RESTORING THE BROKEN BRIDGE

RECONCILING MULTI-ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CONFLICT IN SHASHEMENE, ETHIOPIA

NORWEGIAN CHURCH AID
actalliance

Inter-Religious Council Of Ethiopia

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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PREFACE

Ethiopia is a multicultural, multilingual, and multi-religious nation. The country has diverse religious and cultural values that are the basis for peaceful co-existence, cooperation, and unity. As faith leaders, we believe that sometimes unprecedented evil things can occur in the lives of individuals, families, and communities.

In July 2020, we all heard about the assassination of Artist Hachalu Hundessa, a known Oromo musician. In the aftermath of the killing of the musician, violent protests erupted in some parts of Oromia and caused the death of hundreds of people and the destruction of properties.

One of the worst-hit areas was Shashemene town and the surrounding areas. It is noted that the town is a multi-ethnic community where people of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds co-existed for years.

A few days after the incident, the Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia (IRCE) board members and staff toured Shashemene town and the surrounding areas to examine the impacts of the violent conflict. As faith leaders, the team comforted those who were mostly affected by the incident.

In addition to offering comfort to the victims, the team from IRCE discussed with local government authorities how to rebuild the mutual support, solidarity, and trust that had been shattered by the conflict.

Accordingly, the Town Administration Office requested IRCE's support to undertake peace conferences in the town and surrounding areas. IRCE welcomed the request and supported the holding of peace conferences in all areas. The completion of the peace conferences was held on December 8, 2020.

The conflict that resulted in the devastation of the town taught us a great lesson about the importance of peace. People usually realize the value of peace when peace is lost. Violence destroys precious human life, destroys the wealth and resources we have earned over the years, makes it difficult for us to meet our basic needs, violates human rights, and causes many other problems.

Differences of opinion may arise among people because we are all human. Conflict naturally occurs among people. While we do our part to prevent conflict, it is important to deal with conflict in a non-violent way when it occurs. Individuals and groups in our community must be prepared and equipped with the necessary skills to resolve conflicts in a non-violent way.

In the teachings of religion, peace is of great value. Therefore, everyone has a role to play in sustaining peace. Religious institutions need to teach their followers about peace to maintain lasting peace. People should be encouraged to resolve their differences through dialogue. Religious institutions also need to work together with other stakeholders in the community to build peace.

IRCE has supported the forgiveness and reconciliation conferences conducted per the Oromo traditional peacebuilding system to rebuild the social ties and trust that have been shattered by the conflict in and around the West Arsi zone. It is very important to promote good cultural values in the community and to use them for rebuilding social trust among diverse communities. Because people respect their culture, they are more likely to respect the decisions they have made through their cultural traditions.

IRCE expresses its heartfelt gratitude to the Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) for providing financial support to undertake forgiveness and reconciliation conferences in the communities in Shashemene town and the surrounding areas. Without their financial support, it would have been difficult to hold peace conferences in different communities and the final reconciliation conference. On behalf of myself and the IRCE, I would also like to thank all those who have contributed to the success of the Forgiveness and Reconciliation Conference in various ways.

God bless Ethiopia and her people.

Reverend Tagay Tadele
IRCE General Secretary

1. INTRODUCTION

IRCE has been implementing the peacebuilding project in Shashemene and the surrounding areas to restore the broken relationship among diverse ethnic and religious groups in the aftermath of the July 2020 conflict. The major project activities include undertaking community-based peace dialogues, consultation meetings among key actors, and conducting forgiveness and reconciliation conferences.

The project was implemented in collaboration with government offices particularly the Shashemene town administration and security offices as well as the Oromo traditional leaders (Abbaa Gadaas). The project was funded by Norwegian Church Aid (NCA).

As part of its project practice, IRCE wanted to document the processes steps, and methods employed to restore peace in the target areas. The general objective of the documentation was to document and produce a proceeding on the reconciliation process. This includes capturing the entire process (key events) in the aftermath of the July conflict in Shashemene area to the peace and reconciliation conference, documenting the reconciliation process including methodologies involved, key deliberations, stories from participants, and capturing key issues for future consideration.

To develop this report, the documenter reviewed relevant literature to understand the background of the conflict, interviewed project staff who were involved in the implementation of the project as well as participants of the reconciliation conference, observed the events of the reconciliation conference, and held informal discussions with the local people.

The draft report was developed and submitted to IRCE for review and feedback. Then, comments were incorporated, and this final product was generated.

The report mainly includes background information about the country and regional context, a description of the conflict, the reconciliation process, and lessons learned from the implementation of the project.

December 2020

2. BACKGROUND

2.1. COUNTRY CONTEXT

Geographic Location

Ethiopia is located in the Horn of Africa with coordinates 3 and 150 N latitude and 33 and 480 E longitude. The country has a total land mass of 1,104,300 square kilometers.

Ethiopia is a landlocked country, bordering Eritrea, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Djibouti. Ethiopia uses neighboring Djibouti's port for International trade since Eritrea separated by referendum. Ethiopia has geo-political importance as its' capital city, Addis Ababa is a diplomatic hub for the African Union and its member states.

Population

According to World Bank estimates for 2019, Ethiopia was the second most populous country in Sub-Saharan Africa with a total population of 112 million[1] and a population growth rate of 2.56% in 2020.[2] Half of the total population is female which accounts for 49.9%. More than 87% of the total population lives in rural areas.

Government structure

Ethiopia has implemented a federal system of government since 1991. The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) has eleven regional states and two City Administrations. These are Tigray, Afar, Amhara, Oromia, Southern Nations-Nationalities and Peoples, Somali, Gambella, Benishangul Gumuz, Harari regional states, Sidama, The South-West Ethiopia Peoples' Region, and two city administrations – Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa.

Regional administrations are divided further into three administrative hierarchies called zones, Woredas (districts), and kebele administrations. At the zone and Woreda level, there are administrative offices for sectors such as finance and economics, agriculture, health, education, security, peace, etc.

[1] (World Bank, 2019)
[2] (CIA, 2020)

Conflict Analysis

Conflict in Ethiopia can be observed from various perspectives. There are conflicts related to the geopolitical location of Ethiopia. Ethiopia is located in a volatile and insecure region. The volatile nature of the region is attributed to diverse factors including, but not limited to, competing for cross-border claims on territory, resources, legitimacy, the quest for greater autonomy by some ethnic groups, the seasonal migration of the nomadic populations, the illicit movement of people and goods across porous borders.

Ethiopia is playing a significant role in resolving conflicts and promoting peace in the Horn of Africa countries. Ethiopia took initiative to make peace with Eritrea and was able to end hostility that lasted for about two decades. Ethiopia has active involvement in the Nile Basin Initi ative dialogue and mediating efforts in the South Sudan power struggle. Ethiopia is also part of the AMISOM to support the Somali national army and separately provides training to the Somali militia along its border.

Internally, the country has experienced diverse kinds of conflicts. Some of the major conflicts that occurred in the past decade were stated and briefly analyzed in the following pages.

Political Conflicts

The relationship between the Government and the public worsened after the disputed national election in 2005. The government used force in response to peaceful public protests rather than employing softer conflict resolution mechanisms such as dialogue and negotiations. The government attempted to silence dissent voices by formulating anti-terrorist laws that outlawed some political parties, imprisoned their followers, and conducted human rights abuses against individuals, groups, and parties opposing its unlawful approaches and practices.

Furthermore, Charities and Societies legislation and media laws were restrictive and closed civic space in the country.

The Addis Ababa-Oromia Integrated Masterplan which was announced publicly in 2014 provoked anti-government protests in Oromia Regional State.[3] The protests were mainly organized by the youth, 'the Qeerroo. The Qeerroo popular resistance movement was supported by Oromo human rights activists residing abroad and continued despite a series of efforts by the government to crack down on the movement. Later on, the government dropped the implementation of the Masterplan, but the movement continued. When the government increased its force to suppress the movement, the youth from other regions particularly from Amhara joined the movement.

The instability that happened in some areas of Oromia and Amhara regional states led the government to declare a state of emergency in October 2016 and stayed for ten months until it was lifted in August 2017. The situation had an impact on the overall development including a lack of security on the movement of people, particularly in some volatile project areas.

The continuation of the anti-government protests led to the resignation of Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn in February 2018 and the coming to power of Dr. Abiy Ahmed as a reformer in April 2018. In 2018, the new leadership admitted the human rights violations, unlawful imprisonment of political leaders and their followers, and banning opposition parties and activists. The new leadership also stated that the security institutions were used in pursuit of partisan objectives.

As part of the reform activities within the country, the new leadership of the government invited all political parties exiled into the country to come and engage in peaceful political struggle. The government created an open and transparent political space where parties can struggle peacefully.

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[3] https://theglobalobservatory.org/2017/06/ethiopia-protests-oromo-addis-ababa-master-plan/

One of the political parties that came to the country was the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). The party agreed to disarm its guerilla fighters and to struggle peacefully in the country.

