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# Parliament-Civil Society Dialogue in Ethiopia

The Parliamentary Women's Caucus-  
Ethiopian CSOs Initiative

In commemoration of 10 December Human Rights Day: "Dignity, Freedom and  
Justice for All"



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### *The Parliamentary Women's Caucus-Ethiopian CSOs Initiative*

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9 December 2022, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

### PROCEEDINGS and KEY OUTCOMES

#### Introduction/Background

This Proceedings and Key Outcomes Document (Draft) is a background material that parliament and the civil society sector in Ethiopia may build on towards establishing strategic collaboration/partnership/coordination platform or mechanisms, such as through the signing of a more detailed Memorandum of Understanding, Terms of Reference or any other appropriate instrument of choice.

In light of the above, the following paragraphs provide a summary of key points discussed and proposals made to realize the commonly shared objective of laying the ground for an effective, sustainable and constructive parliamentary-civil society engagement to work on diverse thematic areas, including democratic governance, peace building, human rights, gender equality and achieving sustainable development goals.

1. The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) House of Peoples' Representatives (HoPR)-**Women's Caucus**, the Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations Council (ECSOC), and Consortium of Ethiopian Human Rights Organizations (CEHRO), with the technical support of Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights-East Africa Regional Office (OHCHR-EARO), organized a Parliament-Civil Society Dialogue in Ethiopia, hereinafter referred to as "the Dialogue", on 09 December 2022, at the premises of the HoPRs, as part of commemorating the 2022 International Human Rights Day.
2. Honourable Alemitu Abebe (Ms.) HoPR-Women's Caucus, Vice-Chair, officiated the Dialogue, stating that "the protection and promotion of human rights is not something that should be left as traditional role of government alone, rather CSOs and other stakeholders should play their role to promote human rights of all citizens as well as to foster democracy, peace building, and overall development". Honourable Alemitu also added, "Commemorating the 75<sup>th</sup> international Human Rights Day in the premises of HoPRs entails many positive implications. It shows HoPR's commitment to ensuring human rights, and commitment to work with CSOs in areas such as peaceful conflict resolution and peace building processes."

3. Mesud Gebeyehu (Mr.), Executive Director, CEHRO said that “CSOs and Parliament share the same constituency and work towards the betterment of the same people, i.e., the Ethiopian people, and hence working together would help to achieve the desired outcome”.
4. Henock Melese (Mr.), Executive Director, Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations Council (ECSOC), noted that “commemorating the International Human Rights Day in the premises of parliament chambers is symbolic as it is indicative of the government’s attention to human rights and opens up the door for sector-wide collaboration and coordination.” He added that “such kinds of collaboration between parliament and CSOs is instrumental, has the potential to collaborate on many important areas, such as peaceful resolution of conflicts, establishing sustainable peace, contributes to improved human rights protection, and as such the initiative should further be strengthened”. He expressed ESCOC’s commitment to contribute to this collective effort.
5. Fasikaw Molla (Mr.), Vice-Director, Authority for Civil Society Organizations (ACSO), stated, “the interaction between CSOs and HoPRs should be based on the values and principles of the FDRE constitution, and it’s encouraging that the government has undertaken progressive measures including the repeal and replacement of the previously regressive CSOs proclamation to broaden the civic space and create an enabling environment for CSOs to operate fully, actively and effectively”. He also added “to further strengthen the already started reform process in Ethiopia, there is a need to establish robust platforms through which both parties [CSOs and HoPRs] can regularly interact, and that’s the reason behind our presence here today.”
6. OHCHR’s Deputy Regional Representative, Charles Ndiema Kwemoi (Mr.), commended parliament’s commitment to hold this dialogue inside its chamber and highlighted the importance of this year’s commemorative theme of “Dignity, Justice and Freedom for All”. He added, “the formalization of CSOs-HoPRs relationship would enable the CSOs to present well-articulated views of the public to one of the most important branches of government, the HoPRs, and gives the opportunity for parliament benefit from evidence-based inputs from CSOs for its consideration while drafting and endorsing laws, and beyond”. Mr. Kwemoi noted that “there is so much that CSOs and parliament can collaborate on to realize national priorities, such as advancing transitional justice- one of the key national priority areas that were included in the recently signed peace agreement”. He committed that the OHCHR-EARO will continue to provide the required support to parliament, CSOs and other organs of government in advancing human rights, promoting and protecting civic space, and gender equality.
7. The Dialogue was attended by a total of 79 participants(40 men and 39 women), 51 of which are Members of Parliament(MPs) and senior leadership of various parliamentary committees, including that of the Justice, Legal and Good Governance Affairs Committee and Women’s caucus, while the rest 28 were representatives of the Ethiopian CSOs working on human rights, women’s and children’s rights, children, development, humanitarian affairs and other thematic areas as well.

