, weakening the comprehensiveness of the 2021 elections (UNDP, 2023a).

In addition, despite NEBE's neutrality, elements of repression—such as the detention of opposition figures—undermined the broader political environment. Some opposition parties boycotted elections, citing concerns over unequal conditions (EHRC, 2023).

NEBE's logistical systems were also severely tested. The postponement of the 2020 general elections due to COVID-19 was highly politicised, particularly in relation to the Tigray regional government's decision to hold its own unsanctioned elections, which contributed to later conflict (FDRE, 2021).

Moreover, while the Board has complaints handling mechanisms, their effectiveness remains limited. Dispute resolution is further hampered by the absence of strong, independent judicial mechanisms for adjudicating electoral disagreements (EHRC, 2023; UNDP, 2023a).

Finally, challenges persist around the legacy of a dominant-party political culture, concerns about the fairness of constituency delineation, and debates over the appropriateness of the current electoral model (first-past-the-post versus proportional representation). These issues affect perceptions of political pluralism and equitable representation.

3.1.8. Relevant political reforms supporting peace

Overview

Beginning in 2018, Ethiopia implemented a series of political reforms intended to open democratic space and address grievances that could lead to conflict (FDRE, 2018; UNDP, 2023b). These reforms, led by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's administration, aimed to foster a more inclusive political environment. Although not a peace institution per se, these legal and structural reforms contributed significantly to the broader peace infrastructure by laying the groundwork for a more stable and participatory political system (UNDP, 2023b).

Key legislative reforms included the revised Amnesty Law (2018), the Civil Society Organisations (CSO) Law (Proclamation No. 1113/2019), the new Mass Media Proclamation (2019), and the amended Anti-Terrorism Proclamation (2020) (FDRE, 2019; FDRE, 2020). Political party restructuring, particularly the merger of the ruling coalition into the Prosperity Party in December 2019, also redefined the political landscape, albeit more as a political development than a peace mechanism (RVI, 2022).

These reforms were rooted in parliamentary proclamations aimed at building an inclusive polity and rectifying laws previously associated with political repression (Berhe, 2023; FDRE, 2018). The Amnesty Law created a legal basis for releasing individuals imprisoned for political offences or armed rebellion, fostering reconciliation with opposition groups (FDRE, 2018; UNDP, 2023a). The CSO and Media laws dismantled restrictive frameworks, empowering civil society and independent media to participate in peacebuilding and human rights advocacy with fewer constraints (EHRC, 2023; UNDP, 2023a). The 2020 revision of the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation introduced clearer definitions and stronger safeguards, making it less prone to misuse against dissenters (FDRE, 2020).

These changes allowed exiled or previously banned opposition groups to return and engage openly in politics. The reforms were underpinned by the government's "Medemer" (synergy) philosophy, which called for unity and reconciliation (FDRE, 2018).

Between 2018 and 2024, several notable outcomes were observed. Thousands of political prisoners were released, including opposition leaders, journalists, and activists, signalling a departure from past authoritarian practices (FDRE, 2018; UNDP, 2023a). Banned groups such as the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), and Ginbot 7 returned from exile and entered peace talks with the government (FDRE, 2018; RVI, 2022). By the end of 2018, peace agreements had been signed with the OLF and ONLF, and they were removed from the terrorist designation list (EHRC, 2023).

The ONLF signed a peace accord in Asmara in October 2018 and subsequently registered as a political party. The OLF's political wing was similarly allowed to operate legally in Oromia, although an armed offshoot remained outside the political process (FDRE, 2019; UNDP, 2023a).

Legislative reforms also broadened civil society and media freedoms. The CSO Proclamation removed foreign funding restrictions and eased operational barriers, allowing human rights and peace organisations to flourish (EHRC, 2023). The Media Proclamation of 2019 expanded press freedom, reversing years of suppression (FDRE, 2019). In parallel, the merger of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) into the Prosperity Party aimed to overcome ethnic factionalism by integrating regional parties—especially from Oromia and Somali regions—into a national framework (RVI, 2022).

These reforms culminated in the June 2021 general elections, in which opposition parties campaigned under relatively freer conditions. The reformed NEBE registered numerous new political parties, including those that had previously been outlawed or exiled (EHRC, 2023; UNDP, 2023a).

Implementation of these reforms relied on institutional capacity. The Ministry of Justice played a central role in drafting new legislation and facilitating prisoner releases (FDRE, 2019). The cooperation of the security sector was also crucial—police and prison authorities were tasked with enforcing the amnesty law and respecting new political freedoms (EHRC, 2023; UNDP, 2023a). An expanded media and civil society presence contributed to political dialogue and conflict mitigation efforts (RVI, 2022).

However, the rapid pace of reform also triggered new challenges. The loosening of restrictions allowed for an upsurge in ethno-nationalist mobilisation, overwhelming the state capacity to manage resulting tensions (UNDP, 2023a). While some reforms have been institutionalised—such as CSO and media liberalisation—others have faced setbacks due to ongoing instability and insecurity.

Assessment

Strengths: The reforms initiated in 2018 played a critical role in de-escalating tensions and fostering inclusive political engagement. Notably, the reduction in state repression and legalisation of formerly banned opposition groups provided peaceful avenues for political expression (FDRE, 2018; UNDP, 2023b). The demobilisation of armed groups such as the ONLF and OLF's political transition reduced the likelihood of insurgent violence (RVI, 2022; EHRC, 2023).

Civil society and independent media were also empowered to act as watchdogs and early-warning actors in conflict prevention. Moreover, the integration of opposition-aligned figures into key democratic institutions—such as NEBE and EHRC—boosted institutional legitimacy and public trust (EHRC, 2023; UNDP, 2023a).

Weaknesses: Despite these gains, the reforms had unintended consequences. The rapid opening of the political space occurred without adequate institutional preparation, allowing political and ethnic rivalries to escalate into localised violence (RVI, 2022). Expectations raised by the reforms—particularly concerning autonomy or representation—were not always met, leading to disillusionment (Berhe, 2023; UNDP, 2023a).

While the OLF re-entered politics, some factions remained armed, especially in Oromia, contributing to continued unrest (FDRE, 2019). The merger of the EPRDF into the Prosperity Party, although aimed at promoting national unity, was perceived by some as centralising power, exacerbating tensions with groups like the TPLF (FDRE, 2019).

The spread of hate speech and inflammatory rhetoric, particularly online, fuelled polarisation and violence. While a hate speech law was introduced in 2020, critics argued it was introduced too late and risked curbing legitimate expression (FDRE, 2020; EHRC, 2023).

3.2. Hybrid national/sub-national and formal/informal initiatives

3.2.1. Regional peace and security bureaus

Overview

Each of Ethiopia's regional states has a Peace and Security Bureau (or Security and Administration Bureau), typically part of the regional executive cabinet, with a mandate to maintain public order, prevent conflict, and coordinate security forces (FDRE, 2018; ICG, 2023). Geographically, these bureaus operate at the regional level, often overseeing subsidiary peace and security structures down to zones and woredas (UNDP, 2023c). Their role includes supervising regional police, local militias, and prison administrations, as well as leading conflict early warning and response activities (AU, 2023; ICG, 2023).

For example, the Amhara Peace and Security Bureau and its counterparts in other regions manage Conflict Prevention and Resolution directorates, which gather intelligence on disputes and mobilise rapid responses (Okul & Bayene, 2021; FDRE, 2020). These bureaus frequently liaise with the Federal Ministry of Peace and Ethiopia's Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism (CEWARN) units (ICG, 2023; UNDP, 2023c). In practice, Regional Peace and Security Bureaus convene peace committees, issue security directives, and mediate inter-community conflicts (FDRE, 2020; RVI, 2022).

Between 2018 and 2024, these bureaus played a key role in responding to ethnic clashes in Oromia, Amhara, and Benishangul-Gumuz regions, often negotiating local ceasefires (EHRC, 2023; AU, 2023). However, their capacity varies. While most bureaus have dedicated staff and field monitors at regional and district levels for conflict data gathering, many face resource constraints given the scale of challenges (ICG, 2023). Federal grants and training programs, such as those facilitated by the Ministry of Peace, aim to bolster their conflict resolution capabilities (FDRE, 2020; UNDP, 2023c).

During the 2020–2022 northern conflict, regional bureaus in Afar and Amhara coordinated with federal forces to manage security, while during more peaceful times, they focused on community dialogue programs (ICG, 2023; EHRC, 2023). Notably, in 2023, the Amhara Peace and Security Bureau underwent a leadership overhaul as part of a state of emergency response, demonstrating the critical role these bureaus play in regional stability (Addis Standard, 2023; ICG, 2023).

Assessment

Strengths: Regional Peace and Security Bureaus are pivotal in swift governmental responses to conflicts (FDRE, 2020; ICG, 2023). As formal institutions embedded in regional state governance, they have the authority to mobilise police, local militias, and resources rapidly during crises (RVI, 2022). Their regional presence ensures that they are closer to local issues than federal agencies, granting them detailed contextual knowledge of conflict dynamics (Okul & Bayene, 2021; AU, 2023).

The bureaus' Conflict Early Warning and Response mechanisms have shown promise. For example, in Oromia, the bureau's field monitors and situation rooms at district and zonal levels allowed early reporting of tensions and rapid response deployment (ICG, 2023; FDRE, 2020). Such systems help contain conflicts before they escalate (AU, 2023).

Furthermore, these bureaus act as forums for multi-stakeholder engagement, bringing together security forces, elders, and administrators (Berhe, 2022; UNDP, 2023a). This hybrid approach to conflict management, which integrates both formal and informal actors, strengthens social buy-in for peace initiatives (ICG, 2023; FDRE, 2019). Bureaus have also led inter-regional dialogues—such as the Afar-Somali bureau-led talks in 2024 to resolve border clashes (RVI, 2022; AU, 2023).

Weaknesses: Despite their critical mandate, regional bureaus face political and capacity-related challenges (ICG, 2023; EHRC, 2023). Politically, they are embedded within regional governments, making them susceptible to ruling party influences (FDRE, 2020; UNDP, 2023b). This has, at times, led to preferring security over mediation, where bureaus resort to heavy-handed crackdowns rather than addressing the root causes of conflict (Befkadu, 2023; ICG, 2023).

For instance, some bureaus have deployed regional special forces against perceived opposition groups, raising human rights concerns (EHRC, 2023; AU, 2023). During the Tigray conflict (2020–2022), the Tigray Peace and Security Bureau aligned with the TPLF administration, while the Amhara Peace and

Security Bureau coordinated with federal forces, highlighting how political affiliations shape bureau decisions (ICG, 2023; Addis Standard, 2023).

Capacity limitations are another significant challenge. Many bureaus lack trained conflict resolution professionals, relying instead on security personnel with policing backgrounds rather than mediation experience (Berhe, 2022; UNDP, 2023a).

Resource constraints are particularly severe in poorer regions, where bureaus lack vehicles to deploy to remote flashpoints or funds for community peace dialogues (ICG, 2023; FDRE, 2019). Coordination with federal forces can also be strained—in 2021, some regional bureaus in Oromia complained that federal military operations against insurgents were not communicated to local security actors, undermining regional peace efforts (Okul & Bayene, 2021; UNDP, 2023c).

Moreover, frequent leadership reshuffles disrupt continuity. In 2023, the Amhara Peace and Security Bureau underwent a leadership overhaul, with the new appointee replacing many security officials and shifting the bureau strategy (Addis Standard, 2023; ICG, 2023). Such politically motivated changes weaken institutional stability and prevent the development of long-term conflict resolution strategies (FDRE, 2020; AU, 2023).

3.2.2. Regional offices of national institutions

Overview

Several national institutions have established regional or branch offices, extending their peace and governance functions across Ethiopia and contributing to subnational peace efforts. These offices act as critical linkages between national policies and local realities, ensuring that peacebuilding, human rights monitoring, electoral management, and post-conflict rehabilitation reach communities outside the capital.

▶ **The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC)** has expanded its presence by opening regional offices in key areas, including Mekelle for Tigray, Bahir Dar for Amhara, Dire Dawa, and Hawassa covering all the newly created regions that have been under SNNPR (the former SNNPR is split into four semi-autonomous regions: Sidama region; Southern Ethiopia region; South-West Ethiopia region; and Central Ethiopia region)(EHRC, 2024). These offices monitor human rights conditions, investigate local atrocities, and advocate for the protection of civilians during conflicts. Their role includes reporting inter-ethnic violence, documenting displacement crises, and pressuring regional authorities to take corrective action. For example, EHRC's regional teams reported on clashes along the Afar-Somali border and unrest in Oromia, ensuring that such conflicts received national and international attention (EHRC, 2024). Additionally, EHRC engages in community peace dialogues, often partnering with elders and local officials to promote human rights education as a conflict-prevention tool. Since 2018, EHRC's regional capacity has grown significantly, with donor support enabling the deployment of mobile investigation teams during emergencies (EHRC, 2024).

▶ **The National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE)** also maintains regional branches, which are responsible for voter education, registration, and polling logistics. NEBE's regional presence has been particularly important in mitigating electoral violence by mediating disputes between local political parties and handling complaints during elections (NEBE, 2021). In the 2021 national and regional elections, NEBE regional offices established local 'Election Code of Conduct' committees, including representatives from elders and civil society organisations, to resolve campaign-related conflicts. In Somali and Afar regions, NEBE's regional branches helped negotiate the timing of delayed elections due to insecurity, coordinating with local authorities to ensure peaceful voting processes (NEBE, 2021). While NEBE's primary mandate is electoral, ensuring free and fair elections is critical for national stability, making its regional branches a vital aspect of Ethiopia's conflict management infrastructure. However, these offices face challenges such as staff shortages and intimidation in volatile areas, which occasionally hinder their ability to operate effectively.

▶ **The Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission (ENDC)** has also pursued regional outreach since its establishment in late 2021. The Commission planned to set up liaison offices in collaboration with public universities across Ethiopia, using these institutions as hubs for dialogue forums (ENDC, 2022). This approach aimed to ensure that local communities had direct input into the national dialogue process, fostering inclusive participation. For instance, Bahir Dar University in

Amhara and Jimma University in Oromia were identified as potential hosts for regional dialogue secretariats (ENDC, 2022). These offices have been tasked with gathering agenda inputs from local stakeholders, including community leaders, opposition parties, and civil society groups. Additionally, in mid-2023, the ENDC organised town hall meetings in Gambella and the Sidama region to identify key issues and engage grassroots communities. The Commission also trained local facilitators and conducted confidence-building workshops to enhance public trust in the dialogue process.