However, the disarming of the guerilla fighters did not happen on due time and conflict emerged between the government soldiers and the guerilla fighters that resulted in the killing of many people and disruption of public services, businesses, and transportation in the western part of Oromia Regional State.

The Abba Gadas, the Oromo traditional elders, intervened, and a peace talk was conducted in January 2019 and the mediation did not bear fruit.

The Oromo Liberation Army was accused of ethnic-based conflicts in the western part of Ethiopia. The rebel group mostly targeted ethnic Amharas living in the Wollega zone. On November 1, 2020, at least 54 people from the Amhara ethnic group in Gawa Qanqa village in Guliso Woreda of West Wollega Zone were murdered by the suspected Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), which was/is the military wing of OLF. The incident occurred when the Ethiopian Defense Forces withdrew from the village without notice and replaced forces that provided security services to the people.[4]

Religious-Based Conflicts

Ethiopia has been generally described as a religiously tolerant country. Some argued that although there have been sporadic religious-based conflicts in different parts of the country, the conflicts are not a real threat to a longstanding tradition of religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence in the country.

Some of the reasons include the major religious groups in Ethiopia are not radicals; the fact that Ethiopians usually identify themselves with their ethnic origin[567] and nationality rather than with their religion and the instruction to Muslims that they should co-exist with Christians unless they mistreat them.

On the contrary, others argued that religious identities are becoming more dominant as the primary public identity of people and more ideological.[8]

There was a history of religious-based conflicts that occurred in the country in the past. In 2019, more than five religious-based clashes occurred in the country. For instance,

- In February 2019, youth members burned two mosques and vandalized Muslim-owned businesses in Mekane Selam Town, Amhara Regional State. According to a local police officer, the cause of the conflict was the claims by a group of youngsters who said they have seen St. Mary's picture being crushed at the wedding led to the violent attack on the Mosques and looting and damaging properties.[9]

- In February 2019, 8 evangelical churches were destroyed by a group. Officials stated that the attackers responded to the fake news that claimed mosques were attacked by non-Muslims in the nearby area.[10]

- On July 18, 2019, groups of people from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, killed a priest and two followers of the church, burned three churches, and partially destroyed four churches.[11] [12] [13]

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[4] https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/11/ethiopia-over-50-ethnic-amhara-killed-in-attack-on-village-by-armed-group/
[5] (Marquardt, 2005)
[6] (Erlich, 2006)
[7] (USIP, 2004)
[8] (Abbink, 2011)
[9] https://www.bbc.com/amharic/news-47112939?ocid
[10] www.bbc.com/news/topics/cwlw3xz047jt/ethiopia
[11] https://www.theafricareport.com/17355/in-ethiopia-religious-extremism-fans-the-flames-of-ethnic-division/
[12] https://borkena.com/2019/07/22/three-ethiopian-churches-burnt-in-sidama-death-toll-reaches-60/
[13] https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ETHIOPIA-2019-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf page 4.

- In October 2019, the supporters of an Oromo activist and politician attacked churches and Christians in the Dodola area in the West Arsi Zone of the Oromia regional state. The immediate trigger for the violent conflict was the social media post by Jawar Mohammed, an Oromo activist, accusing the government authorities of threatening his security and the police officers were attempting to withdraw his security guards from their posts which implied that he was in danger.[14] He posted the message around midnight on October 22, 2019. He was previously assigned a VIP security protocol when he returned from the US to Ethiopia.

Protests around Jawar's house in Addis Ababa. Image: REUTERS/Tiksa Negeri

On October 23, Jawar's supporters congregated around his house in Addis Ababa and in most parts of Oromia to protest against the government. The protests in some parts of Oromia blockaded roads and became violent.

One of those places where a violent conflict occurred was in Dodola town.

It was not clear why the Christians were targeted in the attack. Perhaps most of the Christians were the Amharas who accounted for about 6% of the 193,812 total population of the Woreda. Reuters reported that one local Orthodox Church leader stated that Christians were the minority, and the attackers did not want to see Christians and the church in the area.[15] It seems that the attack had ethnic and religious motives. The attackers were believed to be pro-Jawar young supporters who have been following him mainly on social media since the start of the recent Oromo youth protests in 2014.

- In the town of Mota, Eastern Gojjam Zone of Amhara Regional State, on October 20, 2019, 2 mosques were burned down, and 2 other mosques were damaged. In addition, many businesses owned by Muslims were burned down and vandalized.

    The cause of the attack was not explicitly reported by concerned bodies. Government officials including the Prime Minister denounced it as a deliberate act to break down the long-standing religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence in the country.[16] The local police reported that just before the burning of the mosques, a fire broke out in one of the Ethiopian Orthodox churches in the town and partially damaged it. It was reported that the attack on the mosques was a response to the fire at one of the churches.[17]

    After the incident, no information has been given to the public regarding the actual cause of the fire in one of the Orthodox Churches and the burning of the mosques. The attackers were referred to as "a group of people" in the media reports and "extremists" by the Prime Minister. No further details were given about their affiliation or real motives.

[14] https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/01/ethiopia-justice-needed-deadly-october-violence
[15] https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-politics-idUSKBN1X50BC
[16] https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/12/21/five-arrested-for-attack-on-mosques-in-ethiopias-amhara-region
[17] https://addisstandard.com/news-attacks-on-multiple-mosques-muslim-owned-business-center-in-amhara-region-draws-criticism/

Ethnic-Based Conflicts

Ethiopia is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and multi-religious country. Ethiopia is home to various ethnic groups. According to the World Population Review, the Oromo and the Amhara account for 34.4% and 27% of the total population of the country respectively. Other major ethnic groups include the Somali, Tigray, Sidama, Gurage, Wolayta, Afar, Hadiya, and Gamo.[18]

Ethiopia is a country where more than 80 languages are spoken. The various ethnic groups speak their own languages. The Ethiopian languages are divided into four major language groups: Semitic, Cushitic, Omotic, and Nilo-Saharan. The federal government has been using Amharic as a working (not official) language (Article of FDRE Constitution). On the other hand, the regional states have their preferred working languages. English is the most widely spoken foreign language in the country and it is the medium of instruction in secondary schools and colleges/universities. Other foreign languages such as Arabic, French, and Italian are also spoken by some Ethiopians.[19]

Ethnic federalism as a system of government was introduced in Ethiopia in the FDRE Constitution of 1994 and recognized ethnic pluralism in the country. However, the way ethnic federalism was operated in the country caused more ethnic tensions and conflicts in different parts of the country mainly due to ethnic boundaries, ethnic identities, scarce resources, and power rivalry.[20],[21]

Scholars like Aalen argued that the formation of an ethnic federation in Ethiopia contributed to looking at previous conflicts and tensions from an ethnic perspective.

Conflicts that were previously seen as an economic issues, became increasingly ethnic. The elites manipulate and mobilize their ethnic bases for their political goals.[22] They argued that ethnic federalism was introduced in Ethiopia to solve the historic nationalities question of diverse ethnic groups; however, it has not reduced ethnic tensions and conflicts due to many factors including ethnic heterogeneity of regional states, resource-boundary sharing among different ethnic groups, and others. [23] Some cited the example of African countries in a post-colonial period which established ethnic federalism and later removed it because it exacerbated ethnic conflicts.[24]

Some of the major causes for an increase in the ethnic-based conflicts in Ethiopia recently could be attributed to an increase in "militant ethnic nationalism against a backdrop of state and party fragility" and less commitment of the state and ethnic nationalists for inclusive dialogue.[25]

[18] (World Population Review, 2019)
[19] (FDRE, 2018)
[20] (Aalen, 2011)
[21] (Abbay, 2004)
[22] (Aalen, 2011)
[23] (Girum, 2014)
[24] (Berman, 2010)
[25] (Yusuf, November 2019)

2.2. REGIONAL CONTEXT

Geographic location

West Arsi Zone is located in the Oromia Regional State. Oromia is one of the 10 states of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. Geographically, the State of Oromia borders Afar, Amhara, and the State of Benshangu-Gumuz in the north, the State of Somali in the east, the Republic of Sudan and the state of Benishangul-Gumuz in the west, the State of Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples', Sidama, the state of Gambella and Kenya in the south. The estimated area of the State of Oromia is about 353,690 Km, and accounts for almost 32% of the country.[26]

The Oromia Regional State has 20 administrative zones and two city administrations.

Population

The Oromo people are the single largest ethnic group in Ethiopia and East Africa. The Oromo people account for about 35% of the total population of Ethiopia.

Although the Oromo people are the majority in Oromia, there are people of other ethnic groups in the region. According to the 2007 census, the major ethnic group living in the Oromia regional state was the Oromo people which accounted for 87.8% of the total population of the region. The Amhara, the Gurage, and other ethnic groups accounted for 7.22%, 0.93%, and 4% respectively.

