

How civil society can help build a more stable, peaceful future in the **Horn of Africa**



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INTRODUCTION

The Horn of Africa countries are some of the most conflict affected countries in the world. Few countries in the region have experienced sustainable relative peace. The region experiences civil unrest, cross-border conflicts, economic stress, ecological extremes, and prolonged humanitarian emergencies.

There is no one size fit-it-all approach to dealing with the Horn of Africa's conflicts, which are diverse yet interconnected. However, actors operating at the local and international levels are making significant contributions toward addressing the region's crisis. Among them are international organizations such as the U.N. (United Nations), the African Union, the European Union, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD, and the East African Community (EAC); international nongovernmental organizations and faith-based organizations; states acting independently; regional and local civil society organizations; academics; and individuals.

The American Friends Service Committee recently commissioned a study exploring factors in the region's political and socio-economic ecosystem that contribute to instability. Oral interviews were conducted with key informants in Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Somalia/Somaliland, and Uganda in September and October of 2022. The study included a review of existing literature about conflict in the Horn of Africa.

This research offered insight into how civil society organizations, policymakers, and others can improve conditions and support peace in the region. The following recommendations summarize these opportunities.

Intervention in the short term (Immediate)

Offer humanitarian assistance to those impacted by war.

A severe humanitarian situation is unfolding in Ethiopia, Somalia/Somaliland, and South Sudan. The Tigray war has displaced many people at a time when Ethiopia is facing drought and food insecurity. Those affected, especially those in refugee camps, need food aid, medicine, clothes, and other essentials that can save lives.

Those who have faced sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) need immediate support, including trauma counseling. This should be extended to South Sudan where intercommunal conflicts are still active and where some face the problem of child abduction. A key respondent from an AFSC partner organization confided in the researcher by stating that *“women in Somaliland suffer in silence. Hundreds of women and girls in refugee camps have been violated and they are defiled daily but do not report due to stigmatization locally.”*

Offer humanitarian assistance in response to climate displacement.

An ongoing drought has affected the whole of the Horn of Africa, where millions need food aid and other humanitarian support. Sustainable measures to address climate change (adaptation and mitigation) are needed.

A key informant in Somaliland stated that “people are moving en masse and they have no place to settle. Conflict occurs as new people arrive to the already constrained land and resources.” Another complicating factor is the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine. The World Health Organization (WHO) has stated that due to the conflict, much-needed grain for humanitarian support cannot reach those in need.

South Sudan has been hit hard by floods in the south and drought in the north. While some of the displaced have crossed the border as refugees, some have chosen to remain in the country as internally displaced persons. An assessment is needed to identify their needs and measures to help ensure their safety.

Northern Kenya and Uganda have their unique climate induced shocks as well. These have led to food insecurity and immigration. There, too, an assessment of immediate needs and steps to address climate change in the region is needed.

Cessation of hostilities between Ethiopia Federal Army and Tigray Forces

On November 3, 2022, the Ethiopia's Federal government and TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front) rebel forces agreed to cease hostilities between them in a peace negotiation breakthrough in Pretoria South Africa. The AU led peace negotiations were facilitated by the head of African Union mediation team, former Nigerian President Obasanjo. The two sides agreed to a “permanent cessation of hostilities.” Each side made concessions. While the government agreed to halt its military offensive, TPFL eased away from claiming to be the elected regional government and Tigray forces agreed to a disarmament plan. Many observers are looking at the two sides and hope that peace will prevail so that millions facing hunger, effects of the war and climate change can receive the long-awaited humanitarian support.

CSOs (Civil Society Organizations) and FBOs (faith-based organizations) could support ensuring that peace prevails by engagement with both sides and ensuring humanitarian corridor remains open in the short term. Monitoring of the peace agreement is crucial at this point by all stakeholders.

Take nonviolent action to end war.

There is a need to stop war and prevent future ones from occurring. While stopping war can be an uphill task, civil society has a role to play in influencing policymakers in the U.S (United States), Europe, Asia, and Africa to bring the parties in conflict to negotiations. There is widespread fear that the civil war in Ethiopia could spread and consume the nation unless it is stopped. A collapsed Ethiopia would not only take decades to reconstruct, but it could also destabilize the entire region and beyond. The latent Somaliland-Puntland conflict should also be closely monitored, and a negotiated deal struck. This includes fostering relations between the Dinka and Nuer ahead of South Sudan's forthcoming elections.

Medium-term interventions (3–5 years)

Invest in grassroots conflict management approaches.

Grassroots conflict management approaches which have proved effective in resolving inter-communal violence need support. There is an opportunity to strengthen them for community and national peacebuilding. Studies show that state-led approaches are not only reactive, but they also tend to be coercive and insensitive to the underlying causes of conflict and end up exacerbating instead of ending violence. Traditional communities have conflict management approaches which are effective to the extent that they are binding, compatible with the constitution, and less costly to enforce.