▶ Similarly, the **National Rehabilitation Commission (NRC)** has conducted regional consultations and established offices in conflict-affected regions such as Tigray, Amhara, and Afar (Addis Standard, 2023b). The NRC's regional teams work closely with local authorities, community elders, and former fighters to design disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) programmes that are locally accepted. In 2023, NRC officials held stakeholder meetings in Mekelle (Tigray) and Dessie (Amhara) to discuss reintegration pathways for ex-combatants, ensuring that the process had community buy-in (Addis Standard, 2023b). The NRC has also coordinated the establishment of rehabilitation centres, such as vocational training facilities in Tigray, to provide ex-combatants with economic alternatives to returning to conflict. The geographic focus of these offices is on post-conflict regions, where their role is to prevent renewed violence by successfully reintegrating former fighters through a combination of psychosocial support and economic reintegration.

These regional representations of national institutions help to connect Ethiopia's top-down peace initiatives with grassroots realities. Their physical presence in different regions allows them to adapt national strategies to local contexts, ensuring that human rights, electoral integrity, community dialogue, and DDR programmes are implemented effectively at the subnational level. In many cases, these institutions work in tandem with regional governments and informal mediation networks, showcasing the multi-layered nature of Ethiopia's peace infrastructure.

Assessment

Strengths: The regional outposts of national institutions offer several strengths in Ethiopia's peace and governance landscape. The EHRC's regional offices, for example, act as a watchdog presence, deterring human rights abuses and ensuring accountability. By documenting incidents of violence and publishing reports, EHRC regional teams pressure local authorities to address grievances, reducing cycles of impunity (EHRC, 2024). The NEBE's regional branches contribute by institutionalising fair election processes and reducing political conflict. In 2021, NEBE's Sidama branch successfully managed the referendum vote count, lending legitimacy to the outcome and ensuring peaceful acceptance (NEBE, 2021). Similarly, the National Dialogue Commission's regional outreach strengthens inclusivity, ensuring that even remote communities have a voice in national peacebuilding efforts. By anchoring dialogues in universities and civil society groups, the ENDC leverages local expertise to build trust and credibility (ENDC, 2022). Meanwhile, the NRC's regional operations play a crucial role in post-conflict stabilisation by ensuring that ex-combatants are peacefully reintegrated into their communities. When DDR is implemented effectively, it prevents former fighters from remobilising into armed groups, contributing to long-term stability (Addis Standard, 2023b).

Weaknesses: However, these regional representations also face challenges. One common weakness is limited reach or integration with local governance structures. As extensions of national institutions, these offices sometimes face mistrust or lack of awareness among local communities. For example, albeit weak, NEBE branches are often temporary, peaking around election periods but lacking sustained engagement in political peacebuilding outside electoral cycles (NEBE, 2021). Unlike NEBE, ENDC has no regional offices as such, it only has representatives housed in regional state universities. As a result, ENDC faced delays due to logistical and political hurdles, slowing down its ability to conduct consultations widely, taking into account local realities (SWP, 2023). If community engagement efforts remain too infrequent or superficial, they risk losing public trust.

The NRC's DDR efforts have also encountered challenges in community reception. Some communities fear that ex-combatants are being prioritised over victims, leading to resentment (Addis Standard, 2023b). Resource constraints are another issue—many of these initiatives, particularly dialogue forums and DDR reintegration programmes, rely heavily on donor funding. If external support declines, these efforts may falter, risking partial implementation (ICG, 2022). Furthermore, coordination between regional offices and local governments is often inconsistent, leading to turf disputes. For instance, a regional peace bureau may not initially welcome a National Dialogue regional office intervening in

conflict resolution, unless roles are clearly defined (ICG, 2022). Finally, political contestation can affect the effectiveness of these entities. Opposition groups have occasionally accused the National Dialogue Commission of bias, which has hindered its activities in some regions (SWP, 2023).

Despite these challenges, Ethiopia's regional offices of national institutions remain a key pillar of its peace infrastructure. With improved coordination, sustained funding, and greater community engagement, they can further enhance their role in conflict prevention, electoral integrity, and post-conflict recovery.

3.2.3. Government-involved informal conflict resolution practices

Overview

While not formal judicial or administrative processes, informal conflict resolution practices have been increasingly utilised by Ethiopian authorities at national and sub-national levels since 2018 (FDRE, 2018; UNDP, 2023a). These practices include traditional elders' councils, inter-ethnic peace committees, and ad hoc mediation forums convened by government officials to resolve disputes outside of formal legal systems (RVI, 2022; ICG, 2023). Many of these mechanisms have long existed in Ethiopia's diverse communities, but federal and regional governments have actively integrated them into conflict resolution strategies over the past six years (FDRE, 2019; UNDP, 2023a).

Unlike formal institutions, these mechanisms operate without a strict legal mandate but often with official recognition or participation. Ethiopia's legal framework implicitly acknowledges customary dispute resolution, with personal and family disputes often handled under customary law (FDRE, 1995; EHRC, 2023). In conflict resolution, elders and local peace committees derive their legitimacy from community trust and the acquiescence of government authorities (RVI, 2022; ICG, 2023). Government involvement in these informal mechanisms gives them a semi-official character, particularly when regional governments establish "Peace Committees" composed of clan elders, religious leaders, and local officials (FDRE, 2020; UNDP, 2023c). Though not created by statute, these committees operate under the auspices of regional bureaus for peace and security, sometimes receiving logistical support from the Ministry of Peace (FDRE, 2020; ICG, 2023).

A prominent example of informal mediation was the role of community elders in resolving disputes involving the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) insurgents in 2018–2019 (RVI, 2022; UNDP, 2023b). After the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) signed a peace agreement with the federal government in August 2018, disagreements arose over the disarmament of OLA fighters (ICG, 2023; FDRE, 2019). Influential Oromo elders and activists formed an Elders Committee to mediate, leading to a peace agreement between the OLF leadership and the government in Ambo in January 2019. This resulted in approximately 800 insurgents laying down arms and reporting to a demobilisation camp at Tolay, with elders guaranteeing their fair treatment (FDRE, 2019; EHRC, 2023).

Another case was the joint peace committee initiative in Moyale, an area historically affected by ethnic clashes between Oromo and Somali communities (RVI, 2022; UNDP, 2023a). In 2018, after waves of violence displaced thousands, local authorities, supported by federal observers, convened tribal elders from both groups to negotiate ceasefires (ICG, 2023; EHRC, 2023). The resulting peace committee, composed of elders and local security officials, successfully helped return displaced populations and stabilize the region (FDRE, 2019; UNDP, 2023a). Similarly, in Afar–Somali border conflicts, government-supported clan elder negotiations led to agreements on resource-sharing and conflict de-escalation (RVI, 2022; ICG, 2023).

The Ministry of Peace has played an active role in endorsing such initiatives. In late 2020, it announced the creation of a national peace council of elders to intervene in communal clashes, particularly in Benishangul-Gumuz (Metekel) and Oromia (FDRE, 2020; UNDP, 2023c). This council, consisting of respected figures from conflicting communities, was tasked with reconciling ethnic groups and breaking cycles of retaliatory violence (ICG, 2023; EHRC, 2023). Additionally, regional governments, such as the Somali Regional State, revived traditional "Gar" assemblies, which bring together government officials and clan chiefs to mediate land and water disputes (RVI, 2022; UNDP, 2023c).

Religious institutions have also served as government-supported mediators in conflict situations. Authorities have enlisted councils of Islamic scholars and Ethiopian Orthodox Church elders to intervene in inter-religious and ethnic violence (FDRE, 2019; EHRC, 2023). The common approach across these various mechanisms is dialogue-based mediation, where parties identify root causes of conflict (land disputes, political exclusion, revenge cycles) and use traditional customs of apology and compensation

to settle disputes (ICG, 2023; RVI, 2022). Peace declarations and reconciliation rituals—such as public forgiveness ceremonies or communal meals—often formalise the restoration of peace in the eyes of the community (UNDP, 2023a; EHRC, 2023).

The effectiveness of these mechanisms largely depends on the social capital of the mediators and the level of government support (ICG, 2023; UNDP, 2023a). Community elders command significant respect and can persuade parties to cease violence in ways that state actors cannot (RVI, 2022; FDRE, 2019). Government involvement, in turn, provides security assurances and ensures that agreements are upheld (EHRC, 2023; UNDP, 2023a). Financially, these processes are cost-effective compared to formal peace interventions, and their flexibility allows them to adapt quickly to local contexts (ICG, 2023; UNDP, 2023a). When successful, they prevent further bloodshed and build local buy-in for peace beyond what centralized institutions can achieve (FDRE, 2019; EHRC, 2023).

Assessment

Strengths: A key strength is community legitimacy. When elders or local leaders lead mediation efforts, conflicting parties are more likely to trust the process and accept outcomes because resolutions align with cultural norms rather than external imposition (RVI, 2022; EHRC, 2023). For instance, the peace deal brokered by Oromo elders in 2019 demonstrated how traditional authority can achieve disarmament where military force might have failed (ICG, 2023; FDRE, 2019).

Other strengths include speed, flexibility and cost-efficiency. Unlike formal legal mechanisms, which can take months or years to resolve disputes, informal processes can be convened within days (UNDP, 2023a; ICG, 2023). For example, after the 2018 Oromo-Somali clashes in Moyale, elders quickly organised peace dialogues, preventing escalation and reducing displacement (FDRE, 2019; RVI, 2022).

These mechanisms also focus on holistic reconciliation, including symbolic acts of peace such as forgiveness ceremonies and communal meals, which formal legal settlements lack (EHRC, 2023; UNDP, 2023c). Government involvement adds legitimacy to informal resolutions by endorsing agreements and ensuring follow-up, as seen in the Ministry of Peace's role in the Benishangul-Gumuz reconciliation process (FDRE, 2020; ICG, 2023).

Weaknesses: Despite their advantages, informal mechanisms face several limitations (ICG, 2023; EHRC, 2023). A major issue is the lack of legal enforceability. Agreements made in informal settings are not legally binding and rely solely on mutual trust. If one party later reneges, there is no formal recourse beyond social sanctions (FDRE, 2019; RVI, 2022).

Another weakness is dependency on state goodwill. If authorities fail to respect agreements mediated by elders, the process loses credibility, as was observed in certain failed peace talks between the OLF and the government (ICG, 2023; UNDP, 2023a). Additionally, some conflicts exceed the scope of informal mechanisms. While local disputes over resources or communal violence can be mediated, constitutional disputes, power struggles, cross-regional conflicts or national-level conflicts require political solutions (RVI, 2022; FDRE, 2019).

Scalability is another challenge. Informal conflict resolution works best at the local level, but a patchwork of localized peace deals does not always result in broader stability (EHRC, 2023; UNDP, 2023c). Without systematic coordination, peace efforts may remain fragmented and short-lived (ICG, 2023; RVI, 2022). Finally, the lack of follow-up mechanisms presents a risk. Without structured monitoring, informal agreements may collapse over time, reigniting conflicts (FDRE, 2019; UNDP, 2023c).

3.3. Sub-national and formal/informal institutions and mechanisms

3.3.1. Regional and local courts

Overview

Ethiopia's judiciary comprises parallel federal and state court systems. Regional courts handle the majority of local civil and criminal cases and are crucial to the administration of justice across the country (FDRE, 1995; UNDP, 2021). Each regional state maintains a Supreme Court—its highest judicial body—supported by zonal High Courts and Woreda (district-level) Courts, which serve as first-instance courts (Jenkins &

Elsayed, 2023; EHRC, 2023). These courts have geographic jurisdiction within their respective regions and adjudicate matters under both regional and federal laws (FDRE, 1995; UNDP, 2021).

Since 2018, judicial reforms have aimed to enhance independence, accountability, and professional standards. Measures included merit-based appointments, performance evaluations, and expanded training for judges and legal personnel (Jenkins & Elsayed, 2023; UNDP, 2023a). Regional Supreme Courts oversee the consistency of decisions, often operating cassation benches to review judgments from lower courts (FDRE, 2019; UNDP, 2021). Meanwhile, Woreda and Zonal Courts remain the primary access point to formal justice in rural areas, often serving as appellate bodies for Kebele social courts (RVI, 2022; UNDP, 2021).

These formal courts play an important role in Ethiopia's peace infrastructure. They offer legally binding decisions, enforce state law, and provide due process—deterring vigilante reprisals and reinforcing state legitimacy (UNDP, 2021; EHRC, 2023). In contrast to customary institutions, their decisions are enforceable by the state and aim to uphold constitutional rights and equality before the law (FDRE, 2019; UNDP, 2021).

From 2018 to 2024, regional and local courts handled sensitive cases related to election disputes, inter-ethnic violence, and property claims of internally displaced persons (IDPs) (EHRC, 2023; Jenkins & Elsayed, 2023). However, systemic challenges persist. Many courts face shortages of qualified judges, limited infrastructure, and case backlogs. These issues are particularly acute in conflict-affected and remote areas, where courts have sometimes been unable to function due to insecurity (EHRC, 2023; UNDP, 2023a).

Public trust in the formal judiciary varies. While courts exist at the Woreda level in most districts, rural populations frequently turn to customary mechanisms due to their speed, cultural familiarity, and perceived fairness (Fisher, 2019; RVI, 2022). Despite judicial administration proclamations introduced to bolster independence and professionalism, concerns over political influence and inconsistent rulings persist (Transparency Ethiopia, 2020; UNDP, 2021).

Assessment

Strengths: Regional and local courts are essential to Ethiopia's rule-of-law infrastructure. Their capacity to issue binding judgments and enforce decisions through law enforcement gives them a distinct role in conflict resolution and deterrence (Jenkins & Elsayed, 2023; UNDP, 2023a). Courts also serve as mechanisms for rights enforcement, including minority protections embedded in the Constitution (EHRC, 2023; Fisher, 2019).