Afaan Oromoo (the Oromo language) is the official language of the Oromia regional state and is widely spoken in the region. Amharic, Gurage, Hadiya, Gedeo, and Nilo-Saharan languages are spoken by some communities in the region.

Religious Demography

Oromia's regional state is a multi-religious region. According to the 2007 census, Muslims accounted for 47.6%, Orthodox Christians 30.4%, Protestant Christians 17.7%, traditional religions 3.3.%, and other religious groups were 1% of the total population of the region.

The proportion of Orthodox Christians was as high as 51.2% in the urban areas whereas the Muslim population was 29.9% in the urban areas.

The traditional Oromo religion is the belief in Waaqaa, one God. Waaqaa is responsible for the creation of human beings and other creatures. The practice of the belief has revived in recent years. Some Oromo elites have started to put in place systems and structures to practice the traditional belief of Waaqeffataa, the worshipper of Waaqaa.

According to the national census in 2007, the followers of traditional beliefs in Ethiopia were 2.6% of the total population. Waaqeffataa is one of the traditional beliefs in Ethiopia. Although many Oromo people say that they believe in Waaqaa, the number of registered worshippers of Waaqaa is not known. Among the Oromo youth (Qeerroo and Qarree), regardless of their formal religious membership, they say that the Oromo people believe in Waaqaa. Waaqeffannaa (worshipping Waaqaa) is stated as an indigenous Oromo religion, and it is neither Christianity nor Islam. Both Christian and Muslim Oromos have been participating in Oromo Thanksgiving Day (Irreecha). It seems that Waaqeffanna symbolizes Oromoness (being Oromo) for the young Oromo generation. Tesema Ta'aa, a professor of history at Addis Ababa University, stated, "Whether the Oromo have become Christians or Muslims, however, a true belief in one God (Waaqeffanna dhugaa) remains the basic tenet of Oromo identity."[27]

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[26] http://www.ethiopia.gov.et/oromia-regional-state
[27] (Ta'aa, 2013, p. 87)

2.3. DESCRIPTION OF THE COMMUNITIES

West Arsi is one of the 20 administrative zones in the Oromia Regional State located in the Rift Valley Region. The zone is bordered by East Shewa Zone to the north, Sidama and SNNPR to the west and south, Arsi to the northeast, and Bale zone to the east. Shashemene is the capital town of the West Arsi administrative Zone. The Zone has 12 Woredas.

According to the 2007 census, the total population of West Arsi was 1,732,974. Women account for about 50.42% of the total population28. About 86.15% of the population inhabited the rural areas of the Zone.

Different ethnic groups inhabited West Arsi Zone including Oromo, Amhara, and other ethnic groups. The Oromo ethnic group accounts for more than 88.5% of the total population followed by Amhara which account for 3.98% of the population.

The remaining ethnic groups accounted for about 7.5% of the total population. Afaan Oromoo is the official language and is widely spoken in the zone.

In terms of religion, West Arsi is a Muslim majority context where Muslims account for 80.34% of the total population, followed by Ethiopian Orthodox Christians (11.04%) and Protestants that account for 7.02% of the population.29

The Seventh-Day Adventist missionaries started mission activities in the West Arsi area in the 1940s. In 1947, the Church established an Adventist College in Kuyera and Arsi Negele areas to provide education to the people in the area.

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[28] http://www.oromiabofed.gov.et/images/stories/rstatistics/2007_oromia_housing_Population_census.pdf
[29] (CSA, 2007)

3. THE CONFLICT IN WEST ARSI

3.1. HISTORY OF THE CONFLICT

The most prevalent types of conflicts in communities in the West Arsi Zone are resource-based, boundary issues, inter-ethnic, and religious. One of the most prevalent conflicts is land-based conflict. Hussein stated that unrestricted land lease markets caused land-based conflicts and litigation in the area.[30]

There were also inter-regional conflicts between the West Arsi zone of Oromia and the Sidama Regional State (the Sidama zone before its statehood in November 2019). Competition over natural resources (scarcity, competing for ownership) was regarded as the major cause of the conflict between the Oromo and the Sidama people. The underlying causes range from historical, cultural, and economic to political issues.[31] The conflict between the two ethnic groups: the Oromo and the Sidama existed before the formation of a federation in Ethiopia. Some of the resources that were used commonly were divided into two due to boundary separation between the two ethnic groups. Some resources were left on the border and remained to be a source of conflict.

There was a deadly clash between Oromo and non-Oromo groups in Arsi Negele in 1992 in which about 60 people were killed, more than 50 people were wounded, houses, grain stores, and property were destroyed, cattle were stolen, and churches were looted.[32] According to a local newspaper, in 1996, a conflict occurred between the Oromo and people from the Amhara and other ethnic groups; a group from the Oromo intimidated the groups and threatened to expel them.[33]

Some conflicts had political nature. The youth and other groups joined the rest of Oromia in protesting against the government in 2015/16. The demand of the anti-government protesters in Shashemene, the capital of the West Arsi administrative zone, was the release of detained political leaders, economic justice, and ending displacements and expulsion of the Oromo ethnic group from the Somali region in the eastern part of the country. The Somali-Oromo clashes occurred in September 2017. Both ethnic groups share long borders (more than 1400 km) and had a history of conflict over resources such as water and grazing lands as both are pastoralists and some Oromos are farmers.

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[30] (Husssein, 2011)
[31] (Mustefa, August 2018)
[32] (EHRCO, 1992)
[33] Tomar Amharic Weekly newspaper, October 2, 1996

The federal government held a referendum in 2004 to solve the disputes over boundary issues and as a result, 323 Kebeles were assigned to Oromia Regional State out of 422 Kebeles. The remaining 93 Kebeles were assigned to the Somali Regional State. The strategy did not bring people between the two ethnic groups.[34]

In September 2017, clashes around the boundary spiraled into mass killings and displacements. The Somali special forces were accused to be the attackers.[35],[36],[37] Some reports indicated that nearly a million ethnic Oromos were internally displaced due to the conflict.[38]

For some politicians, the large-scale displacement of the Oromo from the Somali Regional State was used as an opportunity to mobilize the mass, particularly the Oromo youth to undertake mass demonstrations. The attack on the Oromos was interpreted as a way of weakening Oromia not to play a big role in national politics. As a result, violent protests erupted in many parts of Oromia in defense of a stronger Oromia. For instance, in October 2017, three people were killed in Shashamene town during a protest against the government.[39]

There were religious-based conflicts that occurred in the West Arsi zone in the past five years. In October 2010, a mob of Muslims attacked the evangelical churches in the zone and injured Christians.[40] In February 2016, protestors in the zone burned down 15 churches and related facilities that belong to evangelical churches, Catholic, Seventh-day Adventist, and Ethiopian Orthodox churches. The attacks were believed to be carried out by Muslim extremists in the area.[41] No detailed information was given about these "Muslim extremists," but the government claimed that they were local Muslims

who received funding from foreign countries and opposition political parties to undertake such attacks.

In 2018, there was an amateur video that went viral on social media about young men beating and trashing an old person in a fight that occurred among people of the same faith in the Shashemene area. It was something that rarely occurred and was mostly unacceptable in the community.

A study conducted by IRCE indicated that there were intra-religious conflicts among Muslims. A group within the Muslim community accused some Muslim leaders of being pro-government. This group in the Muslim community accused the federal government of working to change the local Islamic teachings and practices of Al-Ahbash, a Sufi religious movement based in Lebanon.[42] The accusation also includes government interference in the religious affairs of the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC) by orchestrating the selection of pro-government Muslim leaders. One specific accusation was holding the election meetings outside the mosque.[43]

This group was related to an Arbitration Committee established to dialogue with the government on its interference in EIASC's affairs. The members were from 17 prominent Muslim schools and some of them were teachers at Awoliya religious school in Addis Ababa. In July 2011, the government arrested some of them and charged them with acts of terrorism. The government closed Awoliya, the Islamic school with claims that it supported the teaching of radical Islam.[44]

[34] (Bassi, 2010)
[35] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-41278618
[36] https://www.opride.com/2017/03/05/liyu-police-raids-oromia-testing-ethiopias-semblance-calm/
[37] https://ethsat.com/2017/09/70000-displaced-killings-continue-eastern-ethiopia/
[38] https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ethiopia_-_oromia_somali_conflict_induced_displacement_june_2018c.pdf
[39] (VOA Africa, 2017)
[40] (Mehler, Belber, & Walraven, 2010, p. 330)
[41] (US Department of State, 2016)
[42] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Ahbash (there are other sites, but not sure whether their views are balanced)
[43] (US Department of State, 2016)
[44] http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2015/7/ethiopia-politicizes-courts-to-strangle-dissent.html