At best, the government may come in as a witness and custodian of an agreement reached by parties to the conflict. Examples of such approaches in Kenya which still bind (nomadic) communities to peace include the *Keiyo-Tugen Pact* (1915) and the *Lokiriama Peace Accord* (1978). Other countries may also have local-based peace agreements which still work, for example the Matoput from the Acholi community in Uganda. There is a need for further research into and support for these approaches.

Capacity building and strengthening civil society.

Elections were suspended in some parts of Ethiopia and South Sudan, but eventually they will be held. There is a need to prepare these countries for elections by laying a durable foundation for peaceful transition. The international community should work with the government and CSOs to ensure full inclusion and participation by the citizenry in the democratic processes. This may involve capacity building and strengthening the role of civil society in their advocacy for civil rights, which the current government has defiantly suspended. Equally important, strengthening civil society in advocacy to support peaceful elections in Ethiopia and South Sudan is critical.

Support electoral reforms.

Kenya looks stable, but there is need to closely monitor the post-poll political environment and to either reorganize or completely overhaul the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission ahead of 2027 elections. So far, Kenyans have little faith in this institution, yet it is critical for long term stability of the nation. Long-term electoral reforms and a peacebuilding agenda need to be pursued nationally and within the region.

Address political rifts in governments.

The Horn of Africa needs a stable Somaliland as a corridor for responding to persistent crisis in Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, and Ethiopia. This may require the international community to address the emerging clan-based political rifts within Bihi Abdi's government in Somaliland so that this haven of peace does not descend into destructive violence.

Reduce access to weapons.

The proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) is a major obstacle to long term security and sustainable development in the region, particularly in the *ungoverned spaces* of Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan Uganda. Some of these weapons are used to commit crime both in urban areas and within the community. A program should be rolled out (in collaboration with regional states) to address this and to introduce alternative economic livelihoods. Unlike in the past, the process should be consultative and non-coercive.

Work with youth to interrupt recruitment by extremist groups.

One of the main causes of conflicts in the Horn of Africa is violent extremism. Al Shabab's presence is increasing in Somaliland and parts of Somalia. The researcher established that the group, known for committing acts of terrorism, is already feeding into the tension between the Ethiopian central state and its federal units. Youth unemployment and economic injustice in the Horn Africa provides them with ready recruits for pursuing their objective of establishing an Islamic state in the entire region. Working with the youth as a special category to address extremism can help interrupt their recruitment by Al Shabab and other insurgent groups. Advocacy work with concerned governments for youth inclusivity will support the work of addressing violent extremism.

Protect free speech and freedom of expression.

Journalists (media), national human rights defenders, and activists in the areas of human rights, peace and conflict, migration, and asylum are increasingly seeing their freedoms diminished. This has been reported in Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan, and Sudan.

Creating safe spaces or hubs to buffer the rights activists to speak freely and undertake their work without intimidation or fear is a critical priority. Those we interviewed indicated that there is a crisis with perceived shrinkage of civic spaces. Closing of civic spaces includes introduction of restrictive legislations that undermine constitutional and other global provisions for protection of freedom of association. The restrictions are manifested in internet shut down and connectivity in several Horn of Africa countries, where state control of these

spaces is increasingly common. Regional bodies like the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and African Union (AU) face an imminent threat of losing power as member states reprimand “rogue” colleague states in the name of respect for countries’ internal affairs.

Civic space and opportunities for dialogue arise both when new spaces are created and when policymakers extend invitations to existing spaces. Sometimes opportunities for dialogue are created by duty bearers, for instance non state actors, but because they do not control decision-making, their opportunity to advocate is limited. At the grassroots level, there is need to establish a common ground for dialogue and join work for policies at national or regional levels. However, given the diversity of the region and the tendency for many actors to work in silos, the linkages between human rights, peacebuilding, migration, climate, and gender justice etc. have remained unclear and undefined and not well articulated or addressed.

Address youth migration.

Youth who migrate are perceived as a source of conflict, especially in countries such as Eritrea, Somaliland, and Sudan. According to a 2019 Mo Ibrahim Forum Report¹, most migrants in Africa are under 35 years old. In addition, half are female, contrary to common perceptions. The plight of youth migrants is a major cause of concern, and it should be addressed from the root in country-specific ways, looking at the economic drivers of migration. This is an area that requires further research.

Interrupt hate speech.

As the United Nations has observed, “hate speech contributes to tensions and lays the groundwork for a wide range of discrimination and abuses. Efforts are needed to identify effective measures to stop hate speech and its resulting harms.”

Long term interventions more than 5 years

Shift the locus of security from the state to the people.

The long-term stability for the Horn of African region can be best achieved by shifting the locus of security from the state to the people. Human security arises from community-based socio-economic welfare, not regime survival, which is presently the focus of countries in the Horn.