Judicial reforms since 2018 have contributed to improved transparency and professionalism. Merit-based recruitment, strengthened judicial councils, and clearer case management procedures are designed to enhance impartiality and build public trust (FDRE, 2019; Transparency Ethiopia, 2020). Appeals mechanisms from Woreda to Regional Supreme Courts allow for structured oversight, helping to correct errors and reduce arbitrariness (UNDP, 2023a).

The geographic spread of the Woreda court system means that most districts are covered by the formal judiciary, at least in principle. In some conflict-affected areas, mobile courts have been deployed to extend access to justice, particularly for displaced or marginalised populations (UNDP, 2021; Jenkins & Elsayed, 2023).

Another positive feature is the courts' engagement with customary dispute resolution. In some instances, regional courts have referred appropriate cases to traditional elders or reconciliation mechanisms, with the consent of both parties, enabling hybrid approaches that combine legal authority with social legitimacy (Fisher, 2019; RVI, 2022).

Weaknesses: Despite these improvements, the judiciary continues to face significant constraints. One key challenge is limited access to justice in remote areas. Many rural communities face physical and financial barriers to accessing courts and lack awareness of legal rights or procedures (UNDP, 2021; EHRC, 2023). In regions with ongoing insecurity, courts have sometimes closed or ceased operations, denying affected populations formal legal remedies (EHRC, 2023).

Case backlogs remain widespread. Delays in adjudication frustrate litigants and, in some contexts, contribute to further disputes or community tensions (UNDP, 2023a). Woreda courts are particularly understaffed, with shortages of judges, prosecutors, and support staff undermining timely justice delivery (Jenkins & Elsayed, 2023).

Judicial independence at the regional level is inconsistent. Some courts face informal pressure from regional executives or political actors, particularly in politically sensitive or high-stakes cases. Judges have occasionally faced disciplinary action or transfers after issuing unpopular rulings, raising concerns about institutional autonomy (Transparency Ethiopia, 2020; EHRC, 2023).

Marginalised groups—especially women, pastoralists, and IDPs—often face barriers to accessing the courts, including linguistic, financial, and procedural challenges. These limitations undermine equality before the law and contribute to the continued reliance on informal systems (Fisher, 2019; EHRC, 2023).

Corruption and inefficiency are also persistent concerns. While recent reforms have introduced ethics codes and oversight mechanisms, litigants in some jurisdictions report that bribery and favouritism still influence court decisions (Transparency Ethiopia, 2020; UNDP, 2021). This erodes public trust and diminishes the perceived legitimacy of formal institutions.

3.3.2. Customary courts and traditional dispute resolution mechanisms

Overview

Alongside the formal judiciary, Ethiopia recognises customary and religious courts that play a significant role in local conflict resolution (FDRE, 1995; Gundel, 2006; Seid & Jotte, 2019). These mechanisms, often centuries-old, operate informally but are deeply embedded within their communities (UNDP, 2021; Yusuf, 2019).

Sharia Courts, functioning in the predominantly Muslim Somali, Afar, and Harari regions, are officially sanctioned to decide family and personal law cases for Muslims (marriage, divorce, inheritance) if the parties consent (FDRE, 1995; Yusuf, 2019). They operate within the state legal framework (with their own appellate system) and receive some government funding (Seid & Jotte, 2019; UNDP, 2021). In practice, Sharia courts in Somali and Afar adjudicate most civil disputes among Muslims, offering accessible justice consistent with Islamic law (Yusuf, 2019; Abdurahman, 2020). Their role in conflict prevention is significant, as resolving personal disputes peacefully reduces broader communal tensions (FDRE, 1995; Musawah, 2018).

Gadaa Courts operate within the Oromo Gadaa system, a traditional socio-political institution inscribed by UNESCO for its cultural significance (UNESCO, 2016; Legesse, 1973). In Oromo communities (especially Borana and Guji zones), Abbaa Gadaa (Gadaa leaders) mediate inter-clan conflicts, adjudicate property disputes, and enforce customary laws (Legesse, 1973; Seid & Jotte, 2019). Their activities include facilitating truces between feuding groups, presiding over reconciliation rituals, and imposing customary sanctions (such as cattle compensation for harm inflicted) (Abdurahman, 2020; FDRE, 2019).

Clan-Based courts in the Somali Region are informal councils of clan elders (Odayaal) that apply Xeer (customary law) to resolve disputes, ranging from grazing land disagreements to blood feuds (Gundel, 2006; Hagmann, 2007). The Somali regional government has formalised elders' roles, appointing them as local peace advisors (Hagmann, 2007; Seid & Jotte, 2019). These courts rely on traditional mediation, diya (compensation), and consensus-building (Gundel, 2006; Hagmann & Mulugeta, 2008). Similarly, in the Afar Region, Makabantu councils of elders use Afar customary law (mada'a) to mediate conflicts over pasture and water, including cross-border disputes with Issa Somali clans (Afar Regional Government, 2020; Seid & Jotte, 2019).

Elders' Mediation Councils in Amhara and Tigray, known as Shimglina, are highly respected for resolving community disputes (Aneme, 2015; The Gender Security Project, 2023). These councils intervene in land disputes, family quarrels, and even vengeance killings, aiming for restorative justice rather than punishment (Zerihun, 2013; Musawah, 2018). Their decisions carry significant social weight, and non-compliance results in ostracism (Gundel, 2006; Seid & Jotte, 2019).

Customary courts operate without formal budgets or infrastructure, relying on community support and social legitimacy (UNDP, 2021; Yusuf, 2019). Between 2018 and 2024, these mechanisms played a critical role in diffusing local tensions. For instance, Oromo Gadaa elders mediated between Oromo and Gedeo communities during clashes, while Somali clan elders facilitated peace agreements between warring sub-clans in the Ogaden zone (FDRE, 2019; Abdurahman, 2020).

Ethiopia's legal framework (Constitution Article 34(5)) provides official space for customary and religious courts in personal matters, and in practice, authorities often endorse elders' resolutions even in criminal cases, as long as they do not contradict state law (FDRE, 1995; Seid & Jotte, 2019). Estimates suggest

that customary courts handle up to 80–90% of disputes among Somali populations, indicating their significant role in local justice (Gundel, 2006; Hagmann & Mulugeta, 2008).

Assessment

Strengths: Customary and traditional courts are among the most accessible and culturally legitimate peace institutions in Ethiopia (Gundel, 2006; Seid & Jotte, 2019).

▶ **Deep community legitimacy:** Elders, clan leaders, and religious judges derive authority from tradition and trust, making parties more likely to accept their decisions (Zerihun, 2013; Yusuf, 2019). Shimglina mediation, for instance, ends with rituals that rebuild social harmony, something formal courts rarely facilitate (The Gender Security Project, 2023; Abdurahman, 2020).

▶ **Speed and flexibility:** Customary courts convene quickly after disputes arise, avoiding delays associated with formal litigation (Gundel, 2006; Seid & Jotte, 2019). The Somali Xeer system handles an estimated 80–90% of local disputes, demonstrating the capacity to resolve cases that would overwhelm formal courts (Gundel, 2006; Hagmann, 2007).

▶ **Adaptability to local norms:** Gadaa assemblies incorporate Oromo principles of fairness (safuu), while Sharia courts apply Islamic law in a way that aligns with local religious values, increasing acceptability among communities (Legesse, 1973; Abdurahman, 2020).

▶ **Socially enforced compliance:** Customary rulings are upheld through community pressure, with ostracism and social sanctions ensuring adherence, reducing the need for police enforcement (Hagmann & Mulugeta, 2008; Gundel, 2006).

▶ **Conflict de-escalation:** These mechanisms mitigate revenge cycles through compensation agreements (e.g., diya blood money in the Somali region, guma blood compensation in Oromo culture), preventing escalation into further violence (Hagmann & Mulugeta, 2008; Afar Regional Government, 2020).

Weaknesses: Despite their strengths, customary mechanisms face several limitations (Musawah, 2018; The Gender Security Project, 2023):

▶ **Bias and exclusion:** Traditional courts are male-dominated; women, youth, and lower-status groups often lack representation (Zerihun, 2013; Musawah, 2018). Gender-based discrimination is particularly noted in inheritance and divorce rulings in Sharia and clan courts (The Gender Security Project, 2023; Musawah, 2018).

▶ **Inconsistencies with formal law** – Some customary rulings contradict Ethiopian legal principles, such as cases where rape is resolved by forcing the perpetrator to marry the victim, violating human rights standards (Seid & Jotte, 2019; Musawah, 2018).

▶ **Enforcement challenges:** Customary courts lack coercive power. If an individual rejects an elders' decision, enforcement depends on community pressure, which may fail if the person has alternative support networks (Hagmann & Mulugeta, 2008; Gundel, 2006).

▶ **Ethnic and inter-community disputes:** These courts work best within homogenous groups. Inter-ethnic conflicts require extraordinary effort, and if a clan perceives bias in Xeer rulings, revenge cycles may continue (Hagmann, 2007; Hagmann & Mulugeta, 2008).

▶ **Limited reach for criminal justice:** Customary courts cannot handle serious criminal cases effectively, particularly where victims demand formal state intervention (FDRE, 1995; UNDP, 2021).

▶ **Perceptions of Legitimacy:** Some stakeholders have observed a perceived decline in the acceptance and credibility of local and traditional governance systems, which they attribute to increased engagement or influence by state and non-state actors.

3.3.3. Local administrative councils (Kebele and Woreda)

Overview

Ethiopia's lowest administrative units, the Kebele (village or urban neighbourhood) and Woreda (district) councils, play a crucial role in local peace infrastructure by serving as first responders to disputes and community governance (FDRE, 1995; UNDP, 2020; CJWG, 2021). Kebeles, which encompass rural communities or urban wards, are governed by elected councils and executive committees responsible for handling local security and governance (FDRE, 2019; CJWG, 2021). These local administrations mediate minor disputes, such as land boundary conflicts, family disagreements, and petty crimes, before they escalate into larger confrontations (UNDP, 2020; Seid & Jotte, 2019). Many kebeles maintain informal social courts or peace committees, which function as accessible, community-driven mechanisms

for resolving local grievances (CJWG, 2021; UNDP, 2020). In urban centres such as Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa, there are formal Kebele Social Courts empowered to adjudicate minor offences and civil claims below a designated threshold (CJWG, 2021; UNDP, 2020). Meanwhile, in regional areas such as Oromia and Amhara, kebele administrators convene customary shengo (community meetings) that integrate elders and religious leaders to resolve disputes through dialogue (Seid & Jotte, 2019; The Gender Security Project, 2023).

At a broader level, Woreda councils, which oversee multiple kebeles, serve as elected district-level assemblies responsible for ensuring peace, security, and development (FDRE, 1995; UNDP, 2021). Woreda administrators coordinate policing and security through militia forces and frequently chair Woreda Peace Committees, which include representatives from elders, women, youth, and religious institutions (UNDP, 2020; CJWG, 2021). These committees became increasingly active after 2018 when the Ministry of Peace encouraged the establishment of grassroots peace structures (UNDP, 2020; Seid & Jotte, 2019). The geographic scope of these councils determines their role in conflict resolution. Kebele councils address local disputes within their villages or urban neighbourhoods, while woreda officials are responsible for inter-kebele conflicts, including land disputes, communal resource allocation, and emerging ethnic tensions (Seid & Jotte, 2019; UNDP, 2021). From 2018 to 2024, local councils played a significant role in mitigating conflicts. For example, some woredas in SNNPR organised community dialogue forums to ease inter-ethnic tensions following clashes (UNDP, 2020; The Gender Security Project, 2023). In Afar, kebeles facilitated negotiations over water-sharing agreements, particularly in arid areas where resource scarcity fuels disputes (Afar Regional Government, 2020; Seid & Jotte, 2019). Additionally, local councils have been responsible for implementing higher-level peace agreements, ensuring that truces negotiated at the federal or regional level are enforced at the village level (FDRE, 2019; CJWG, 2021).

The proximity of kebele and woreda councils to communities makes them important actors in conflict prevention and resolution. As the lowest units of government, these councils have intimate knowledge of local dynamics, allowing them to intervene at the early stages of conflicts before they escalate into violence (FDRE, 1995; UNDP, 2020). However, they often lack formal training in mediation, and political affiliations may affect their neutrality (Amnesty International, 2021; The Gender Security Project, 2023). To address this, the government has invested in training kebele officials in peacebuilding and dispute resolution, though gaps remain in capacity and funding (UNDP, 2020; CJWG, 2021).

Assessment

Strengths: One of the key strengths of kebele and woreda councils is their accessibility and responsiveness. Because local leaders are embedded within their communities, they can detect disputes at an early stage—for example, a land encroachment issue or a dispute over grazing rights—and intervene before conflicts escalate (Seid & Jotte, 2019; UNDP, 2021). Their institutional authority allows them to convene official meetings between disputing parties, ensuring that mediation efforts carry weight (CJWG, 2021; The Gender Security Project, 2023). In addition, these councils coordinate closely with police and militias, allowing them to provide an integrated response that combines dialogue with security enforcement when needed (FDRE, 2019; UNDP, 2021). Beyond direct conflict mediation, woreda councils also play an indirect peacebuilding role through service delivery. By overseeing water management projects or grazing land allocation, they help to prevent resource-based conflicts (Afar Regional Government, 2020; UNDP, 2020). Kebele administrations further contribute by maintaining local order through by-laws and community-based sanctions (CJWG, 2021; Seid & Jotte, 2019). Another notable strength is their ability to legitimise peace agreements; when elders broker a truce between conflicting communities, kebele officials formally endorse the settlement, making it part of local administrative records, thereby enhancing its sustainability (CJWG, 2021; Seid & Jotte, 2019). Finally, local councils act as a bridge between citizens and the state, escalating larger disputes to woreda or zonal authorities when they exceed the capacity of local mediation (FDRE, 2019; UNDP, 2020).

Weaknesses: Despite these strengths, local councils face significant constraints that limit their ability to effectively resolve conflicts. One major challenge is the lack of formal mediation training. Most kebele and woreda officials are not trained as mediators, and many lack the skills needed to facilitate complex dialogues (UNDP, 2020; Seid & Jotte, 2019). Another serious issue is political bias. In many ethnically mixed areas, local governance is dominated by a single ethnic group, leading to distrust from minorities who may view kebele or woreda officials as partisan rather than neutral facilitators (Amnesty International, 2021; The Gender Security Project, 2023). Furthermore, local councils are not always impartial actors in conflicts. Reports from Oromia in 2021 indicate that some kebele militias were directly

involved in ethnic violence, highlighting failures in governance neutrality (Amnesty International, 2021).