In Ethiopia, including in West Arsi, there are followers of the Salafi-Wahhabi group. The government fears that this Salafi-Wahhabi group is a threat to the stability of the state and the country of suspicion that some of their activities are allegedly linked to al-Qaeda. The group has a strong ideological and financial affiliation with Saudi Arabia.[45] Haggai Erlich stated that Saudi Arabia provides financial support for aggressive Islamization in Ethiopia.[46] Some researchers asserted that the Wahhabi movement started in Ethiopia during the Italian occupation of 1936-1941 with the Ethiopian Muslims from the hajji. It started in the eastern and southern parts of Ethiopia such as Harar, Bale, and Arsi, and later spread to the rest of the country including Addis Ababa.[47]

The group adheres to a stricter observance of Islam, the growing of the beard, the wearing of trousers above the ankles by Muslim men, and a full covering of faces by Muslim women. This group preached extremist views and threatened those who tried to oppose their views. The group even tried to exclude those Muslims who were not willing to accept their teaching. Wahhabism "is an austere form of Islam that insists on a literal interpretation of the Koran. Strict Wahhabis believe that all those who don't practice their form of Islam are heathens and enemies."48 Some researchers attributed the increase in inter-religious intolerance in Bale and Arsi areas in recent decades to the increase in the radical Islamic movement.[49], [50]

[45] (Østebø, 2013)
[46] (Erlich H. , 2007)
[47] (Østebø, The Question of Becoming: Islamic Reform Movements in Contemporary Ethiopia, 2008)
[48] https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/saudi/analyses/wahhabism.html#:~:text=For%20more%20than%20two%20centuries,Islam%20are%20heathens%20and%20enemies.
[49] (Amenu, May 2008)
[50] (Østebø, Localising Salafism: Religious Change Among Oromo Muslims in Bale, Ethiopia, 2012)

Shashemene town was the epicenter of the 2020 conflict in the West Arsi zone. It was one of the places in the zone that was damaged by the violent conflict. According to the 2007 national census, the town had a total population of 100,454; 43.44% of them were followers of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, 31.15% were Muslims, 23.53% were Protestants and 1.3% were Catholics.

Shashemene town was previously dominated by non-Oromo ethnic groups. Recently, many Oromos particularly Muslim Oromos migrated from the rural areas to the town to dominate the town's economic sources.

In the aftermath of the killing of Hachalu Hundessa, the Oromo musician, on June 29, 2020, protests erupted in most parts of Oromia. Hachalu, 34 years old, was perceived as a reverend Oromo musician who sang about love and unity. His songs also address issues that matter to most Oromo people such as marginalization by the central government, pride in the Oromo culture, the hope of Oromo coming to glory, and resilience. Some of his songs became an anthem for the anti-government resistance that began in 2015. It united the Oromo people to stand together and protested against the oppression and marginalization of the Oromos. With his songs, he advocated for justice and equality for the Oromo people.

His assassination was seen as suppressing and trashing the rights of the Oromo people. He was perceived as an Oromo hero who stood up to the invincible government during difficult times. From an early age, he paid a price for the liberation of Oromo by being jailed when he was a teenager. His imprisonment did not force him to give in but strengthened him to fight more for his and his people's freedom. He was an Oromo activist and powerful political voice who was admired by Oromos, especially by the young Oromos. The Oromo people did not consider his killing as the death of an ordinary musician.

Therefore, killing him was perceived as murdering an Oromo hero, freedom fighter, and icon of resilience. As a result, when the Oromo people heard about his assassination, people became emotional and went to the streets to protest regardless of their age, gender, and religion.

In Shashemene, these protests escalated into widespread rioting, looting, and burning of buildings, vehicles, residential houses, businesses, and factories. The government blamed the assassination on Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) and its alleged sponsor Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) to incite ethnic violence and derail political reform. No detailed information is available on how TPLF and OLA coordinated to kill Hachalu Hundessa. There is some anecdotal information that seems they both act in coordinated ways behind the scenes. For instance, the assassination attempt of the Prime Minister was claimed to be masterminded by the former TPLF intelligence chief and the executors were members of the OLF. TPLF was unhappy with the reform because it lost its previous dominance whereas the OLF was disappointed because the Prime Minister is centrist and has not shown favoritism to the Oromo people and key Oromo nationalists. Although no compelling evidence was disclosed so far, the government accused TPLF of providing funding, training, and planning for OLA.

In Shashemene, organized mobs vandalized and set on fire residences, hotels, and businesses belonging mostly to non-Oromos. There has been a political narrative, especially by the Oromia Diaspora in the past two years that labeled other ethnic groups residing in the Oromia region as "settlers." The messages circulating on social media by extremist Oromo nationalists particularly target the Amhara people who live in Oromia Region.

The group claimed that the Amhara settled in Oromia during the invasion of Menelik II. The group explicitly demanded Amharas leave Oromia and return to their original places.

While other ethnic groups were not responsible for the assassination of Hachalu, the group used the incident as a cover to evict non-Oromos from Oromia. When the Oromos went out to express their grief and anger over Hachalu's murder, they took the opportunity to apply the message that had been inculcated in their minds.

The Shashemene City Administration stated that 251 households were displaced, 89 hotels, 249 residential houses, 79 vehicles, and 36 three-wheel vehicles were burned down during the violent conflict in the town.

Haile Resort, owned by the athlete Haile Gebre Selassie, a hotel that caters to western tourists and the local clientele was destroyed. Commercial buildings located in the center of the town Tsegaye Building and Mara Building were looted and damaged. Lucy Education Center, a private school that serves from kindergarten through high school with 4200 students and 350 employees was burned down with documents. Hotels such as Abay Hotel and Wehabe Hotel, Meridian Cafe and shopping centers, and many residential houses were destroyed by the mobs.

Commercial buildings, hotels, schools, and other businesses burned belonged to non-Oromos and non-Muslims. When interviewed, some victims stated that the attackers were trying to destroy the properties of non-Oromo ethnic groups. Previous attacks have targeted prominent pro-government individuals, pro-government officials, and religious institutions. In the recent violence, none of these were targeted. It was an attack on the economy of the non-Oromos (and non-Muslims) by destroying their properties. The victims said that the assumption was when the non-Oromos lost their properties, they would leave the area.

3.3. CAUSES OF THE CONFLICT

It is difficult to know for sure what caused the July 2020 clashes in Shashemene town and the West Arsi zone in general. Different bodies have stated different reasons. Some said that the conflict was religious. As evidence, they stated that people of the Oromo ethnic group and Christians were affected by the conflict.

One of the news outlets that attributed the violent conflicts and attacks on victims to religion was the Guardian Newspaper. It stated that the inter-communal conflict was along religious lines and led Muslim and Christian Oromos to fight against each other. More than one-third of those Orthodox Christians attacked during the conflict were Oromos.[51]

On the contrary, others attributed the violent conflicts to ethnicity. They claimed that the attack was ethnic-based. For instance, news media reported that the owner of Lucy Education Center in Shashemene said that the attack was ethnically motivated. Even those who have mixed ethnicity with Oromos were not spared. [52]

Associated Press reported that in Shashemene town, some of the attackers were going home to home checking identity cards and attacked the Amhara residents.[53]

Among the victims, many of them were Orthodox Christians of the Amhara ethnic group. Other non-Oromo ethnic groups such as Guraghe, Wolayita, Tigreans, and others were also the targets.[54]

In an interview with VOA, Temam Hussien, the then-mayor of Shashemene said that the attack was carried out by youths from the town and those who came from the rural areas surrounding the town. At first, these young people protested peacefully and expressed their grief over the artist's death. But later the protests turned into ethnic violence and looting. [55]

This indicates that the attackers were young men from the town and the neighboring Kebeles and that they carried out the attack under the guise of peaceful protest. The change from peaceful protest to violence and vandalism was already planned. When the protests began destroying and burning properties, the security forces did not respond to prevent the protesters from attacking people's proprieties.

If the protesters had started the attack from the beginning, residents would at least have taken action to defend themselves. Many people regardless of their ethnic backgrounds were saddened by the assassination of Hachalu. The protesters' initial approach distracted the residents. The approach also gave an excuse for the security forces for failing to protect the residents from attack.

The IRCE team that visited the area in the aftermath of the violent conflict talked to various groups within the communities and supposed that the conflict was one of the effects of ethnic-based political polarization at the national level.

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[51] https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/aug/03/how-a-musicians-death-unleashed-violence-and-death-in-ethiopia

[52] https://www.ethiopiaobserver.com/2020/07/06/ethnically-motivated-attacks-in-shashemene-and-elsewhere/

[53] https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/ethiopias-week-of-unrest-sees-239-dead-3500-arrested/2020/07/08/8eb30952-c100-11ea-8908-68a2b9eae9e0_story.html

[54] http://www.spc.rs/eng/genocide_orthodox_christians_and_minorities_ethiopia

[55] (Fantahun, July 6, 2020)

It was obvious that during the nearly three decades of rule of EPRDF in Ethiopia since 1991, political elites from one ethnic group dominated the state. More work was done on dividing than uniting the various ethnic groups to build a strong nation. The ethnic tensions that were simmering for years led to mass protests that brought a change in the new Prime Minister in 2018. As part of the reform, the new government released political prisoners and gave more freedom to the press. To expand the political space, all political parties were called upon to struggle peacefully and return home. As a result, many political parties including those who had been in armed struggle returned to the country.