The philosophical bases of *security from want* and *security from fear* should apply in the region. Putting pressure on the incumbent and future regimes could help to expand opportunities for citizens. Currently, human development has been neglected as leaders prioritize regime security; yet the region has sufficient resources to support dignified existence. There is a positive relationship between corruption and instability in the HOA region. Critical resources meant for development are known to have been diverted to powerful individuals.

¹ Mo Ibrahim Forum Report (2019): Africa’s Youth: Jobs or Migration? Demography, economic prospects and mobility, Mo Ibrahim Foundation

Corruption creates mistrust, suspicion, and lack of confidence in the government. Conversely, trust leads to transparency, the rule of law, and accountability.

Manage corruption by strengthening civic space.

Corruption thrives in political systems where institutions are weak and where people lack information and organization. This gap can be filled by strengthening civil society organizations in countries like Kenya, where they already exist, and revitalizing them in Ethiopia, South Sudan, and Uganda. This makes it possible for people to speak and act against corrupt government officials.

A vibrant civil society will strengthen state society relations, which is the missing link in the region's development trajectory. Regrettably, there is widespread apprehension that the civic space is shrinking in the entire region, leading to a reversal to dictatorship. There is a simultaneous need to strengthen key institutions such as the judiciary (especially those vested with persecution powers), the legislature, and anti-corruption authorities.

Recommendations for Policymakers

These recommendations are for the policy makers, noting that CSOs, FBOs must work closely with them and other stakeholders to ensure policies addressing the issues below are in place through advocacy.

Protect civic space.

Restrictions on freedom of speech, media, and internet access have become all too common in the Horn of Africa. Civil society organization, nongovernmental organizations, and others are often too afraid to speak out due to the threats of deregistration and in some cases disappearance of persons known to be critical to the government. The passing of restrictive laws, e.g. the *Cybercrime law* in south Sudan and the state using violent means to silence critics, may trigger more violence and mass protests, as seen in Sudan. Militarization is antithetical to peacebuilding and must be addressed too. There is a need for policymakers to seek peaceful solutions working with local organizations, Faith Based Organizations, regional organizations, and the donor community, among others.

Promote mass civic education and awareness.

The protection of freedoms due to shrinking of spaces is needed in the region. Mass civic education imparts information and creates awareness of civic morals and values, rights, and responsibilities of all citizens for effective participation in democratic spaces. An aware citizenry can help to restore the social contract and to establish a political order that focuses on citizenry needs, duties, and obligations to both politicians and the citizens. Increased civic awareness can make government institutions deliver so that citizens realize tangible dividends in the form of more responsive representation, improvements in economic opportunity, and quality service delivery at the local level.

Address youth unemployment.

Studies show positive relationship between youth unemployment and violent extremism in the region, as attested by the increasing number of young people either involved already or willing to get recruited into terrorist cells, ethnic militias, insurgency, etc. Youth unemployment is also a big waste of human capital, which the region needs for its economic growth. This phenomenon is likely to get worse for regional states; hence the need for joint policy stance. In addition, youth migration to Europe, the U.S., and the Middle East affects the region's future workforce potential. Policies for the humane treatment of migrants should be reviewed and strengthened. Migrants' policy implementation and gaps therein require deeper research to enhance advocacy work.

Take steps to stop child abduction, the child-soldier phenomenon, and other acts of child abuse.

Child abduction incidents persist in Jonglei State (South Sudan), while recruitment of minors into the ranks of militias and insurgency movements is a norm in most countries experiencing conflicts and wars. Beneath these overt incidents lie structural factors that expose children to different forms of abuse including child trafficking, sexual abuse, etc. This has a lasting traumatic effect on society, and the region needs a joint policy to tame the child abuse menace and to stop child abduction.

Commit to democracy and good governance.

Limited democratic space and the rule of law have emerged as the underpinning factors accounting for the region's instability. To tame this culture, a policy position is required which will bind regional states and governments to democracy and good governance as a building block for the Horn of Africa's stability.

Case Study of Binding Traditional Conflict Management Approaches

1. The Lokirama Peace Agreement (1973)

The Lokirama Peace Accord is a peace treaty between the Turkana of Kenya and the Matheniko of Uganda. It was signed in December 1973 as a commitment by both parties to peacefully co-exist. The accord derives its name from Lokirama, which is a remote town in Turkana County, at the Northwestern Kenya-Uganda border that is inhabited by the Turkana.

For many years before the agreement was signed, the Turkana of Kenya and the Matheniko (a Karamojong sub-tribe of Uganda) were embroiled in incessant inter-communal raids, which are common to pastoralist communities in the zone. The hostilities brewed by these conflicts brought untold suffering to both communities. It led to fatalities, decimation of livestock through cattle raids, inability to share resources (water and forage in each other's territory), and restrictions on cross border trade and intermarriages.