Resource constraints also pose a major barrier to effective conflict resolution. Kebele and woreda councils operate on limited budgets, which primarily fund basic administrative functions, leaving little financial capacity for peace initiatives such as community dialogues or early warning systems (FDRE, 2019; UNDP, 2020). In remote pastoralist communities, local government structures are often absent or ineffective, meaning that kebele and woreda governance fails to extend its influence over marginalised populations (Afar Regional Government, 2020; UNDP, 2021). Another critical weakness is the inability of local councils to manage large-scale conflicts. While kebele and woreda councils can address small disputes, they lack the resources, authority, and expertise to mediate conflicts involving armed groups or inter-regional disputes (UNDP, 2020; CJWG, 2021).

3.3.4. Traditional conflict resolution mechanisms

Overview

Indigenous conflict resolution practices remain vibrant across Ethiopia's cultural mosaic and have been partly discussed in Section 3.1.9. They serve as informal institutions for peace, passed down through generations and often operating parallel to formal systems.

One such practice is **Shimglina** in Amhara and Tigray, literally "elders' mediation," which convenes councils of respected community elders (**shimagillé**) to restore harmony after disputes. **Shimglina** is used to address everything from land conflicts and cattle raiding to blood feuds. Elders typically begin by investigating the root causes, then mediating dialogue between the parties, drawing on customary laws and norms of forgiveness (**irq**) to achieve a settlement (Bamlak, 2013). The process often concludes with symbolic reconciliation rituals, including the sharing of food or drink to signify the end of enmity. This mechanism has proved crucial during the tumultuous post-2018 period; even amid the Tigray conflict, there were reports of local elders in Raya attempting grassroots reconciliation between Tigrayan and Amhara neighbours (Accord, 2023).

In Oromo communities, the **Gadaa system's Jaarsumma** (elder mediation) plays a similar role. The **Gadaa** institution, beyond its political functions, provides structured conflict resolution. Periodic assemblies (**Gumi Gayo**) bring together representatives from various clans to deliberate and resolve inter-clan disputes through consensus and enact binding decisions (Debsu, 2013). The **Gadaa** ethos of **nagaa** (peace) guides these efforts. For example, in 2019, Oromo **Gadaa** leaders mediated between Borana and Garba clans over water access, preventing further armed clashes (IJSRP, 2018). In the Afar region, traditional mediation led by clan elders and Islamic scholars (known as **mablo** or **dardaar** in the Afar language) is customary. These mediators use Afar customary law to settle blood feuds with compensation (often involving the institution of **loo** payments, a form of **diya**) (Life & Peace Institute, 2019). A critical case was the mediation following Afar–Issa clashes in 2021, where Afar elders, with support from religious leaders, negotiated a ceasefire and exchange of abductees (Gender Security Project, 2023). On the Afar-Somali regional border, **Makabantu elders' councils** (comprising elders from both Afar and Issa communities) have been created as informal cross-border peace committees. They engage in shuttle diplomacy whenever raids or killings occur, helping to calm retaliation cycles (Accord, 2023).

Somali clan leaders and the institution of **Ugaas** (traditional clan chiefs) are also instrumental in conflict resolution in the Somali Region. When two clans fight, elders from a neutral clan often form a **jir** (jury) to mediate, under the moral authority of an **Ugaas** (Hassan, 2020). These Somali customary processes emphasise restitution and restoring relations via **Xeer** agreements and have resolved protracted conflicts such as the 2018 Gurre and Jarso clan dispute over grazing land (Accord, 2023). All these traditional mechanisms are community-based with wide geographical reach within their ethnic domains, and sometimes beyond (through inter-ethnic elder councils). They typically have no formal funding; their "capacity" lies in social capital and the respect and authority elders command.

Assessment

Strengths: Indigenous mechanisms have proven highly resilient and effective in Ethiopia's diverse contexts. Their primary strength is cultural appropriateness and community ownership. Because solutions emerge from within the community's values, compliance is voluntary yet strong. They are cost-free and easily accessible. Elders meet under a tree, not in a distant courthouse, which encourages participation and openness. Traditional processes can address not just the immediate dispute but

also heal historical rifts and restore social harmony, something formal negotiations often struggle with (Tarekegn, 2008). They also operate on consensus, which, while time-consuming, means decisions are more likely to stick since all involved have agreed. In multi-ethnic areas, cross-cultural mediation traditions exist (such as the joint Afar-Issa elder councils), which illustrates flexibility to extend norms across group lines when needed (Gender Security Project, 2023).

Traditional authorities like Oromo **Gadaa** leaders or Somali **Ugaas** often carry the moral weight that armed actors respect. There are instances of rebel groups halting fighting to honour an elders' plea or elders securing the release of hostages (Life & Peace Institute, 2019). The **preventive role** of these institutions is another strength. Their involvement in community life (blessing ceremonies, counsel in daily matters) creates channels to defuse tensions early (Accord, 2023). Additionally, outcomes from these mechanisms typically involve reconciliation rituals binding on the wider community, thus they do not leave losers nursing grievances; everyone ritually "agrees" to peace (Tarekegn, 2008). Customary law has also been adaptive. For example, Somali **Xeer** has been updated in some areas to include provisions against rape or to increase **diya** payments for firearms killings, showing an internal capacity for reform (Life & Peace Institute, 2019).

Weaknesses: Weaknesses include inconsistency and lack of formal recognition. Outcomes can vary widely depending on the composition of elders or local customs, potentially leading to uneven justice. While the constitution gives some space to customary law, there is often ambiguity about jurisdiction, leading to conflicts between state courts and elders if, say, a party reneges and goes to formal court after a customary settlement (IJSRP, 2018).

Another weakness is that certain disputes exceed the scope of traditional methods, such as crimes by outsiders, ideologically driven violence, or conflicts fuelled by modern factors (like political party rivalries). Elders may lack knowledge about such issues or authority over actors who are not socially embedded (Accord, 2023). Integration with formal systems remains weak. Agreements made in customary settings might not be enforceable beyond moral pressure, and if they break down, the formal system is not always able to pick up the pieces (Gender Security Project, 2023).

3.3.5. Religious institutions and leaders

Overview

Faith-based actors and institutions in Ethiopia have become key peace brokers, leveraging their moral influence and extensive networks. The country's two largest religious communities—Ethiopian Orthodox Christians and Muslims—along with Protestant and Catholic groups, have historically coexisted, and their leaders frequently collaborate for peace (Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia, 2019).

The Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia (IRCE), a national body comprising representatives from major faiths (Orthodox, Islam, Catholic, Protestant, and others), has been actively involved in peace initiatives since 2018. At national and city levels (Addis Ababa, Dire Dawa), interfaith peace dialogues have been convened to quell tensions. For example, in 2019, the IRCE held peace forums in Addis Ababa in response to ethnic-driven unrest, where church Bishops and senior Imams stood together urging unity and calm (Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia, 2019). In Dire Dawa, a diverse city of Oromo, Somali, and Harari communities, interfaith committees regularly meet to address communal grievances—these dialogues were credited with defusing a potentially violent protest in 2020 by emphasizing shared religious values of peace (Dereje, 2021).

Individual religious leaders have also mediated in specific conflicts. In April 2024, the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council took the lead in mediating a ceasefire between Afar and Somali region militias amid deadly border clashes. Local imams and Orthodox priests joined that effort, travelling with elders to conflict zones to persuade combatants to agree to a truce in the name of preserving innocent lives (Mohammed, 2024). In Tigray and Amhara, during the aftermath of the war, clergy have been involved in community healing dialogues. Meanwhile, in Oromia, Protestant church networks and Qallu (traditional Oromo religious leaders) have campaigned jointly against revenge killings associated with the insurgency, promoting forgiveness sermons in local languages (Dereje, 2021).

The reach of these institutions is nationwide, with regional dioceses, mosques, and churches present in almost every community. Their capacity lies in the high trust they command from the public—religious figures are often seen as neutral and guided by conscience rather than politics. They also control influential media platforms, with sermons and messages of peace broadcast on radio and television,

amplifying their impact (IRCE, 2020). Activities between 2018 and 2024 included not only mediation and dialogue but also trauma healing programs—churches in war-torn Axum and Adigrat set up counselling for victims—and youth peace camps jointly led by Muslim and Christian leaders to build interfaith understanding, such as a 2022 camp in Jigjiga for Somali and Oromo youth (Dereje, 2022).

Assessment

Strengths: Religious leaders and institutions enjoy broad respect in Ethiopian society and have a unique capacity to bridge divides, making them strong peace actors. A major strength is their moral authority— appeals for peace coming from the pulpit or the minbar (mosque pulpit) can carry more weight than those from politicians, especially in highly polarised environments (Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia, 2020). They can frame peace and reconciliation in terms of religious duty and compassion, resonating deeply with believers. Moreover, almost every community has religious figures, giving them extensive reach.

The interfaith collaborations since 2018 (e.g., the Inter-Religious Council's initiatives) demonstrate strength in unity—when multiple faith leaders stand together, it sets an example of coexistence and counters narratives of division (Sant'Egidio, 2023). Religious networks also often have significant resources for mobilisation—churches and mosques can quickly gather people for prayers or dialogues. These institutions have infrastructure like meeting halls, schools, and charities that can be repurposed for peace education and supporting affected populations, such as churches sheltering displaced families regardless of faith (Dereje, 2021).

Religious peace initiatives also tend to emphasise forgiveness and empathy, which are crucial for genuine reconciliation beyond political agreements. Importantly, Ethiopia's religious institutions often straddle ethnic lines—both the Orthodox Church and Islam – the most prominent ones have followers across many ethnic groups and are cross-cutting. This allows them to mediate inter-ethnic conflicts by focusing on shared faith identity rather than ethnic divisions (Mohammed, 2024).

Weaknesses: A major weakness is when religious identity overlaps with conflict lines. While high-level religious councils call for peace, local religious figures could sometimes be part of the problem. For example, a few local preachers or priests might use inflammatory rhetoric if they feel their community is under threat (Dereje, 2022). Additionally, religious institutions move carefully and can be bureaucratic; the IRCE, for instance, took time to develop common positions and thus sometimes reacted too slowly to fast-moving crises (Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia, 2020).

Another challenge is that some religious leaders are closely aligned with political actors, which could affect their perceived neutrality in peace efforts. In some cases, tensions between religious institutions and the government (such as debates over land ownership of religious institutions) have hindered interfaith peacebuilding (Sant'Egidio, 2023). Despite these weaknesses, religious actors remain among the most trusted mediators in Ethiopian society and have a crucial role in preventing and resolving conflicts.

3.3.6. Community-based organisations (women and youth groups)

Overview

Grassroots peacebuilding in Ethiopia has been significantly energised by community-based organisations, particularly those led by women and youth. These groups have played an essential role in preventing and mitigating conflicts at the local level, often filling gaps left by formal peace institutions.

Women's Peace Committees have emerged as influential actors in various regions. In Oromia, for instance, women in conflict-prone woredas—such as West Guji, which experienced the Gedeo-Guji clashes of 2018—formed peace committees that traversed village lines to dialogue with other ethnic groups. These women leveraged their roles as mothers and wives to appeal for ceasefires and reconciliation (Birhan Research, 2020). Such committees frequently operate informally, mediating family-level disputes and persuading armed sons or husbands to lay down weapons. In Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region (SNNPR), women's associations in Wolaita and Sidama have organised reconciliation events blending cultural rituals with peace messaging. A notable example is the coffee ceremonies, which symbolically brought together the wives of opposing faction leaders to reconcile (Girma, 2021). The mandate of these women-led groups is largely self-defined, focusing on community cohesion, counselling survivors of violence, educating children about tolerance, and acting as early warning observers. Women, often the first to notice brewing conflicts at water wells or markets, have played an active role in preventing escalation. While they lack formal authority, these

groups have gained recognition. Some have been invited by local administrations to official peace and security committee meetings for their insights on conflict resolution (International Alert, 2018).

Youth Reconciliation Groups have also become highly active. In Addis Ababa, after episodes of ethnically charged student clashes in 2019, several urban youth clubs united to form a "Youth for Peace" coalition, organising inter-university dialogues and sports events under the theme of unity (UN PBF, 2021). They employed music, poetry, and social media campaigns to counter hate speech and misinformation, which had previously fuelled violence. Similarly, in Hawassa, a city that experienced tensions during the Sidama autonomy referendum in 2019, youth from Sidama, Wolayta, Amhara, and Oromo backgrounds established a joint reconciliation committee with support from local NGOs. This group conducted community theatre performances, dramatizing the futility of violence, and organised exchange visits, where Sidama youth visited Wolayta neighbourhoods and vice versa to foster empathy (Girma, 2021).

The geographical scope of these community-based organisations (CBOs) is usually local (town or district-based), though networking has improved in recent years. For example, youth peace groups from Addis Ababa and Hawassa have connected online to share best practices. However, these initiatives often struggle with capacity constraints, as they rely on volunteer energy and sporadic NGO or government support (training or small grants). Under the UN Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) projects in 2020–2021, some women's and youth peace initiatives in Oromia and Somali Region received dialogue facilitation training, highlighting increasing efforts to formalise their impact (UN PBF, 2021). These community actors bring creativity, grassroots legitimacy, and a preventive approach to Ethiopia's peace infrastructure.

Assessment

Strengths: Women's and youth-led peace initiatives bring a unique, bottom-up approach to conflict resolution, leveraging their local knowledge, trust, and innovative methods. One key strength of women's peace committees is their ability to work across faction lines informally. In many cases, women—who may not be seen as formal power brokers—can move between opposing sides unnoticed, opening lines of communication without attracting suspicion from warring parties (International Alert, 2018). Women's social roles as caregivers enable them to appeal to combatants' empathy, urging them to consider the suffering of children and families (Girma, 2021). Women-led groups also tend to focus on practical peace dividends—such as reopening markets or access to water points—which grounds peace efforts in daily life improvements. Empirical observations in Ethiopia suggest that communities with active women's peace groups recover faster from conflict (Girma, 2021).