While the government was still at the early stage of the reform process, some political parties and groups began to disseminate hate speech that further weakened the effort to bring the multiethnic and multireligious country together. The tendency to interpret any action from one's ethnic perspective became a new normal. The country was more polarized than ever before. It was in such a context that the Oromo musician was assassinated, and the Oromo people particularly the youth became too emotional and attacked other ethnic groups. Some media and social media disseminated messages that incited ethnic violence. The Attorney General's office stated that some activists and political party leaders sent messages to their supporters in many parts of Oromia including Shashemene in the aftermath of the assassination of Hachalu to incite violent conflicts.

Behind the screen, there has been an informal structure known as Qeerroo Bilisummaa (The Oromo Youth struggling for true democracy and justice, self-determination rights of the Oromo people) orchestrating unrest and protests in Oromia.56 The group has social media pages, but no specific information is available about its leaders.

The broadcast media such as OMN (Oromia Media Network) and Tigray Media House (TMH) transmitted messages that incite inter-ethnic violence in the aftermath of the incident. These media mentioned that Hachalu was murdered by the Naftagna, (which means armed men or riflemen) a term usually used to refer to the Amhara ethnic group. The motive was to instigate conflict between the Oromo and the Amhara ethnic groups. It was claimed that TPLF and Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC) were the parties that used these media to use the incident for political gain – weakening the new government and creating public distrust in the central government to ensure the stability of the state and security of citizens.[57] [58]

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[56] https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/mar/13/freedom-oromo-activists-qeerroo-ethiopia-standstill

[57] (Estifanos, July 25, 2020)

[58] (Chala, August 8, 2020)

4. RECONCILIATION

4.1. ROLE OF IRCE IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Ethiopia is home to major world religions including Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Christianity was introduced to the country by King Ezana of Axum in the 4th century AD. Ethiopia is also the first country to peacefully embrace Islam in the 7th century and allowed the adherents to practice their faith free of persecution. Judaism has long been practiced in Ethiopia, particularly in the northern part of Ethiopia among the Beta Israel, the Ethiopian Jews.

A small number of Ethiopians are adherents of African Traditional Religions (ATR). Most of the followers of indigenous religions reside in rural areas. There are also members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Jehovah's Witnesses in Ethiopia. There is also a Rastafarian community in Addis Ababa and the town of the Oromia Region.

According to the 2007 report of the Central Statistical Agency, the religious demography of the country was Ethiopian Orthodox 43.5%, Muslims 33.9%, Protestant 18.6%, Catholics 0.7%, and traditional religions and others 2.6%.[59]

Different religions have a long history of co-existence over centuries in Ethiopia and have been playing an influential role in political history and in cascading behavior change among their respective congregations for centuries.

The inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia – IRCE- was established as an independent entity in 2010. Seven religious institutions (the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church (EOTC), the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC), the Ethiopian Catholic Church (ECC), the Ethiopian Seventh Day Adventist Church (ESDAC), the Evangelical Churches Fellowship of Ethiopia (ECFE), the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY), and the Ethiopian Kale Hiwot Church (EKHC)) established it to promote and systematize inter-faith learning, collaboration and synergy to address issues of common concern such as peacebuilding, promoting tolerance, combating all forms of extremism, and transforming any forms conflicts.

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[59] (CSA, 2007)

IRCE has regional chapters in all regional states, and two city administrations. Each regional Inter-Religious Council has a coordinating office. Using these regional coordinating offices, IRCE has been able to organize and conduct training of trainers, peace conferences, dialogue forums on Christian – Muslim relations, workshops on violent religious extremism, on freedom of religion, belief, and thought. The structures of member religious institutions that extend to the lower administrative structures (kebeles) have enabled IRCE to reach a wider section of the Ethiopian population. By using the regional and zonal IRCE structures, IRCE has conducted various activities focusing on peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and restoring the social cohesion of the communities at the grassroots level. In 2015, IRCE took a leadership role in creating an interfaith dialogue in the town of Jimma, Oromia.

In December 2018, religious leaders under the auspices of the Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia took the initiative to mediate the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the Oromo Democratic Party in Addis Ababa. The purpose of the mediation was to end the conflicts between the two parties in some parts of the Oromia Regional State. The religious leaders invited the parties to solve the problem through roundtable discussion rather than by fighting and causing deaths and displacement of people.[60]

[60] https://fanabc.com/english/amp/2018/12inter-religious Accessed on February 17, 2019

4.2. THE RATIONALE FOR MERGING THE TRADITIONAL AND RELIGIOUS APPROACH TO RECONCILIATION

One of the rationales is indigenous community-based institutions have a greater role in conflict management in various communities in the country where the state is weak to deal with large-scale conflicts or violence. In the past, the government has not taken comprehensive steps to strengthen these local institutions to promote peacebuilding.[61]
However, they have demonstrated their power to help their communities co-exist peacefully using traditional conflict transformation mechanisms.

In 2018, mobs of young people in many parts of the country attacked and destroyed the properties of minority ethnic groups. In the Burayu area, a town neighboring Addis Ababa in the western part, dozens of Gamo people were killed and thousands were displaced. Gamo youth in the Arab Minch area marched to retaliate by attacking Oromo businesses in the town.

When the country was in turmoil due to ethnic-based conflicts here and there, something strange happened at Arba Minch. As youth groups marched to burn and destroy properties belonging to the Oromo people in the town, Gamo elders held green grass in their hands and knelt in front of them. When the groups saw that, they stopped and listened to their elders.

The elders told them not to attack anyone or destroy any property. The young people obeyed their elders. As a result, no property was destroyed, and no one was harmed in Arba Minch town. [62] This incident demonstrated the influential power of community elders to avert conflict at the national level. It was a heartwarming scene when the country was in chaos.

In the aftermath of the assassination of artist Hachalu Hundesa, many lives were lost, and the property was destroyed. In the town of Meki, however, no such damage was reported. As a group of Oromo youth set out to destroy the property of other ethnic groups, an elder, Abbaa Gadaa, took off his robe and lay on the ground, and stood in front of the young people. Then the youth stopped because they knew he was a respected community elder. Everyone kept silent. "Where are you going?" asked the community elder. The young men told him the truth that they were marching to burn the properties belonging to other ethnic groups. The elder told the young men not to attack anyone and destroy anything but express their grief over the musician's death peacefully.

The youth told him that they could express their grief peacefully if the police were not visible on the street. The elder told them that he would talk to the local government officials not to send the police to the street. No police were visible on the street. The youth expressed their grief peacefully and returned home.

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[61] (Zigale, 2016)
[62] https://borkena.com/2018/09/19/gamo-elders-intervention-to-avert-retaliation-got-ethiopians-talking/

It was learned that the traditional elder was working with Catholic Church in Meki town to calm down the angry young people. The collaboration between the traditional elder and the religious leaders contained the conflict that would turn violent and become a cause of much damage.

The reconciliation according to the traditional Gada system is more inclusive. In the system, men and women are included. Men and women elders work side by side to restore community peace. The Gada system does not discriminate against people based on ethnic or religious affiliation. It treats all people as human beings. It employs the same moral and ethical standards for all people.

The Arsi Oromo is one of the branches of the Oromo people inhabiting the West Arsi, Arsi, and Bale zones of Oromia. There are traditional institutions among the Oromo people in the zone that enhance peacebuilding efforts. One of the institutions is jaarsuma (reconciliation by the elders). The traditional reconciliation in the community is usually facilitated according to the Gadaa System. In the West Arsi zone, the clan's Gadaa system is known as Gadaa Gutaa. Although all the Gadaa clans are aligned to the general Gadaa System, there are specific ways that each follows to undertake reconciliation.

The second traditional peacebuilding approach is known as Siiqee, a women's customary institution, that is involved in protecting the rights of women. Siiqee means a stick, a special or colorful stick held by appropriate women. The woman who holds the stick is haadha siiqee.

The Siiqee institution has social, religious, and political functions for women. It traditionally gives women the to protect their rights to property, sexuality, and fertility, and to maintain religious and moral authority. Among the Arsi Oromo, women have an important religious role.[63]

The women also use ateetee, a sung Arsi Oromo women to resolve conflicts. The women use music, as an expressive form, to protect, promote and claim their rights, and to resolve disputes peacefully. Arsi society is socio-politically male-dominated, however, women have their own power through the ateetee ritual. Ateetee is a highly political and power-laden process, in which women travel to the offender's house singing insults until a reconciliation ceremony is held. At the ceremony they receive a cow as compensation, then the women finish by blessing the offender.[64]

Third, over the past three years, religious leaders and traditional elders have been participating in national reconciliation conferences and forums. Since the majority of the Ethiopian people are religious,[65] it is expected that they would listen to the advice of religious leaders with a respect to their religious beliefs. Religious leaders can play a big role in building sustainable peace in the country.[66] Similarly, as a collective society,[67] people in many communities in the country have high regard for their culture, and tradition, and for traditional elders who are regarded as reservoirs of indigenous wisdom. IRCE has presupposed that the use of beliefs, practices, and systems of religion and culture for peacebuilding is a new territory as a formal approach but with one with potential for effective peacebuilding in Ethiopia.