In 1973, elders from both communities struck an agreement after elaborate negotiation to end their conflict. The elders met at public gathering in Lokiriana and marked the solemn the event by burying hatchets - including guns, spears, arrows, traditional razor blades, and knives - as a sign of the end of animosity between the Turkana and the Matheniko. The elders poured milk, honey, and livestock blood in the pit where instruments of conflict were buried to make the agreement binding on both parties.

The Lokiriana Peace Accord has been a subject of intense academic study due to its binding nature on two neighbors who were traditional rivals. Since its signing in 1973, both communities migrate annually with their livestock into each other's territory whenever they experience drought or other forms of natural disaster, without involving their respective governments. The Turkana-based program officer with Practical Action observes "*a new security regime has evolved in the Kenya-Uganda border zone in which both do not anticipate aggression from the other but may work together to ward off threats from a common enemy.*"

In the recent past, for instance, the Matheniko have crossed over into the Turkana side of Kenyan border to avoid forceful disarmament in Karamoja region by the Uganda Army (NRA). Equally, the Turkana have always sought refuge in Moroto to avoid forceful disarmament or military reprisal by the Kenyan army. The locals say that cross border trade in livestock (and livestock products) and intermarriage between both communities has increased since the signing of the agreement. Humane disarmament through peaceful means, negotiations is critical across borders.

The Accord is celebrated annually by key stakeholders to uphold it and to provide a platform for pastoral communities from Ethiopia, Kenya, South Sudan, and Uganda to reflect on how they can contribute towards sustainable peace and development in the borderlands. These events are also utilized to award peace champions who have played a pivotal role in conflict management, like local kraal elders, reformed warriors, security officers, area Chiefs and the Kenya Police Reservists (KPRs) who have tactfully thwarted attacks and helped recover stolen livestock from other rival communities in the neighborhood such as the Jie and Dodoth (Uganda), Pokot (Kenya), Toposa (South Sudan) and Merile (Ethiopia).

Although the date for commemorating the event is not fixed, it is always graced by high-profile political and appointed leaders from all levels, including the central government of both Kenya and Uganda, Turkana County Government, and local and international civil society organizations. A symbolic monument for the accord has been erected at the exact hatchets burial site in Lokiriana for commemoration.

2. Keiyo-Tugen Peace Agreement (1915)

Like other pastoralist communities that share borders, hostilities between Keiyo and Tugen existed long before the colonial period. Historically, both communities fought and raided livestock from each other for restocking after decimation (caused by drought) and to raise cows to pay as bride price. Boundary disputes due to the ever-changing River Kerio course on the lower northern sections also caused perennial conflicts. As with the Turkana-Metheniko case, these hostilities caused untold suffering to the communities. It led to loss of human lives,

livestock, and suspicions between the Keiyo and Tugen until 1915, when they agreed to come together into reconciliation, which they marked by signing a peace pact.

Presided over by elders from both communities, the Keiyo-Tugen (KETU) Peace Pact was defined by a set of taboos (*Kigirei*) and values which has helped both communities co-exist peacefully. These values were manifested in the sharing of resources and labour, including grazing fields, salt licks, and the River Kerio and its tributaries, which serves as a source of water for livestock and domestic use. According to a key informant, “*goats from the Tugen can today cross over in the morning to Keiyo land, graze and then go back to Tugen land in the evening.*” In other words, neither the Tugen nor Keiyo would hold on, kill, or steal the livestock from each other. Both communities also agreed to intermarry and to form “one family” by putting away their communal differences and forging close relationships between the relatives who turn out to be in-laws.

More importantly, *Kigirei* has evolved from the pact as an unwritten code of conduct, (the ancestral charter), which regulates individuals’ conduct, inter-personal behavior, and inter-communal relations. In particular, the pact restrains individuals from committing crimes, including theft, murder, slander, rape, and cursing others without elders’ sanction, among others. Its custodians are the elders, who are held in high esteem as adjudicators of justice in society. *Kigirei* is also responsible for the widely held belief in Keiyo and *Tugen* that those who violate the peace oath would face dire consequences some of which include nose bleeding, temporal insanity (especially for those who steal honey from other people’s beehives), death, and collateral curse.

The rituals and oaths, which accompanied the 1915 peace pact, are periodically renewed to remind both communities about their responsibility to each other. These renewals tend to coincide with age-set cycles and the emergence of disasters like droughts, famine, livestock diseases, which causes stress and instability in society. The pact has been renewed four times since it was signed, in 1955, 1970, 1974 and 1998.

While interference by the state (and its political elites), and the setting in of new capitalist values (including individual land ownership) are weakening some of the key tenets of the pact, the bond between the *Tugen* and the Keiyo and their resolve to avoid hostilities against each other remains.

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