Youth reconciliation groups, meanwhile, are particularly effective at countering the mobilisation of young men into violence. Given that youth are often targeted for recruitment by armed groups, peer-to-peer influence becomes crucial—young people speaking to fellow youth through music, sports, and social media can undercut hate propaganda in ways that elders or government officials cannot easily replicate (Birhan Research, 2020). Their creative approaches—such as peace concerts, street theatre, and viral social media campaigns—engage wide audiences and help build a culture of peace among the next generation.

These CBOs are also nimble and responsive—they can intervene rapidly to prevent a neighbourhood dispute from escalating into ethnic clashes. Their presence at the grassroots level allows them to function as early warning agents—often, they hear rumours or signs of brewing conflict before formal authorities do (UN PBF, 2021). Additionally, women and youth groups tend to champion inclusivity, bringing perspectives often overlooked by traditional leaders, such as gender-based violence concerns or youth unemployment issues.

Weaknesses: Despite their strengths, these community-based initiatives face structural weaknesses that can limit their impact. The foremost challenge is their lack of formal authority—unlike regional peace bureaus or official mediators, these groups have no legal enforcement power. Their recommendations or peace agreements can be ignored if local elders or government officials fail to support them (International Alert, 2018).

In conservative settings, women's public involvement in mediation may face social resistance. In some cases, male community leaders have dismissed women peace advocates, arguing that mediation is a male domain (Girma, 2021). This cultural bias can limit women's influence or, in extreme cases, put them at risk if they are seen as challenging social norms. Similarly, youth peace groups may be dismissed as inexperienced or not taken seriously by elders and politicians, reducing their access to decision-making spaces.

Another weakness is resource dependence—many women's and youth peace groups rely on short-term NGO funding for transport, meeting logistics, or materials. This creates sustainability issues, as projects may collapse when donor support ends (Birhan Research, 2020). Additionally, there is a risk of co-option—political parties or armed movements might attempt to infiltrate youth groups or manipulate their messaging. In some instances, government-aligned groups have tried to steer youth peace initiatives in ways that serve political interests (UN PBF, 2021).

Finally, the impact can be geographically limited—an isolated local women's peace committee or youth club might succeed within its immediate community, but struggle to influence broader conflict dynamics without stronger networks or institutional backing. As a way forward, targeting and empowering these women and youth groups can bring tremendous strength to local peacebuilding and reinforce local leadership and ownership.

3.3.7. Civil society and non-governmental organisations

Overview

Independent civil society organisations (CSOs) and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have increasingly contributed to subnational peace efforts since the loosening of restrictions in 2018. Their engagement has ranged from facilitating peace dialogues to capacity-building for local actors and advocacy for conflict-sensitive policies.

One of the most notable CSOs is InterAfrica Group (IAG), an Ethiopian NGO known for policy dialogue and mediation. IAG has facilitated peace dialogues in peripheral regions such as Gambella and Afar, which often receive less national attention (InterAfrica Group, 2020). In Gambella, a region marked by historical Anuak–Nuer ethnic tensions, IAG convened a series of dialogues in 2019–2020, bringing together community leaders, youth representatives, and local officials to identify sources of conflict and discuss mechanisms for peaceful cohabitation. These dialogues, sometimes co-hosted with the Gambella Regional Peace Bureau, resulted in agreements on natural resource sharing and led to the formation of a joint peace committee of Nuer and Anuak elders (InterAfrica Group, 2020). Similarly, in Afar, IAG, in collaboration with local elders and the Afar Pastoralist Development Association, organised community peace conferences focused on resolving recurring clashes with the Issa Somali. One major outcome was a locally driven roadmap for conflict prevention, which included reviving traditional arbitration courts and establishing a hotline communication system between Afar and Somali local administrators (IAG, 2021).

Other CSOs have also played crucial roles in peace processes. The Life & Peace Institute (LPI), an international NGO with a local presence, has supported women-led reconciliation initiatives in Oromia, helping women's peace committees to document grievances and hold local authorities accountable (LPI, 2022). LPI also provides mediation training for elders and youth leaders, enhancing their skills in peace facilitation. Another key actor is the Centre for Dialogue, Research and Cooperation (CDRC), led by former diplomats, which discreetly facilitated dialogues in 2019 between the federal government and Sidama activists, helping ease tensions during the transition to Sidama regional statehood.

Academia-linked forums have also supported peacebuilding efforts. Addis Ababa University's Institute for Peace and Security Studies (IPSS), for example, has hosted multi-stakeholder dialogues on local conflicts, such as the Wellega violence in Oromia, contributing to policy solutions (Rift Valley Institute, 2023). Civil society initiatives often benefit from public trust, as they are viewed as neutral conveners compared to government-led processes. Their activities range from research and conflict mapping (to identify the root causes of violence) to direct mediation efforts. For example, during the Tigray conflict, several local NGOs successfully negotiated humanitarian access, highlighting the critical role of CSOs in conflict mitigation.

Since the legal reforms of 2019, CSOs have expanded their work in peace and human rights, domains that were previously restricted. Many CSOs receive support from international donors and the UN, which recognise that grassroots peace initiatives are essential complements to top-down peace negotiations. Civil society forums provide safe spaces for grievances to be aired and addressed outside of formal government structures. They also engage both formal and informal actors. For instance, a 2022 peace dialogue in Assosa (Benishangul-Gumuz), organised by a local CSO, successfully brought together militia representatives, tribal chiefs, and regional officials—a composition that formal government meetings often fail to achieve (Rift Valley Institute, 2023).

Assessment

Strengths: CSOs and NGOs play a vital role in Ethiopia's peace infrastructure, offering expertise, neutral convening power, and long-term engagement in conflict resolution. Their greatest strength is their ability to act independently of government or ethnic partisanship, allowing them to facilitate frank dialogue among opposing factions. Think tanks and NGOs like InterAfrica Group and the Ethiopian Elders' Peace Initiative function as neutral mediators, creating trusted spaces where conflict actors can communicate without political pressure (InterAfrica Group, 2020).

Another key strength is their ability to sustain engagement where political actors might lose interest. Government agencies, due to shifting priorities, may abandon peace dialogues before they yield results. CSOs, however, are often dedicated solely to peacebuilding and can persist in conflict resolution efforts. For example, IAG's continued engagement in Gambella ensured that Anuak and Nuer leaders returned to the table multiple times, maintaining dialogue and de-escalation efforts (IAG, 2021).

Additionally, CSOs often bring professional expertise in conflict resolution and policy research. Organisations like LPI and IPSS conduct evidence-based conflict analysis, allowing peace dialogues to be informed by data and comparative experiences (LPI, 2022). They can also translate community grievances into policy recommendations and communicate them at the national level (Rift Valley Institute, 2023).

Another major advantage of CSOs is their access to international donor funding, which allows them to inject resources into local peace processes. Unlike government-led peace initiatives, which are often constrained by bureaucracy, NGOs can mobilise funding for transport, dialogue facilitation, and training more flexibly (InterAfrica Group, 2020).

Weaknesses: Despite their strengths, CSOs operate in a fragile political space and face legal and institutional challenges that can hinder their peacebuilding efforts. One primary weakness is their vulnerability to government restrictions. While Ethiopia relaxed CSO laws in 2019, civil society organisations still face bureaucratic hurdles and risk government sanction if perceived as too critical of authorities (Rift Valley Institute, 2023).

Another weakness is their reliance on external donor funding, which often results in short-term interventions that end before peace processes are fully consolidated. Many NGO-led projects operate on annual funding cycles, meaning that conflict resolution initiatives may be cut short if funding expires (LPI, 2022). Without sustainable financial backing, CSOs struggle to maintain consistent programming, especially in rural areas.

Additionally, CSO presence outside urban centres remains limited. While major cities like Addis Ababa and Hawassa host several well-established peace organisations, rural areas, particularly lowland regions such as Somali and Afar, lack strong local CSOs dedicated to peace work (InterAfrica Group, 2020). National NGOs may lack the local language skills or trust networks necessary to operate effectively in remote conflict-affected areas.

Finally, civil society organisations can struggle with legitimacy among political and grassroots actors. In some communities, CSOs are seen as donor-driven entities rather than authentic local initiatives, which limits their influence (Rift Valley Institute, 2023). There is also a risk of political co-optation—some NGOs have faced accusations of being aligned with opposition groups or international agendas, making their work more controversial in Ethiopia's highly polarised environment (IAG, 2021).

3.4. Culture and peace

3.4.1. Introduction

Ethiopia's rich tapestry of cultural traditions plays a pivotal role in sustaining peace across the nation. From age-old community practices to the influence of religious institutions, culture is deeply interwoven with both formal and informal peace mechanisms. Customary dispute resolution led by local elders operates parallel to the formal justice system and often enjoys greater trust and usage at the grassroots level *(Enyew, 2014)*. Indeed, surveys indicate that a majority of Ethiopians prefer traditional approaches to resolving conflicts over formal courts, viewing them as more accessible and in tune with local values *(Metekia, 2023)*. These indigenous methods emphasise reconciliation, restorative justice, and

communal harmony, complementing official peacebuilding efforts. Ethiopian culture, therefore, provides an essential part of the infrastructure for peace with a set of norms, institutions, and practices through which communities prevent and resolve conflicts in synergy with state mechanisms.

3.4.2. Key national cultural elements supporting peace

Ethiopia's shared historical experiences, national identities and symbols constitute cultural assets that underpin unity and peace at the national level. Foremost among these is the legacy of the 1896 Adwa Victory, where Ethiopians of all backgrounds united to defeat a colonial invasion. Adwa stands as a profound symbol of anti-colonial triumph and multi-ethnic solidarity, celebrated in annual national commemorations. The narrative of diverse ethnic warriors – Amhara, Tigrayan, Oromo, Gurage, and others – fighting side by side under Emperor Menelik II and Empress Taytu has been ingrained in the national consciousness as a source of pride and cohesion (Teshome, 2022). This shared memory serves as a reminder that Ethiopians have a common destiny and can overcome great challenges when united. Indeed, Adwa is frequently evoked by leaders and civil society as proof that Ethiopia's unity in diversity is its strength. It "stands as a powerful symbol of national unity and cohesion in pursuit of a common goal," reinforcing the notion of one Ethiopian identity (ENA, 2024).

Similarly, the ancient Aksumite heritage and the obelisks from the 1st – 8th century, the legend of the Ark of the Covenant, the Lalibela Rock-Hewn Churches in the 12th century, the Walls of Harar from the 13th century, and the Castles of Gondar from the 17th century provide collective historical references that transcend modern ethnic divides. Schoolchildren across Ethiopia learn about the Axum civilisation (centred in today's Tigray region) as the foundational civilisation of the nation, fostering respect for a common heritage (Alemu, 2021). National holidays and rituals also play a role: the Meskel festival (finding of the True Cross) or Epiphany/Timkat celebrations see Ethiopians don traditional white garb and gather in mass ceremonies across the country, projecting an image of cultural unity under the Ethiopian flag. The flag itself (green-yellow-red tricolour with a star emblem) is a potent symbol many Ethiopians rally around, especially in times of external threat or during national sports victories (Teshome, 2022).

Furthermore, sites like the historic churches of Lalibela or the pilgrimage to St. Mary of Zion in Axum, to St. Mary of Gishen in Wello and to St. Gabriel in Hararghie attract pilgrims from all corners of Ethiopia, strengthening ties between regions through shared spiritual devotion. For instance, after the recent conflict, the resumption of the Hidar Tsion pilgrimage in Axum saw residents open their homes to pilgrims from other regions, creating "a sense of unity and hospitality" rooted in common faith and history (ENA, 2024). Such experiences renew bonds between Tigrayans and Amharas who meet as fellow worshippers, helping to heal rifts caused by political conflict.

On the secular side, the story of Arbegnoch (patriots) resisting Italian occupation in the 1930s-40s is another unifying historical chapter commemorated in monuments and popular culture (Alemu, 2021). Despite Ethiopia's federal arrangement along ethnic lines, these national symbols and memories act as cultural threads weaving the fabric of a shared Ethiopian identity. They provide reference points of unity that peace initiatives can tap into – for example, mediators often invoke Adwa or patriot heroism as examples of past cooperation when encouraging groups to reconcile today (Teshome, 2022). Conversely, when national symbols are contested or monopolised by one group, it can strain relations; but overall, the inclusive veneration of Ethiopia's history (e.g. legacies of ancient civilization, celebrating figures like Emperor Theodros the IV and Minlik the II, the victories of Adwa, Karamara, and more recently Badme, the 1980s famine relief effort or construction of the Great Ethiopian Reinesance Dam as national experiences contributes to social cohesion and national unity.

3.4.3. Key sub-national cultural elements supporting peace

Traditional Conflict Resolution Mechanisms by Region

Ethiopia's diverse ethnic groups each possess indigenous conflict resolution systems that operate at sub-national levels, tailored to local contexts yet often analogous in function. These mechanisms, rooted in custom and administered by community leaders, form the backbone of intra- and inter-community peace maintenance across the country's regions *(Tarekegn, 2008)*. This report doesn't claim to be exhaustive in terms of assessing traditional dispute/conflict resolution mechanisms but some examples have been discussed in Section 3.2.6 and include:

▶ **Shimglina – Amhara & Tigray:** In Amhara communities (and similarly in Tigray), *shimglina* refers to the process of elder mediation. Panels of *shimagile* (respected elders) intervene in disputes

ranging from land and cattle disagreements to blood feuds (*Enyew, 2014*).

▶ **Gadaa System – Oromia:** The Oromo people's Gadaa system is an indigenous socio-political system that also encompasses elaborate conflict resolution institutions. Under *Gadaa*, which is a rotating age-grade governance system, peace and justice are administered by elected leaders (*Abba Gadaa*) and councils at various levels (*Debsu, 2013*).

▶ **Jaarsa Biyyaa – Afar & Somali:** In Afar and Somali regions – both predominantly pastoralist societies – councils of elders analogous to *jaarsa biyyaa* (Oromo term for "elders of the country") are the linchpin of conflict management (*Legesse, 1973*). Among Somalis, this traditional institution is embodied in the *xeer* system, where clan elders (*odayaal*) from each side of a dispute convene a *shir* (assembly) to settle issues according to customary law (*Hassan, 2020*).