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[63] (Ayalew, 2012)

[64] (Leila, 2016)

[65] https://theconversation.com/how-the-orthodox-church-in-ethiopia-can-play-a-role-in-reconciliation-101273

[66] https://kroc.nd.edu/news-events/events/2019/11/12/the-role-of-the-religious-leaders-in-building-and-sustaining-peace-in-ethiopia/

[67] https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country/ethiopia/

At the national level, religious leaders and elders have been working together to defuse tensions between some political party leaders. For instance: mediating between Oromo Democratic Party (OPD) and Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) in December 2018;[68] There were occasions when they visited people or communities affected by natural or human-made disasters together.

The initiative in Shashemene to bring religious and traditional leaders together for peacebuilding was a way of cascading the national initiative at the local/community level, pilot-testing its effectiveness, and drawing lessons that would help in the implementation of a similar approach in other contexts.

Fourth, at the community level, most religious leaders serve on the council of traditional community elders to mediate various conflicts. In addition to reconciling individuals and families as part of their religious responsibilities, faith leaders work with traditional elders to mediate major conflicts in their communities. Religious leaders usually have two hats, one for religious service and the other for reconciliation. In light of such practices, creating a platform for faith and traditional leaders to work for peacebuilding is scaling up and solidifying the already existing uncoordinated efforts.

[68] https://borkena.com/2018/12/27/religious-leaders-embark-on-mediating-olf-and-the-moderate-odp/

4.3.1. Initial Step

In the aftermath of the violent conflicts and the destruction in Shashemene town, the executive board and management members of IRCE as well as the NCA Peacebuilding program head visited the affected areas having two major objectives. As interfaith leaders, the team's primary objective was to talk to individuals and families affected by the violent conflict. This was achieved by listening to the stories of people who lost their loved ones, their houses, and their properties and praying for them.

The second objective of the team was to understand the magnitude of the impacts of violent conflicts on the holistic lives of the communities and the implications for future relationships of the communities. Direct observation of the impacts of the conflicts, listening to the stories of people, and discussion with key stakeholders enabled the team to triangulate the messages aired in media with the reality on the ground.

At the end of the visit, IRCE prepared its assessment report for the board for further action. The board endorsed the effort of reconciliation using a local peacebuilding approach.

4.3.2. High-Level Discussion

IRCE brought key peacebuilding players at the zonal level to discuss how to restore the broken relationship and rebuild communities that co-exist peacefully. The main purpose of the meeting was to reduce tensions prevalent in the aftermath of the conflict and restore the broken bridge among diverse groups in the communities. A total of 148 (129 male and 19 female) participants who represented religious organizations, traditional leaders, business people, youth associations, women's associations, and government including delegates from the Ministry of Peace attended the meeting.

The meeting was held at Rift Valley Hotel in Shashemene town on October 14-15, 2020. During the discussion forum, IRCE presented key messages on Community Dialogue on Social Cohesion and Diversity Management. The messages encouraged the participants to do their best to promote the peaceful co-existence of diverse communities.

One of the outputs of the discussion forum was reaching a consensus to undertake community dialogue at the Kebele level so that community groups would get an opportunity to talk about what happened to them and what they would envision about the future.

4.3.3. Community-Based Peace Dialogue

Objectives

The community-based peace dialogue was a face-to-face interaction among members of the community at the Kebele level. Its main objective was to improve understanding, build interpersonal trust, and mobilize people for meaningful reconciliation among diverse groups within conflict-affected communities in Shashemene town and rural Shashemene Woreda. Starting open communication was thought to be one of the means to rebuild the trust that was broken by the conflict.

From the government side, the community meetings were aimed at reducing the tensions that existed in the aftermath of the violent conflict. There was a fear of further escalation of the conflict and the government used the meetings to ease the existing tensions.

Participants

The participants of the community dialogue were the various groups living in each of the Kebeles. Women and men representing different ethnic groups, community elders, faith leaders, leaders of community-based organizations, youth associations, women associations, Kebele managers, and local security forces participated in the community-based peace dialogue.

No agreed-upon participants' selection criteria were prepared to ensure the inclusiveness of the meeting. As a result, some people and stakeholders were left out in some Kebeles.

After the potential participants were identified by the Kebele administration, they were summoned. When they received the invitation, the participants were told that the Kebele administration wanted them for a meeting without further details. In general terms, people usually attend Kebele meetings voluntarily, there has been no direct punishment for not attending the meetings.

However, people who refused the invitation and refrain from attending Kebele meetings would be subject to further scrutiny for their motives.

Venues

Most of the meetings were held in Kebele halls.

Facilitators

Community-based peace dialogues were facilitated by the people assigned by the Woreda and city administration. These facilitators were government employees at Woreda and city administration who were given a brief orientation on how to conduct the dialogue.

Role of faith leaders and traditional elders

The faith leaders and traditional elders participated in the Kebele-level peace dialogues. They gave blessings at the start of the sessions and shared their wisdom when asked by the facilitators.

The process was mainly owned by the government. The meeting was an instrument to accomplish the government's agenda including peacebuilding.

Contents

The contents of the community-based dialogue sessions were not prepared. The facilitators usually go there with agenda items and may ask participants if they have any and then hold the meeting. The meetings did not get deeper to explore and address the root causes of the conflicts. Most of the discussions were on the symptoms of the problem.

4.3.4. Forgiveness through Cultural Ritual

After conducting a series of community-based peace dialogues, the woreda government officials in collaboration with the traditional leaders (Abbaa Gadaas) organized a forgiveness ceremony. Representatives of the victims and various community groups participated in the forgiveness ceremony. As it was a cultural ceremony, the team leader of the Abbaa Gadaa Gutuu (the senior elder of the Gutuu clan) facilitated the session.

The senior Abbaa Gadaa welcomed the participants and blessed them. He then told the participants the reenacted laws of the Gadaa that the participants should obey and share with their families and friends. The laws include:

- We are the children of Waaqaa and abide by the rules of the Creator.

- All people regardless of their ethnicity, gender, age, and place of origin have the right to live in peace.

- Waaqaa likes love and peace; therefore, all of us should live in peace with other people.

- People have the right to create wealth and their properties should be protected.

- We are responsible to protect the property of our neighbors. Destroying the property of other people is not an Oromo tradition.

Anyone who engages in destroying, damaging, or burning others' property does not belong to our community. We will notify such perpetrators to the police.

- Roads belong to all people. Roads are public properties and should be cared for. We should not close roads to protest. We strongly condemn anyone who is involved in actions that hinder people's movement from place to place. Anyone who does such action does not belong to our community. We will notify such people to the police.

After reading the laws to the people, Abbaa Gadaa blessed the participants. All the participants were asked to shake hands and/or hug each other. They did shake hands and hug each other. Then, they shared meals and local drinks (teji).

At the end of the ceremony, Abbaa Gadaa ordered the slaughtering of a young bull. The bull bears the offenses of all the parties and is killed as a ransom for the offenders. Senior Abbaa Gadaa said, "the bull has life. We agreed and killed this life to show our commitment to peace. If any of us break the agreement we made and engage in any anti-peace activities, Waaqaa would punish us."

Reconciliation in the Oromo culture is reconciling with Waaqaa, God.[69] According to the belief, Waaqaa is happy with people when they are at peace with everyone. Apart from the reconciliation feast, the ritual of slaughtering the bull has spiritual meaning.

One thing that was strange about the ceremony was the venue. Traditionally, the forgiveness ceremony is held under a big Oda tree (Oaktree) in an open space. This meeting was held in the compound of the Shashemene City Administration and there were many armed police officers to provide protection. Some attributed the security presence to protecting the safety of government officials who attended the ceremony. Others stated that the government was the coordinator of the event and held the meeting in the town hall.

4.3.5. **Peace/Reconciliation Conference**

The peace conference was done following the day of forgiveness. The main purpose of the mass gathering was to celebrate the reconciliation made and to announce the deliberations of the Abbaa Gadaas to the public.

Who were the participants?

Different community groups including community elders, faith leaders, *haadha siiqee* (women traditional leaders), local government officials, representatives of women and youth associations, the military and security officers, and other guests attended the celebration ceremony.

In addition, the IRCE's General Secretary, board members, and staff as well as NCA's peacebuilding head participated in the ceremony. It was also mentioned that representatives from neighboring Woredas in the West Arsi zone were invited to attend the ceremony so that they would learn and replicate the practice in their respective areas. Traditional elders from neighboring Woredas attended the meeting.

What were the major activities?