8. The Dialogue started with OHCHR-EARO's presentation on "Effective Parliament-CSOs Engagement: Best Practices. The presentation highlighted key characteristics of Parliament-CSOs engagement/collaboration on parliamentary functions, including in legislative, oversight for accountability and good governance and budgetary approval processes/functions. Mr. John Ugolo, representing OHCHR-EARO, noted the potential for CSOs to play critical role in legislative processes, including through public hearings, regular interaction by providing information, data and policy briefings at parliamentary hearings on diverse areas including sustainable development goals, human rights, gender, environment, good governance, economy and poverty reduction, to assist parliament fulfil its oversight and budget allocation mandates/responsibilities. OHCHR-EARO's representative shared good practices, including from Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, India, Zimbabwe, and the European Union.
9. On the session that shared parliament's perspectives on the Parliament-CSOs engagement, Her Excellency Dr Misrak Mekonnen (Ms.) noted that several initiatives have been taken by the government to ensure improved civic space, including the repeal and replacement of the CSOs legislation. Excellency noted that much remains to be desired on the side of CSOs to make use of opportunities to strategically engaging with the parliament, including participating in public hearings. She encouraged CSOs to regularly engage with the parliament and participate in decision making processes.
10. Honourable Aster Keftaw (Ms.), executive member of the Women's Caucus, explained about the functions and responsibilities of the Caucus. Honourable MP indicated the following as some of the expectations for improved Parliament-CSOs engagement: building the capacity of Women's Caucus, exchange lessons, knowledge and skills, enable Caucus members to advance gender equality and contribute to efforts aimed at: increasing Ethiopian women's participation in political participation and decision making processes, address discrimination and inequalities, ending gender based violations, mainstream gender in laws and policies, ensure laws and policies are child rights friendly, including through gathering inputs through convening consultations, and identify gaps in laws and policies.
11. The Dialogue continued with ECSOC's Presentation on "Civil Society Organizations-Legislature Engagement In Ethiopia: A Framework" The presentation highlights the context of the current CSO sector; the CSO-HOPR engagement framework including the areas of engagement ; forms of engagement; principles of engagement; and ethical standards of engagement and the possible challenges hindering the realization of the CSO-HOPR engagements. Mr. Zelalem Eshetu , Legal and Policy Advisor of ECSOC, noted that discussions are ongoing with the HoPR Secretariat Office to put in place strategic engagement framework, including serious consideration to sign a Memorandum of Understanding. He noted that the absence of an umbrella organ to coordinate the efforts of CSOs, competitions and fragmentations among CSOs within the sector; capacity constraints within the sector and the opacity of the past HOPR were the main obstacles to establish effective collaboration between CSOs and HOPR. He further noted that the

2019 reform has brought a paradigm shift in the CSOs sector by introducing a self-regulatory framework led by the Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations Council (ECSOC), which is an umbrella & higher governing body of the CSO sector with a legal mandate to represent and coordinate civil societies. This in tandem with the openness of the HOPR creates an opportunity to establish and then deepen CSO- HOPR collaborations.