▶ **Makabantu – Benishangul-Gumuz & Others:** In Ethiopia's western peripheries like Benishangul-Gumuz, Gumuz and Berta communities also have clan-based elder councils often referred to locally as *mekere* or *sheikh* councils (for Muslim Berta) (*Alemneh et al., 2023*). The term Makabantu appears similar to the Afar Makabon, suggesting a general concept of clan elder mediation in those regions as well. In Benishangul, where frequent clashes occur between indigenous communities and highland settlers, elders' committees mediate disputes over land and resources (*Afar Regional Government, 2020*).

Community-based associations and networks

Beyond formal councils of elders, Ethiopian communities are knit together by various grassroots associations that inherently foster peace and conflict management. These include the ubiquitous *idir* (funeral societies), *equb* (rotating savings groups), and *mahber* (social/spiritual clubs), which serve as informal social support systems and platforms for dialogue *(Teshome et al., 2014)*.

Idir (Community solidarity groups): An *idir* is a self-organised association typically composed of several dozen households who contribute funds regularly to support members during bereavement and other emergencies *(Metekia, 2023)*. Nearly every Ethiopian urban community and many rural villages have at least one *idir*. While its primary function is mutual aid in times of death (ensuring funerals are properly conducted and families of the deceased are materially and emotionally supported), the *idir* also doubles as a micro-local governance unit. Members meet periodically to discuss the group's affairs, which naturally extends to discussing neighbourhood issues. Crucially, *idirs* often mediate conflicts among their members to preserve group cohesion *(Teshome et al., 2014)*.

If two members quarrel—over property boundaries or an insult—the *idir* leadership (composed of respected community members) will bring them and other members together to talk it through. There is a strong incentive to resolve the dispute internally: expelling a member is rare and undesirable, so instead, the *idir* applies social pressure and negotiation to reconcile them. The familiarity and trust among members facilitate frank dialogue. Studies in Addis Ababa show that the *idir* system fosters quick dispute resolution and prevents long-term resentment *(Teshome et al., 2014)*.

Furthermore, *idirs* sometimes extend their peace-making role to the broader community: for example, multiple *idirs* in a town might collectively petition local authorities to intervene in a brewing conflict or join forces to promote tolerance between ethnic groups living in their area *(Metekia, 2023)*. The strength of *idirs* lies in their near-universal presence and the depth of trust they engender, making them quiet but powerful grassroots peacekeepers.

Equb (Rotating savings associations): An *equb* is an economic cooperative where members contribute a set amount of money each period and take turns receiving the lump sum—essentially a rotating credit association *(Tarekegn, 2008)*. Though primarily financial in nature, *equbs* create tight-knit circles of interdependence. Members must trust each other to continue contributing even after they have taken their payout; default by one can collapse the whole scheme. This economic trust often spills into the social realm: *equb* members develop camaraderie and hold each other accountable not just in money matters but in behaviour *(Enyew, 2014)*.

If disagreements arise (e.g., someone delays payment or accuses another of unfairness), the group mediates to maintain unity—otherwise, everyone loses. The fear of losing one's financial network compels members to resolve conflicts amicably *(Teshome et al., 2014)*. Moreover, participation in a multi-ethnic *equb* can bridge social divides—for instance, in a market town, traders from different ethnicities may join the same *equb*, thereby forming inter-ethnic financial bonds. These ties encourage peaceful coexistence because business interests become shared *(Metekia, 2023)*.

Mahber (Religious and social gatherings): A *mahber* (or *senbete* in some contexts) is a traditional association often centred on religious observance combined with social enjoyment *(Alemneh et al., 2023)*. Commonly, a *mahber* is dedicated to a particular saint or angel—such as a Gabriel *mahber*, where members meet on the 19th of each month (St. Gabriel's Day in the Ethiopian calendar) to pray and then feast together.

These gatherings, much like *idirs*, serve as conflict-mitigating spaces. If tensions or misunderstandings exist between members, the convivial *mahber* setting provides an opportunity for informal reconciliation—often initiated subtly by others in the group who notice the strain. Many *mahbers* have an internal rule that members must forgive each other before partaking in the holy celebration, effectively compelling disputes to be settled or at least shelved *(Enyew, 2014)*.

Because *mahbers* frequently cut across ethnic or class lines (especially in towns, where membership might include people from different backgrounds who share a common faith or patron saint), they act as social integrators. For instance, in Addis Ababa, Orthodox Christian *mahbers* might include Amhara, Tigrayan, Gurage, and others together, all venerating St. Mary—this builds interpersonal networks that reduce prejudice and can be called upon to calm inter-group frictions *(Metekia, 2023)*.

By promoting unity through shared beliefs and festive fellowship, *mahbers* enhance social cohesion. Reconciliation through social and religious events is common—for example, if two villagers have been feuding, inviting both to the same Mahber Eyesus (Jesus *mahber*) gathering and publicly having them exchange the kiss of peace can effectively end the dispute in a face-saving way *(Tarekegn, 2008)*.

Community-based associations like *idirs, equbs,* and *mahbers* form an informal yet robust peace infrastructure at the local level. They knit communities together through practical cooperation and shared rituals, thereby preventing conflicts through strong social bonds and providing indigenous forums for dialogue and mutual support when tensions arise *(Metekia, 2023)*.

Cross-border and Inter-regional cultural traditions

Ethiopia's cultural peace mechanisms are not confined to administrative boundaries; many traditions actively bridge ethnic and regional divides, helping to mitigate conflicts that span communities. Several noteworthy cross-border or inter-regional cultural practices have emerged as tools of peace (Tarekegn, 2008).

Afar–Somali–Oromo pastoral peace pacts

In the semi-arid eastern and southern lowlands, pastoralist groups such as the Afar, the Issa-Somali, and the Oromo (e.g., the Borana clan) have a history of both competition and cooperation over resources (Legesse, 1973). To manage recurrent conflicts—often over grazing land or water points—these communities have developed inter-group peace traditions. One example is the periodic Afar-Issa dialogues mediated by elders from both sides, sometimes facilitated by neutral Oromo elders (Afar Regional Government, 2020). Such meetings can result in locally binding peace agreements—for instance, an accord might delineate grazing boundaries and specify compensation for any livestock raiding, agreed upon under oath by representatives of each clan (Teshome et al., 2014).

Similarly, the Borana Oromo and neighbouring Somali clans (like the Garre or Gabra in the south) hold Gumii Gaayo assemblies that include emissaries from both ethnic groups to resolve disputes and renew alliances (Debsu, 2013). A famous cross-border peace pact is the 2009 Maikona Declaration between Borana and Gabra (across the Ethiopia-Kenya border), which Ethiopian Borana elders contributed to, ending cycles of revenge killings by establishing joint policing of the border (Hassan, 2020). In the Afar Region, where the Afar share borders with the Oromia and Somali regions, elders have formed councils that include Afar Makabons, Oromo Abba Gadaas, and Somali Ugas (chiefs) to address conflicts at common frontiers (Metekia, 2023).

These indigenous inter-community forums leverage each group's internal conflict resolution mechanism and then extend it outward. For example, Somali, Borana, and Afar pastoralists each bring their customary leaders (Ogaz, Abba Gada, Keddo Abba, etc.) to meet together, creating a hybrid council that can arbitrate disputes cutting across ethnic lines (Tarekegn, 2008). Cultural rituals seal these peace agreements. They may jointly slaughter a bull and have representatives from each side hold the bull's tail together while swearing friendship, or exchange symbolic gifts (like a camel from Afar to Oromo, and a heifer from Oromo to Afar) to signify bond (Alemneh et al., 2023).

These acts are deeply respected by the communities and often succeed in stopping clashes where

state security interventions have failed (Enyew, 2014). They also institutionalise communication: a peace committee with members from all three groups might be established to monitor compliance and convene again if incidents occur. Such cross-border cultural initiatives are increasingly important amid climate stress and resource scarcity, as they prevent competition from turning violent through negotiated resource-sharing arrangements rooted in traditional reciprocity (Gababa, 2010).

The Ethiopian government and NGOs have recognised this, sometimes sponsoring Pastoralist Peace Conferences that build on the elders' work (Teshome et al., 2014). In these gatherings, leaders from Afar, Somali, Oromo (and even South Omo tribes) affirm pan-pastoralist solidarity: "whatever happens to one will concern us all...our brotherhood is based on being pastoralists and being Ethiopians," as one council chairman eloquently stated (Gababa, quoted in 2010). This ethos helps defuse ethnic animosities by emphasising shared livelihood and mutual dependence, a truly cultural approach to regional peace (Hassan, 2020).

Sidama–Wolayta intermarriage alliances

In the lush southern highlands, the Sidama and Wolayta peoples have a long history of interaction, including periods of conflict in the pre-modern era (Shibru, 2021). One remarkable cultural practice that emerged to reduce tensions between them (and other neighbouring groups) is the strategic use of intermarriage to create kinship bonds across ethnic lines (Metekia, 2023).

Marriages between Sidama and Wolayta families have been encouraged as a peace-making tool—a Sidama clan might arrange for a daughter to marry a Wolayta man from a clan they formerly feuded with, viewing the union as a bridge between the groups (Teshome et al., 2014). Such a woman, often called sihana or peace-wife in the local idiom, carries a significant role: she and her offspring become symbols of the kinship now linking two tribes (Shibru, 2021).

There is a saying among the Sidama that when a woman marries into an 'enemy' group and bears a son, "it is believed to fill the missed life that was lost in the clash," essentially replacing a life taken by conflict with a new life binding the two families (Alemneh et al., 2023). The newborn son is treated as a child of both groups, and both sides ritually "adopt" each other as in-laws, which in Sidama culture creates a strong social taboo against hostility (Enyew, 2014).

During the Sidama autonomy referendum process in 2019, such inter-community bonds helped keep the peace in mixed areas—many Wolayta residents in the Sidama Zone felt assured by their Sidama in-laws that they would be safe regardless of political outcomes (Metekia, 2023). This tradition illustrates how social integration through marriage can be a powerful informal peace mechanism (Gababa, 2010).

Tigray–Amhara religious pilgrimages and ties

The people of Tigray and Amhara, two large highland groups, share the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo faith and centuries of intertwined history in the Abyssinian kingdom (Baleker, 2023). Despite political rivalries in modern times, culturally they remain bonded through religion—and one of the clearest expressions of this is the tradition of pilgrimages to holy sites, which has long brought Tigrayans and Amharas together in peace (Metekia, 2023).

For example, the annual Hidar Tsion pilgrimage in Axum (Tigray) honouring St. Mary attracts tens of thousands of Orthodox believers from all over Ethiopia, notably the Amhara Region (ENA, 2024). Pilgrims travel side by side on buses or on foot, singing hymns in Ge'ez and Amharic, and sharing food and stories. Axum's residents customarily host pilgrims irrespective of ethnicity—a cultural practice of hospitality that reflects the city's spiritual significance (Baleker, 2023).

These shared sacred traditions have often served as informal diplomacy. Even at the height of the recent civil war, clergy and laity from the two regions leveraged church channels to maintain dialogue—such as Amhara priests visiting Tigray's monasteries or joint prayers for peace held in Addis Ababa (Hassan, 2020).

Importantly, many families are themselves mixed Tigrayan-Amhara through marriage, and they often cite their dual heritage during community dialogues: "our blood is both Tigrayan and Amhara—we cannot shed either" (Metekia, 2023).

During mediation efforts after the 2020–2022 war, elders invoked the image of St. Mary of Axum and the common Orthodox faith to appeal for reconciliation, reminding everyone that churches destroyed or monks killed were losses felt by all Ethiopians (Baleker, 2023).

3.4.4. Analysis: strengths, weaknesses, and trends of culture and peace

Strengths

The cultural elements outlined above collectively provide Ethiopia with a flexible, resilient peace infrastructure deeply rooted in society (Enyew, 2014). One key strength is legitimacy. Because these mechanisms are born of local tradition and led by familiar community figures (elders, religious leaders, etc.), they enjoy a high degree of trust (Metekia, 2023). This legitimacy means that outcomes of an elder mediation or a religious council appeal carry moral weight; parties are more likely to accept a settlement brokered by a shimglina elder than one imposed by an external authority (Alemneh et al., 2023).

Another strength is their restorative focus. Unlike formal judicial processes that may be punitive, customary approaches emphasize repairing relationships and communal harmony (Tarekegn, 2008). This not only resolves the immediate dispute but also reduces the chance of recurrence by addressing underlying grievances and reintegrating offenders. Such a restorative justice orientation has led analysts to note that "Ethiopia's indigenous mechanisms align closely with the principles of restorative justice," prioritising reconciliation and avoiding cycles of vengeance (Enyew, 2014).

Additionally, these cultural institutions are widely accessible and cost-effective. They do not require heavy bureaucracy; elders meet under a tree, and an idir meeting might happen in someone's courtyard—there are minimal barriers to entry (Teshome et al., 2014). This allows them to handle a vast volume of conflicts—an estimated three million disputes annually are resolved through traditional means nationwide (Metekia, 2023). In rural Ethiopia, where courts may be distant or costly, elders and idirs fill the gap effectively (Afar Regional Government, 2020). Their informality also allows flexibility and speed; they can adapt procedures to each case and rapidly convene when tensions are hot, whereas formal interventions often come slower (Debsu, 2013).

Importantly, many cultural mechanisms are integrative, not divisive. They tend to bring people into consensus rather than declare winners and losers (Hassan, 2020). This is vital in Ethiopia's multi-ethnic context, as it preserves social cohesion. For example, the Gadaa system's inclusive deliberations or a multi-clan jir mediated by neutral elders incorporate various perspectives and produce outcomes seen as fair by all sides (Metekia, 2023). Cultural practices also often involve symbolic acts (blood oath, sharing meals, etc.) that have a profound psychological impact, impressing upon participants the seriousness of peace commitments in ways a written court verdict might not (Baleker, 2023).

Finally, these mechanisms benefit from intergenerational knowledge transfer. They are time-tested, with each generation of elders learning from the past (Teshome et al., 2014). This continuity builds a rich repository of conflict resolution wisdom tailored to Ethiopian realities (land use customs, clan relations, etc.), something formal approaches sometimes lack (Enyew, 2014).

Weaknesses

Despite their merits, traditional peace mechanisms in Ethiopia face several limitations and challenges in the modern era (Eneyew & Ayalew, 2023). One major weakness is a lack of formal authority or recognition, which can limit their scope (Metekia, 2023). The Ethiopian state, especially under past regimes, often sidelined customary systems as "backward" or inconsistent with statutory law (Alemneh et al., 2023). While the current legal framework (e.g., the 1995 Constitution) allows customary and religious dispute resolution in personal and family matters, it does not clearly empower them in criminal or large-scale conflict issues (Metekia, 2023).