The stage moderator, a young man, introduced the whole program to the audience. The Abbaa Gadaas opened the session with blessings. The formal blessings were:

Waaqaa, as you did at night, give us your peace during the day

Deliver us from evil and err

Spare us from dangers

Direct good things toward us

Let the young grow

Let the old live long

Let the year be of satisfaction and prosperity

You created us, do not cast us away

Do not forget and abandon us

You have created us, do not destroy us

Deliver us from the weeping of the eyes

Deliver us from the grief of the heart

Give us love and peace

Bless every one of us.

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[69] (Hamado & Chala, 2015)

This was followed by the prayers of the religious leaders. The representatives of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and Muslims conducted prayers. *Shashe* music band presented a song that highlighted the importance of peace and development for nation-building.

The Mayor of Shashemene, Gutaa Lachure, made a welcome speech. In his speech, he acknowledged that in the aftermath of the assassination of the known Oromo musician, the conflict erupted in Shashemene resulting in the loss of lives and property. He stated, "the incident that occurred in the town was unprecedented and embarrassing to the residents of the town. It wounded every one of us. It would be remembered as a dark spot in the history of our town." The mayor mentioned that the residents of the town had been known for their love, cooperation, tolerance, and unity for decades. Furthermore, he noted, "the residents of Shashemene had no interest to know the ethnicity, place of birth, religion of each other. They had been living as brothers and sisters regardless of their differences."

The mayor also stated that although some misguided individuals instigated the conflict, Shashemene residents made every effort they could to protect their neighbors and their property. They stood together on a bad day. After the conflict, they showed their support for the victims. He said that although the conflict was devastating, it did not eradicate the compassion and care for each other in times of crisis among the residents of the town.

Finally, the Mayor stressed the importance of unity to continue the rehabilitation efforts to bring back Shashemene to its previous glory. He appreciated the contributions of all to make the peace conference a reality.

After the Mayor's speech, the General Secretary of IRCE, Reverend Tagay Tadele, delivered a keynote speech. [The highlights of the speech were included in the preface section of this document].

Following the speeches, two individuals presented the historical background of Shashemene, the conflict, the effects of the conflict, and the rehabilitation efforts made in the aftermath of the conflict. The presenters stated that the Shashemene town was established more than a century ago. In the town, more than 30 ethnic groups have co-existed peacefully for decades. The town is a business corridor for southern Ethiopia.

The Shashemene town administration lost revenue of about 32.4 million birr due to the destruction. They also mentioned the efforts of the government to put in place the rule of law in the town. 720 people were arrested that were linked to the violence, and 280 of them were charged with inciting and acting to attack people's properties. The others were released on bail. These people were not been sentenced yet but are in the court trial process. Some of the people in the process of the trial include 46 Kebele administrators, 42 police officers, as well as government officials, and young people who were involved in the violent attacks. One of the suspects is the former mayor of Shashemene town administration.

After the presentation, the team of Abbaa Gadaa declared the laws enacted the previous day to the participants.

A reflection session was made with the participants. IRCE's General Secretary and the Mayor of Shashemene town facilitated the session. Some of the key reflection messages of the participants include:

" *Our neighbors are our first responders. Regardless of our ethnic and religious backgrounds, our neighbors are the immediate people we interact with. In Oromo, there is a proverb that says, "Your neighbor is your cloth." Your neighbor protects you. Your neighbor is your confidence. Religion teaches us to love and care for each other. Some people are deviants. When someone from a given ethnic or religious group does something evil, we should not generalize for all ethnic or religious groups. We should expose the wrongdoer. We have a traditional way of excluding the wrongdoer. The rehabilitation efforts are promising. Let us do our best to rebuild the physical and emotional brokenness of the communities.* "

An Ethiopian Orthodox Church Representative

" *Religion teaches us compassion. The Creator hates evil actions. We should strive to do what is good for human beings. We should also tell the truth. When something is evil, we should say it is evil. We should learn to expose evil actions. When someone's action is good, we should appreciate it. Evil actions should not get a place in our communities. Anyone who does evil does not belong to us. The Creator advises us to co-exist peacefully. Religion teaches us to cooperate with people with good intentions and behaviors. I also ask faith leaders to model peace and love for each other. Faith leaders should stand with the truth and condemn evil actions that harm communities. May the Creator bless you.* "

A Muslim leader

" *Distorted and unbalanced messages transmitted by different media severely damaged people's social relationships and mutual trust more than the conflict itself. The media delivered a message as if there were interethnic and interreligious violent conflicts in which all community members participated. That was not true. The conflict was perpetrated by certain sections of the community. Not all the people in the community participated in the violent conflict. Most of the media reported the damage caused by the conflict. They did not speak a word about the cooperation and support that people showed to each other during and after the conflict. Therefore, I kindly request the media to pay back to the Shashemene communities by sharing the acts of compassion people demonstrated to support each other during the crisis.* "

A community representative

" *Religious institutions and traditional community institutions need to work together to bring about better peace in the communities. If churches, Mosques, and community institutions work jointly, lasting peace will prevail in the communities. Because our people belong to one of the three. This initiative is very good. Such joint work must continue in the future. We can ensure our peace by strengthening our religious and cultural values.* "

Abbaa Gadaa

" *Our culture respects diversity. We believe in inclusion-hammachiisaa [embracing the other]. We hope the laws enacted yesterday and announced to us today will be implemented. We agreed to abide by those laws. They are our promises to sustain peace in our communities. The promises we made bear fruits when we share the laws with other people. Youth should discuss this among themselves. Women by the leadership of Haadha Siiqee should share. Clan leaders should play their role. Non-Oromos should also be willing to cooperate for peace. If there are people among them who disagree with the laws, they should let the community elders know. We are responsible to rebuild and sustain our communities. "*

A community elder

" *I am rejoicing today. Reconciliation repairs broken hearts. This opens a new chapter for our town. This is a special moment for diverse groups of people in Shashemene town. "*

A woman participant

" *We need peace. In the past, we co-existed peacefully with non-Oromos in our communities. We rejoiced together; we supported each other during trying times. We journeyed together. The incident that happened recently broke our hearts. We were embarrassed by what happened. Properties destroyed belong to all of us. The people who died in the violent conflict were ours. I believe we have the power to rebuild our communities. We can make our Shashemene even better than what it was in the past. Our sorrow will turn to joy. We advise our young people to abstain from violent protests and riots. As women, we will advise each other. We commit ourselves to abide by the laws of Abbaa Gadaa. "*

Haadha Siiqee

The peace conference was concluded with the blessings of the religious leaders. At the end of the program, the Shashemene town administration gave traditional Oromo robes to individuals who contributed to the success of the program and certificates for those who played a key role in the process.

5. LESSONS LEARNT

For IRCE, working with community-based indigenous institutions to promote the peaceful co-existence of diverse people groups, in the aftermath of a large-scale ethnoreligious violent conflict, was the first experience. In the practical sense, the reconciliation efforts using the *Jaarsummaa* (traditional mediation) approach in Shashemene is a pilot test for IRCE. Some of the lessons that IRCE learned from the experience were:

Use of religious and traditional approaches to building sustainable peace

The clashes in and around town were violent and affected many minority groups who have been living in the area for many years. Thus, organizing a forgiveness and reconciliation program following the traditional Oromo reconciliation process in the aftermath of such conflict by government bodies, religious institutions, and Abbaa Gadaas is in itself a major achievement. A combination of religious and traditional practices as a community-based peace-building approach would be a new model that may help bring influential groups in the community to bring reconciliation and lead to sustainable peace.

Facilitate community-based peace dialogue to restore broken communications

The so-called community-based peace dialogue conducted in Shashemene was not a dialogue in a formal sense. It was a Kebele meeting where the conflict that occurred in the area recently was on the agenda for discussion. People shared their views and the facilitators gave directives to sustain peace in the communities.

- With so many people living in one Kebele, it would have been better to have small groups rather than meetings in one hall. Having several discussion groups in one Kebele could have helped many people to participate in the peace dialogues.

Despite the abovementioned shortcomings, the meetings conducted in the Kebeles had some positive aspects. These include:

- It was a good thing for people to come together and talk about what happened and the effects of the incident in the aftermath of a violent conflict to get a sense of direction for the future.

- At each meeting, people were able to express their feelings and thoughts, although there was fear of repercussions for sharing details about the conflict (who did it, the real intention of the attackers, the involvement of government officials, etc.)

- People represented from religious institutions, traditional elders, youth and women associations, and in some areas, the victims participated in the Kebele peace discussions

Train community-based peace dialogue facilitators

Facilitators of community peace dialogue in each kebele play an important role in educating the community about conflict, the negative effects of conflict, non-violent ways of conflict resolution, forgiveness, and reconciliation. They also help the community to discuss the causes of conflict in their area and how to address these root causes to bring sustainable peace in the future. Therefore, those who engage in facilitating community peace dialogue need to be properly trained and be able to lead the process.

It is also important to ensure that the people who facilitate community peace dialogue are not people who were directly or indirectly involved in the conflict, have a balanced view, are non-partisan, have a good reputation in the community, are trained and competent in facilitating dialogue, are familiar with the local culture and language and are committed to peace.

Identify the role of the local government in the traditional forgiveness and reconciliation process

If the reconciliation process is to be traditional, the role and responsibilities of community elders (Abbaa Gadaa) from community peace dialogue to the final reconciliation ceremony should be made clear. In most of the peace dialogues and reconciliation processes already conducted, it seems that the government was in charge of the process. It is expected that the local government is responsible for

ensuring the safety of the people, monitoring and ensuring that the process goes in the right direction, providing the necessary support for the success of the process, and ensuring that the process goes in alignment with the law of the land.

However, the reconciliation process should not look like the government is using the community elders to achieve its goals. Given the involvement of some government officials and leaders in the conflict, it may be doubtful that the affected communities would accept the genuineness of the reconciliation process when government officials are primarily leading the reconciliation process. The community as a whole - including the victims must believe in the authenticity of reconciliation facilitated by genuine and neutral community leaders. People know the integrity and fairness of reconciliation undertaken according to the Gada system.

Therefore, it would be better to avoid apparent interference from the government body in the traditional reconciliation process. In other words, the government should play its part per the law, and the community elders should do their job according to their culture. For the whole process to bear fruit, both the government and the elders must work together by keeping the balance.

Ensure active participation of victims in peace dialogue as well as the forgiveness/ reconciliation process

As the program is about forgiveness and reconciliation, the participation of the victims and the offenders is essential. Victims were not given a chance to express their feelings on the first-day forgiveness and the second-day reconciliation program. Their voices were not directly heard. The number of attendees was mostly Oromo.

It is fair to include and give victims a chance to tell their side of the story during forgiveness and reconciliation sessions. In the Oromo traditional reconciliation program, elders listen to what the victim has to say.

At this peace conference, however, the victims were not represented on stage. This reconciliation program and forum events should also reflect the culture and traditions of the Oromo and other ethnic groups living in the town and the surrounding area. In the future, when such programs are organized, it is important to ensure that victims' voices are heard.

To get a glimpse of the views of the victims, IRCE conducted two brief interviews with two women who participated in the final reconciliation conference. They did not want to be identified with their names.

The first woman

I have lived in Shashemene for many years. I have a family. I run a business. I had a grocery store. The mob destroyed the grocery store during the conflict, plundered what was in it, and burned everything else. They left nothing. The government promised to rehabilitate. However, I received nothing from the government. The local people did their best to help me. One person brought one thing, another brought other things and through their support, I started the business by repairing the house. Although it is far less than what it was, I have started the business again.

Reconciliation is good. Thanks to God for that. I would love to see this reconciliation come true. For us, Shashamene is our home. We want to live here. It is the town where we were born, raised, educated, established families, and raised our children. We want reconciliation to live in peace.

Apart from coming here today, we have not been involved in the reconciliation process. The day before the peace conference, the mayor of the town gathered some of the victims and asked us to come to the reconciliation conference. That is why I came today. We love reconciliation. Reconciliation from God. Only Satan hates reconciliation. We want reconciliation, we have no other way. Wherever we go, we want to live in peace. We want to live safely. We want the rule of law to be upheld.

The second woman

I lived in a kebele house. When the attackers arrived, they set fire to the house and everything inside. My children and I ran to a neighbor. My children and I remained in hiding for three days. After the conflict, we had no clothes, shoes, food, or possessions. Everything we had burned to the ground. Then we went to the Orthodox Church and took refuge there. I stayed in that shelter for two months. Then the kebele and the local people worked together to rebuild the houses. Luckily, my house was the first to be rebuilt. When I moved into my new home, the local people gave me basic items. I started life again.

Reconciliation is good. I could say it is late. I think rumors will decrease after this reconciliation. The important thing is that my life is safe. We survived. I do not know whether the young people who attacked us did it knowingly or unknowingly. I was very angry at the time. I left my house without clothes, now I am dressed, and I thank God. My children are safe. Reconciliation is good if there is a follow-up of its implementation. I participated in the kebele peace talks. Everyone is upset about the conflict. Therefore, I think they will implement the reconciliation. I hope we live in peace.

Put in place follow-up mechanisms to ensure the implementation of deliberations

Religious leaders and traditional elders can make decisions that enhance peacebuilding in their communities. Often good decisions are made and left in the air. People in the community can put into practice decisions made by religious and traditional elders when they have full awareness of them. Making deliberations is not an end by itself; the goal is restoring broken relationships and building sustainable peace in the community.

Therefore, religious and traditional leaders should use their own institutional structures and systems to cascade the decisions made to sustain peace in the communities. They should not rely only on the media to disseminate their deliberations. Peace messages can be disseminated during church services, mosque gatherings, cultural events, etc.

Religious and traditional institutions influence the thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors of their followers through teaching, advising, and the use of social sanctions. The use of social sanctions to correct people who engage in anti-peace activities can be helpful when employed appropriately.

Choose an appropriate venue for peace dialogue and reconciliation events

According to the Gada System, the Oromo traditional reconciliation ceremony takes place under a big oak tree. There is usually a place allocated for this purpose in the community. The venue has a big respect in the community. Reconciliation can take place in any convenient location, but the traditional venue gives more sense to the communities.

When the reconciliation process is done by integrating religious and traditional approaches, the stakeholders can discuss and select an appropriate venue that satisfies all groups and enhance the peacebuilding effort. The government is not expected to enforce the selection of venue but should also advise on security issues and provide protection when requested or necessary.

Design a strategy to address all affected areas

Expand the scope of the project in terms of geographic coverage and project components. Although the clashes caused severe property damage in Shashamene town, other woredas in the western Arsi zone also suffered heavy casualties.

Therefore, it is important to learn from this and do better in peacebuilding activities in other Woredas within the zone. IRCE should think of developing a one- or two-year project to support the communities to sustain peace by providing extensive training on peacebuilding, facilitating trauma healing sessions for those who have been suffering from emotional trauma in the aftermath of the conflict, and establishing or strengthening community-based peacebuilding structures. IRCE can implement similar kinds of reconciliation processes in all affected Woredas in better ways by incorporating lessons learned from this project.

Ensure gender equality in the whole reconciliation process

Regarding the gender composition of the participants of the reconciliation conference, both men and women participated in the reconciliation conference. Despite a large number of men, many women dressed in traditional attire were present at the event. In the Oromo *Gada* culture, the *Abbaa Gadaas* are leaders of a reconciliation event, but women also have their own leaders known as *Haadha Siiqee.* They both are supposed to work together for the common good of the community. At this particular reconciliation conference, the *haadha siiqee* were present but were not allowed to speak on the stage during the event. Only the men performed the ceremony. Only the men spoke. *Two haadha siiqee*, like any other participants, gave their comments about the reconciliation event during the panel discussion. In an interview with *haadha siiqee*, the reporter noted that they were disappointed with their lack of active participation in the process.

It is important to involve women leaders in all aspects of peacebuilding including in such reconciliation programs, as they can play a significant role in peacebuilding through women's formal and informal networks in the communities.

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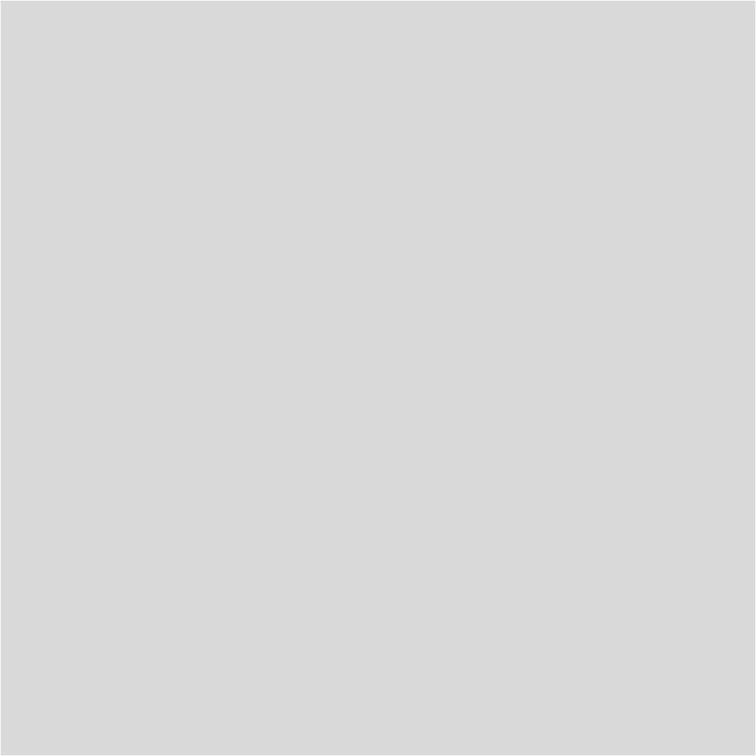
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