As a result, elder councils might resolve a murder through compensation, but the state could still prosecute the killer, leading to parallel processes (Tarekegn, 2008). This gap sometimes undermines traditional settlements or creates confusion over enforcement (Debsu, 2013). Some regions have begun to formally integrate elders (e.g., Amhara's land proclamation requiring disputes to go through elders first, or Oromia's courts recognising Gadaa rulings), but these are exceptions rather than the rule (Afar Regional Government, 2020).

Another weakness is capacity and scale. While excellent for local conflicts, customary mechanisms may struggle with conflicts that are widespread or highly violent (Baleker, 2023). Elders are effective when community norms still hold sway, but in scenarios like armed insurgencies or genocidal violence, their influence can be diminished (Metekia, 2023). The Tigray War tragically illustrated this: centuries-old ties and church mediation attempts were unable to prevent a brutal conflict once political/military agendas took over (Hassan, 2020).

Traditional mechanisms can also be conservative and exclusionary (Eneyew & Ayalew, 2023). Many are male-dominated and gerontocratic; women and youth often have no formal voice (Teshome et al., 2014). This can both perpetuate injustices (e.g., women's grievances like domestic violence might be downplayed by male elders) and erode relevance among younger generations (Metekia, 2023). As society changes—with youths more educated, urbanised, and influenced by global ideas—some view elder forums as relics that don't represent them (Baleker, 2023). Indeed, studies find that the "erosion of the culture of elders' respect" by the young is a growing challenge (Eneyew & Ayalew, 2023).

There's also vulnerability to political manipulation. In recent times, governments and armed groups alike have tried to co-opt elders or religious figures for their agendas (Metekia, 2023). Some elders have been installed to represent specific interests, causing communities (especially opposition-aligned youth) to lose trust in them (Hassan, 2020).

Finally, Ethiopia's ethnic federalism has inadvertently compartmentalised customary systems along ethnic lines, potentially reducing cross-cultural influence (Alemneh et al., 2023). While each ethnic community strengthens its own traditions, there is a risk that an Amhara elder's moral authority may not extend to, say, Oromia, if people retreat into strictly ethnic communalism (Metekia, 2023).

Trends and adaptability

The role of cultural peace mechanisms in Ethiopia is in flux amid rapid socio-political changes *(Baleker, 2023)*. On one hand, there is a renaissance of interest and integration of these mechanisms into formal peacebuilding *(Metekia, 2023)*. The federal government's current *Transitional Justice* policy discussions explicitly acknowledge the potential of traditional methods *(Eneyew & Ayalew, 2023)*. Oromia's experiment with officially registering *Abba Gadaa* councils as customary courts is a pioneering model that might expand to other regions *(Metekia, 2023)*.

The establishment of the *National Dialogue Commission* also signals that any nationwide reconciliation will lean on cultural approaches—commissioners have consulted elders, religious leaders, and customary institutions for input on dialogue processes *(Afar Regional Government, 2020)*.

On the other hand, pressures from political crises and social transformation test the resilience of cultural peace mechanisms *(Teshome et al., 2014)*. The ethnic conflicts that erupted in various regions (Oromia, Benishangul-Gumuz, Amhara) during the transitional turmoil of 2018–2021 at times overwhelmed local elders *(Metekia, 2023)*.

Another trend is inter-regional cultural exchange *(Baleker, 2023)*. Different ethnic communities are learning peace practices from each other. For example, there have been workshops where Oromo elders share the *Gadaa* system's conflict resolution aspects with Afar and Somali elders, fostering a kind of cross-pollination of best practices *(Metekia, 2023)*.

3.5. Preliminary conclusions

3.5.1. National and formal peace infrastructure

Ethiopia's national and formal peace infrastructure between 2018 and 2024 underwent remarkable expansion and transformation. The country established new institutions like the Ministry of Peace and the National Dialogue Commission to promote dialogue and conflict resolution at national and grassroots levels. It also revitalized existing ones – the House of Federation took steps to map conflicts and mediate disputes, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission gained autonomy to demand accountability, and the National Electoral Board delivered a competitive election under reformed rules. Simultaneously, policy initiatives such as transitional justice and DDR are expected to address the legacies and fallout of conflicts, aiming to heal wounds and disarm combatants. Importantly, these formal mechanisms were complemented by informal practices where government officials and traditional leaders worked hand-in-hand to defuse tensions in communities. The multi-layered approach – from high-level dialogues and legal reforms down to local elders' peace committees – reflects an understanding that peacebuilding in Ethiopia must be inclusive and context-specific.

This examination finds that each element of the peace infrastructure brought distinct strengths: inclusivity, legitimacy, cultural resonance, or technical capacity. Reforms opened political space and encouraged opponents to choose ballots over bullets, while commissions and ministries created forums to address

grievances and prevent disputes from turning violent. However, the analysis also highlights critical weaknesses. Many initiatives struggled with implementation and acceptance. The Ministry of Peace and other bodies could not prevent serious conflicts from erupting, underscoring gaps between mandate and impact. The National Dialogue faces the challenge of winning over sceptics and translating talk into consensus. Transitional justice efforts risk being rushed or superficial if not grounded in victims' needs. DDR, while crucial, must ensure a genuine process of disarmament and overcome logistical and economic hurdles to truly reintegrate ex-fighters. Across the board, issues of policy inconsistency, lack of mandate clarity, coordination, and political will, coupled with resource constraints and deep mistrust have limited the effectiveness of the peace infrastructure.

A key takeaway is that peace infrastructure is not merely about institutions, but about the political and social context in which they operate. Ethiopia's experience shows that creating a ministry or commission is the beginning – their success depends on clarity of purpose/vision, genuine inclusivity, availability of resources, follow-through, and the absence of contradictory actions (for instance, political liberalization must be accompanied by local reconciliation efforts to manage newly expressed tensions). Another takeaway is the value of blending formal and informal methods: neither alone suffices for a country as diverse and complex as Ethiopia. Government support for traditional conflict resolution has yielded quick wins in some conflicts, while formal mechanisms are essential for addressing structural issues and ensuring solutions endure within a legal framework.

In conclusion, Ethiopia's 2018–2024 journey in building peace infrastructure illustrates both bold progress and the sobering reality of entrenched challenges. The foundations for more sustainable peace have been laid – laws reformed, institutions created, and dialogues initiated. To capitalize on these, Ethiopia will need to strengthen the identified weak points: ensuring all stakeholders buy into the processes, empowering institutions to act on recommendations, and maintaining the delicate balance between justice and reconciliation, ensuring that the DDR process is followed through and implemented properly, and making sure that decent voices are heard and amicably responded to. The period in review offers a road map of what works and what pitfalls to avoid. Ultimately, the continued evolution and synergy of these peace institutions and initiatives, supported by strong political commitment, will determine how effectively Ethiopia can navigate its internal conflicts and build lasting peace.

3.5.2. Subnational and formal/informal peace infrastructure

Ethiopia's subnational peace infrastructure is multifaceted and deeply rooted in the country's socio-political fabric. Since 2018, the interplay between formal institutions and informal mechanisms has become increasingly significant in managing conflicts and fostering reconciliation.

Formal bodies, including regional peace and security bureaus, local courts, local councils, and regional branches of national institutions, provide structure, authority, and channels for scaling local peace efforts into policy action. They have the advantage of legal mandate and resources, as seen in bureaus coordinating early warning systems and courts upholding the rule of law, but they also grapple with limitations like political interference and limited grassroots reach.

Informal and community mechanisms, from elders' councils (Shimglina, Gadaa, Xeer, etc.) to the emergent women's and youth peace groups, bring social legitimacy, inclusivity, and innovative approaches that formal systems alone cannot achieve. These have proven crucial for mediation and healing in communal conflicts, drawing on cultural values and moral influence. However, they too face challenges in consistency, inclusivity, and alignment with modern legal standards.

The period 2018–2024 highlighted that neither formal nor informal approaches alone are sufficient; sustainable peace arises from the **synergy between the two**, leveraging the state's capacity and the community's trust. Notably, initiatives like the National Dialogue Commission and the National Rehabilitation Commission signalled a move to institutionalise dialogue and reintegration nationwide, but their success hinges on effectively engaging local actors – elders, religious leaders, women, youth and the communities affected – in every region. Key takeaways include the need to strengthen local institutions' conflict resolution skills, ensure customary practices uphold fundamental rights (especially for women and minorities), and maintain an enabling environment for civil society contributions. Ethiopia's experience shows that peace is best built in layers: grassroots reconciliation feeding into administrative and legal resolution, all supported by national frameworks for dialogue and justice. Going forward, investing in these peace infrastructures, through capacity building, legal empowerment, and inclusive participation, will be vital for Ethiopia to navigate its ethnic and political diversities harmoniously. The

challenge remains complex, but the rich tapestry of mechanisms at hand provides a solid foundation upon which to continue building a durable peace architecture.

3.5.3. Culture and peace

Ethiopia's rich cultural heritage is not only a source of identity and pride but also a fundamental pillar for sustainable peace. Our analysis has shown that from the national level down to local communities, Ethiopian culture provides a dense network of peace-supporting infrastructure – whether through the ethos of communal solidarity, the time-honoured institution of elder mediation, the interfaith harmony fostered by religious leaders, the consensus-driven practices of idirs and mahbers, or the unifying narratives of national symbols like Adwa, Aksum ancient civilization, and now GERD.

These elements collectively fill gaps left by formal structures, embedding peacebuilding in everyday social life. They have clear strengths in reconciling feuds, integrating divided communities, and promoting restorative justice in ways that state mechanisms alone often cannot achieve. At the same time, they are not without challenges – needing continual adaptation to modern norms and insulation from abuse or marginalisation.

Ethiopia's recent trials –ethnic clashes resulting from the seeds of ethnic fundamentalism that were planted since the 1990s and fuelled by hate speech, political transitions, and even civil war – have indeed strained the efficacy of cultural mechanisms, yet they have not dislodged or broken them. Instead, we have seen elders and religious figures mediating where possible, customary laws being invoked to halt revenge, and ordinary people leaning on traditions of tolerance to rebuild trust after violence. The resilience of these cultural peace assets suggests that, if properly harnessed, they can significantly complement formal peace efforts and even guide them.

Going forward, strengthening Ethiopia's peace requires a deliberate strategy of **cultural integration**: bridging traditional and modern systems. This means recognising the critical role of local and traditional dispute resolution mechanisms while at the same time respecting their independence and integrity, giving elders and local peace committees an official role in conflict early-warning and resolution, investing in the transmission of peace culture values to the youth, and ensuring national dialogues are framed in culturally resonant terms so that they resonate with the populace's lived experiences.

It also means addressing the weaknesses – for instance, empowering women and youth within these traditions so that the whole community is represented. If Ethiopia can update and uphold its diverse cultural peace mechanisms, it will leverage a formidable asset for unity amid diversity. In essence, Ethiopia's past, present, and future meet on this path: the same heritage that sustained communal harmony for generations can continue to serve as the bedrock for national reconciliation and social cohesion.

4. Analysis: Strengthening the Peace Infrastructure

4.1. An integrated peace infrastructure

Ethiopia's peace infrastructure is extensive, multi-layered, and deeply embedded in both state and society, but as a system, it remains fragmented, fragile, and unevenly coordinated. The system comprises an impressive mosaic of institutions, mechanisms, and cultural practices, but lacks the coherence, interoperability, and trust necessary to consistently prevent and transform violent conflict. Its strengths lie in diversity, adaptability, and societal embeddedness; its vulnerabilities stem from politicisation, capacity asymmetries, and a chronic legitimacy gap between formal authority and local trust.

Key observations include:

▶ **A Rich but disconnected architecture** Ethiopia possesses a remarkably diverse array of peacebuilding institutions and mechanisms operating at multiple levels of governance. These range from national entities such as the Ministry of Peace, the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission, and the Transitional Justice Initiative, to sub-national structures including regional peace and security bureaus, woreda peace committees, and kebele councils. Alongside these formal mechanisms are deeply rooted traditional systems such as Shimglina in the north, Gadaa in Oromia, and Xeer in the Somali Region, to mention but a few, all of which provide culturally embedded approaches to mediation and conflict resolution.

This wealth of infrastructure, however, does not amount to a coherent system. These institutions and mechanisms often function with minimal coordination, inconsistent mandates, and limited communication. Federal, regional, and local bodies frequently lack the platforms, protocols, or political incentives to collaborate effectively. Similarly, formal and informal mechanisms operate in parallel rather than as interconnected parts of a broader peace architecture. While each component plays a vital role within its domain, the absence of integration undermines the collective capacity to anticipate, prevent, and respond to conflict. The result is a rich but disconnected architecture, while each element is individually valuable, it lacks systemic cohesion and institutional synergy.

▶ **Formal infrastructure: expanding, but politically contested** Since 2018, Ethiopia's formal peace infrastructure has expanded significantly, reflecting growing recognition of peacebuilding as a national priority. Institutions such as the Ministry of Peace, the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, and the Transitional Justice Initiative have been established or reformed to address deep-rooted political and social divisions. These bodies signal an important policy shift, elevating peace from an ad hoc concern to a strategic objective embedded within state structures.

However, this formal infrastructure remains politically contested and institutionally fragile. Many of these bodies face overlapping mandates, unclear jurisdictional boundaries, and limited enforcement authority. Coordination across ministries, agencies, and regional governments is uneven, and often hampered by competition rather than collaboration. Despite legal independence, some institutions, particularly those linked to justice and security, struggle with an increasingly polarised environment. Public trust varies widely, which affects the effectiveness of federal initiatives.

Furthermore, implementation frequently lags behind institutional ambition. While policy frameworks exist on paper, operational capacity and follow-through are constrained by limited resources, politicised appointments, and fragile state legitimacy. While the architecture of formal peace institutions is expanding, their systemic effectiveness is hindered by persistent governance and trust deficits.

▶ **Informal and hybrid mechanisms: deep roots, but limited recognition** Ethiopia's informal and hybrid peace mechanisms are among its most enduring and trusted conflict resolution tools. Rooted in centuries-old customs, systems such as Shimglina, Gadaa, Xeer, and Makabantu play a vital role in mediating disputes, preventing violence, and promoting reconciliation at the community level. These mechanisms are highly accessible, culturally resonant, and often seen as more legitimate than formal institutions, particularly in rural and pastoralist areas. Religious leaders, women's groups, and youth associations have also emerged as key hybrid actors, facilitating dialogue and bridging social divides where formal authority is absent or contested.

Despite their reach and social legitimacy, these mechanisms receive limited formal recognition and support. Government engagement with traditional authorities tends to be ad hoc or crisis-driven, rather than institutionalised through policy or resourcing. Hybrid actors, such as local peace committees, often operate without mandates, funding, or sustained partnerships with state institutions. This marginalisation constrains their ability to scale, replicate, or influence broader peace processes.

As a result, informal and hybrid mechanisms remain vital but underutilised components of Ethiopia's peace infrastructure. Their potential to complement formal efforts and enhance system-wide legitimacy is substantial. However, without structural recognition and strategic integration, their contribution remains largely confined.

▶ **Bridges are weak: the missing middle** Between Ethiopia's formal institutions and grassroots mechanisms lies a fragile and underdeveloped connective layer of the peace infrastructure. This middle ground is occupied by hybrid actors such as local peace committees, religious councils, women's and youth groups, and the regional offices of national institutions. These actors are potentially well-placed to translate national policy into local relevance and to channel community concerns upward into formal processes. In theory, they serve as vital bridges, which link top-down strategies with bottom-up legitimacy.

But in practice these bridges are weak. Hybrid actors often operate in institutional limbo, without clear mandates, stable funding, or defined coordination roles. Relationships between formal authorities and local civil society are frequently shaped by personalities or political alignment rather than policy frameworks. This results in inconsistency with some peace actors left without support during crises.

Moreover, mistrust between state and non-state actors, which is sometimes rooted in historical marginalisation, politicisation, or fear of co-option, sometimes limits genuine collaboration. The absence of a coherent structure to support, coordinate, and legitimise hybrid actors means that their system-wide contribution remains constrained. Without investment in this connective tissue, Ethiopia's peace infrastructure may not be able to function as an integrated or resilient whole.

▶ **Trust and legitimacy are uneven and politicised** Trust and legitimacy are the foundation of any functioning peace infrastructure, but are often unevenly distributed and deeply politicised. While some institutions, such as the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission or certain customary courts, enjoy relative credibility, others are perceived as partisan, exclusionary, or lacking accountability and independence. This variation reflects broader tensions in Ethiopia's political settlement, where state institutions are often seen as instruments of competing elite agendas rather than impartial custodians of peace.

4.2. System-level enablers and risks

Ethiopia's peace infrastructure exists within a dynamic and contested political system that both enables and constrains its functionality. A number of macro-level patterns shape how peace mechanisms operate as a system, not only within individual institutions or communities, but across governance levels, sectors, and identities. These patterns can serve as enablers of the peace infrastructure when aligned, but they also generate structural risks when left unaddressed. Understanding these dynamics is essential for building a peace infrastructure that is not only comprehensive but also cohesive and sustainable.

4.2.1. System-level enablers

Cultural embeddedness of peace practices Ethiopia possesses a rich repertoire of indigenous and religious mechanisms for peace that are embedded in daily life and widely accepted by communities. These traditions, from *Shimglina* to *Gadaa*, foster local ownership, social cohesion, and preventive conflict resolution—offering a deeply rooted normative foundation for peace infrastructure.

Growing institutional pluralism Since 2018, there has been a notable expansion of institutions engaged in peacebuilding, human rights, and democratic reform. Bodies like the EHRC, NEBE, and ENDC represent a shift toward a more pluralistic institutional environment, allowing for broader participation and the emergence of semi-autonomous actors with the potential to mediate between state and society.

International engagement and support Ethiopia's peace infrastructure has benefited from consistent international support, including technical assistance, funding, and legitimacy, from partners such as UNDP, the European Union, and bilateral donors. This support has enabled pilot programmes, capacity-building efforts, and large-scale initiatives like DDR and national dialogue.

Crisis-driven innovation In the face of conflict, Ethiopia has demonstrated strong resilience and a capacity for institutional innovation, such as the creation of transitional justice initiatives or local peace committees, in response to urgent needs. Though reactive, these innovations provide important entry points for more permanent and proactive peace architecture.

Conflict fatigue Widespread conflict fatigue among Ethiopia's population sets the stage for societal appetite for stability, dialogue, and non-violent solutions. This fatigue acts as a system-level enabler by increasing public receptiveness to peace initiatives, strengthening the legitimacy of peace actors, and fostering grassroots engagement. As communities seek alternatives to protracted violence, the peace infrastructure is more likely to gain traction, mobilise support, and facilitate inclusive, locally driven conflict resolution processes.

4.2.2. System-level risks

Mismatch between political decentralisation and administrative capacity While regional states enjoy broad constitutional autonomy, their institutional capacities, especially at woreda and kebele levels, are often weak. This mismatch means that decentralised peace responsibilities are not matched with adequate technical, financial, or human resources – and are sometimes hampered by lacking political will and accountability mechanisms. The result can be the uneven implementation of peace initiatives.

Erosion of legitimacy across state and customary institutions Both state and traditional peace actors face legitimacy challenges. For formal institutions, politicisation, regional bias, and allegations of impunity have weakened public confidence. Simultaneously, some customary and religious mechanisms have become entangled in political rivalries or have lost their legitimacy due to external manipulation and influence or have failed to adapt to inclusive norms, particularly around gender and youth representation.

Over-reliance on short-term, project-based interventions Much of the support provided to Ethiopia's peace infrastructure remains dependent on external funding tied to short-term project cycles. This undermines sustainability and limits the institutional memory and continuity necessary for systemic peacebuilding. Without predictable investment in long-term infrastructure, including local peacebuilding ecosystems, the system remains vulnerable.

4.3. Strategic pathways to strengthen the peace infrastructure

Building a sustainable and effective peace infrastructure in Ethiopia requires more than institutional proliferation: it demands a shift toward coherence, synergy, inclusivity, and resilience. This means aligning formal and informal systems, anchoring institutions in community trust, insulating them from elite manipulation, and ensuring they are equipped to adapt to future shocks. Five interlinked strategic pathways are identified here that can help transform Ethiopia's fragmented peace landscape into a functional, durable, and integrated infrastructure for peace.

Pathway 1: Deepening hybridity – linking formal and informal mechanisms: A defining feature of Ethiopia's peace landscape is the coexistence of formal institutions and informal, community-based mechanisms. However, these operate largely in parallel. Strengthening the peace infrastructure requires institutionalising

hybridity, not simply acknowledging traditional practices, but actively integrating them into peace processes.

▶ Formal institutions should establish protocols for working with elders, religious leaders, and local peace committees, especially in early warning, mediation, and post-conflict reconciliation;

▶ Hybrid models, such as peace committees embedded in local administrations that include customary and formal actors, should be scaled and resourced; and

▶ Legal frameworks can clarify the role of traditional mechanisms, ensuring they are respected and supported without compromising rights-based principles.

This integration would enhance legitimacy, broaden outreach, and provide culturally appropriate responses to conflict.

Pathway 2: Reinforcing legitimacy and local ownership: Peace institutions, no matter how well-designed, will struggle to function if they lack public trust. Strengthening legitimacy requires both procedural integrity (how institutions operate) and relational legitimacy (how they are perceived):

▶ Institutions must ensure inclusive participation, particularly of women, youth, and marginalised groups, not only as beneficiaries but as co-designers of peace initiatives;

▶ Dialogue processes, DDR programmes, and transitional justice efforts should be rooted in community priorities, with accessible grievance mechanisms and transparency in decision-making; and

Local governments and communities should be given a meaningful stake in programme design, implementation, and monitoring, reinforcing the principle of subsidiarity.

Pathway 3: Protecting institutions from elite capture: state capture of social, political and institutional life is a serious concern in Ethiopia. One of the greatest threats to peace infrastructure is its instrumentalization by specific (often elite) actors or by the state itself. When peace institutions become proxies in elite competition, they lose neutrality and risk fuelling, rather than mitigating, conflict:

▶ Safeguards are needed to protect the independence of key institutions, including transparent appointment processes, non-partisan oversight, and accountability mechanisms; and

▶ The national peace infrastructure should also include cross-party and inter-regional forums that insulate dialogue and mediation from day-to-day elite struggles.

Pathway 4: Investing in resilience and adaptability: Peace infrastructures must be able to endure uncertainty, withstand shocks, and evolve over time. Ethiopia's volatile conflict landscape, demographic shifts, and ecological pressures require institutions that are not only present but responsive and adaptive:

▶ Long-term capacity building is essential, from conflict resolution training for local officials to improved use of technology across different forums;

▶ Flexible funding mechanisms, including pooled donor funds and locally managed peace budgets, would allow actors to pivot quickly in response to emerging risks; and

▶ Monitoring and learning systems must be built in, not only to track outcomes but to adapt programmes in real time based on feedback and changing conditions.

Investing in adaptability means treating peace not as a fixed outcome, but as a continuous, evolving process of relationship-building and problem-solving. This can be done by factoring in peace and (violent) conflict prevention in other development and sustainable livelihood programmes. Such development should deliberately be projected as dividends of peace.

Pathway 5: Addressing the peace–economy–climate nexus: Conflict in Ethiopia is often driven by underlying grievances over land, water and grazing, livelihoods, marginalisation, and economic inequality. A resilient peace infrastructure must be able to speak to and address some of the structural linkages between peace, climate change and economic opportunity:

▶ Peacebuilding must be integrated with inclusive development strategies, which ensure that job creation, public services, and infrastructure investment reduce rather than exacerbate conflict risk;

▶ Economic reintegration of ex-combatants and displaced populations must be prioritised, particularly in regions affected by protracted violence in a way that benefits also the hosting communities; and

▶ Adaptation and mitigation strategies have to be scaled up, particularly in climate-change prone areas.

5. Recommendations

5.1. UNDP

1. Work with the government to develop a national peace infrastructure strategy: UNDP should support the Government of Ethiopia in developing a comprehensive national strategy for peace infrastructure, with clear objectives, institutional roles, coordination mechanisms, and financing frameworks. The strategy should:

▶ Include a national peace policy;

▶ Establishment of a National Peace Council;

▶ Map and link existing peace infrastructure institutions and initiatives across federal, regional, and local levels;

▶ Strengthening/consolidating an Early Warning and Response Mechanism across all conflict-prone areas and government levels;

▶ Define how formal and informal mechanisms can be integrated within a coherent system; and

▶ Establish coordination and oversight bodies to monitor implementation and facilitate intergovernmental collaboration.

▶ Provide capacity support to the various government peacebuilding entities and civil society actors.

This strategy would provide a unifying framework to guide investments, harmonise efforts, and build system-wide resilience.

2. Develop a programme to support hybrid peace mechanisms and the "missing middle": UNDP, as part of its governance and peace programme, should design and implement a dedicated peace infrastructure support programme focused on:

▶ Strengthening hybrid peace actors, such as local peace committees, religious councils, women's networks, and customary leaders;

▶ Building capacity, legitimacy, and linkages between formal and informal institutions; and

▶ Supporting the "missing middle" by enhancing coordination platforms and operational linkages at the woreda and regional levels.

▶ Initiate annual peace awards to successful community, regional and national peace initiatives, processes, organizations and individuals (rewarding peace is a strong incentive and motivator).

This programme should prioritise inclusion, flexible funding, and local ownership to ensure context-sensitive and sustainable outcomes.

3. Promote conflict-sensitive development that factors in peace infrastructure assessments UNDP should ensure that its development interventions in Ethiopia are designed and implemented through a conflict-sensitive lens, which includes:

▶ Conducting peace infrastructure assessments as part of situational analysis and programme design;

▶ Identifying how investments in livelihoods, service delivery, or governance could strengthen or undermine local peace capacities; and

▶ Promoting integrated programming that links development outcomes to conflict prevention and social cohesion.

By embedding peace infrastructure considerations into broader development work, UNDP can help reduce structural drivers of conflict and reinforce local resilience.

5.2. Government of Ethiopia

1. Prepare a national peace infrastructure strategy with inclusive stakeholder engagement: The Government of Ethiopia should lead the development of a National Peace Infrastructure Strategy that provides a unifying framework for action across all levels of governance. This strategy should:

▶ Engage a wide spectrum of stakeholders, including federal and regional institutions, local governments, customary and religious leaders, civil society, women's and youth networks;

▶ Define clear roles, mandates, and coordination mechanisms for peace actors operating at national, regional, woreda, and kebele levels; and

▶ Set out a roadmap for institutional development, capacity building, legal reform, and resource mobilisation to ensure functionality and sustainability.

▶ Capacitate security apparatus (at all levels) on the need to balance the securitized peace approach with "soft" peace approaches through appropriate training and collaboration with relevant structures.

This inclusive strategy would transform Ethiopia's fragmented peace architecture into a cohesive and coordinated system.

2. Clarify and empower hybrid actors, and protect peace institutions from politicisation: The government should take concrete steps to strengthen the role and integrity of hybrid peace actors by:

▶ Developing legal and policy frameworks that formally recognise the role of community-based and traditional actors in peace;

▶ Providing mandates, training, and resourcing to local peace committees and hybrid institutions operating at the community level;

▶ Safeguarding peace institutions and initiatives from elite capture by ensuring transparent appointment processes, inclusive oversight mechanisms, and non-partisan accountability structures; and

▶ Safeguarding also traditional systems from elite manipulation or any interference in their internal affairs.

3. Embed the peace infrastructure concept into national development planning: Peace should not be treated as a separate policy domain but integrated into Ethiopia's broader development agenda. The government should:

▶ Ensure that reform initiatives, national development plans, sectoral strategies, and regional programmes incorporate peace infrastructure as a cross-cutting theme;

▶ Align peacebuilding efforts with economic inclusion, service delivery, land governance, and youth employment, recognising the interdependence of peace and development; and

▶ Promote institutional arrangements that support whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches to sustaining peace.

▶ Deliberately operationalize the mantra, as laid down by the former UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, that "there can be no peace without development, no development without peace, and none of these without the respect for human rights".

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