12. Mr. Zelalem added that the cooperation/collaboration between CSOs and parliament should be guided strategically and on the basis of a clear framework.. He noted that such engagement framework is expected to cover wide ranging areas, including areas of engagement, forms of engagement, principles of engagement, code of ethics, etc.<sup>1</sup>
13. With respect to potential areas of engagement, the ECSOC argued that CSOs can participate in legislative activities (by participating in legislation preparation ; providing evidence-based opinions and comments on bills ;communicating of social needs ); oversight ( by providing expert assistance in committee work; assisting and sharpening the utilization of oversight tools such as hearing executive reports undertaking visits; questioning and answering) and budgetary process by providing simplified briefings about budget analysis and public expenditure monitoring and associated recommendations to individual parliamentarians and committees and by developing detailed recommendations ahead of budget debates. As to the mode of collaboration, He suggested that ECSOC and HOPR can start their engagement by sharing information and they can be deepen their collaborations into consultations and dialogues in which the sector and the HOPR exchange ideas, inputs and feedbacks regularly.
14. The ECSOC representative noted that the two respective entities could consider establishing a formal partnership arrangement that enable CSOS to co-manage the activities of the legislature by directly involving in each standing committee , which he described as the “highest form of engagement” towards realizing commonly shared objectives.
15. The ECSOC representative emphasised the need to adhering to important ethical standards and principles and highlighted participation, trust, accountability, autonomy, independence, respect for applicable laws (including the FDRE constitution, CSOs proclamation, etc. parliamentary code of conduct), honesty and transparency, confidentiality, accountability, non-discrimination, gender responsive/inclusive approach in all interactions, engagements, support, collaboration and coordination activities.
16. The panel discussion was followed by a moderated open dialogue on “Possible Modalities of Parliament and CSOs Engagement in Ethiopia.” This moderated Open Dialogue identified and clarified the key determinant practical/ethical/normative issues towards

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<sup>1</sup> With respect to areas of engagement, Mr. Zelalem noted that Parliament-CSOs engagement should be beyond participating in public calls for legislative processes. He stated that while the contribution in preparing and presenting informed and evidence-based opinions and comments on draft bills is commendable, CSOs should also work more in relaying social needs of communities, contribute to parliament’s oversight mandate, such as through extending expert assistance in the day-to day work of parliamentary committee works and participate in budgetary allocation.

establishing a meaningful and workable engagement modality. Key issues discussed during this session include whether parliament-CSO collaboration/engagement should be ad-hoc or systematic, the ethical/normative considerations that should guide their respective engagement, what the communication channel should be, expected roles and responsibilities of CSOs and Parliament, etc.

## **SUMMARY OF KEY OUTCOMES**

The following are the key take-aways of the Dialogue:

### **I. Affirmation of shared roles, responsibilities and commitment**

17. Cognizant of differences, distinct functions and responsibilities, the meeting acknowledged and recognised the positive role of both CSOs and FDRE parliamentary Women's Caucus (and parliament, broadly speaking) in advancing, protecting and fulfilling human rights, address discrimination and advance equality in various decision making processes, including review of existing laws/policies/plans/programmes and/or adoption of new ones, undertaking oversight functions to ensure accountability, achieve good governance, promote democracy, and in budget allocation processes.
18. Despite differences in the source of legitimacy, applicable governing laws, codes of conduct and other instruments that the respective entities are expected to comply with, principled and strategic collaboration/partnership between CSOs operating in Ethiopia and the FDRE parliamentary Women's Caucus (and beyond) can be mutually beneficial for both entities to fulfil the needs, rights and demands of their respective constituencies.

### **II. Recognition for a more strategic, sustained and structured engagement modality**

19. The meeting took stock of global good practices of constrictive and effective parliamentary-civil society cooperation in different parts of the world, including the use of public petitions, citizens' initiative, studies/surveys/assessments of CSOs, regular attendance by the latter of parliamentary hearings that resulted in improved protection of rights and participation in decision making processes.
20. Overall, the meeting reached consensus that for the parliament-CSO engagement to be constructive and effective, it should be regular/institutionalised (instead of ad-hoc) but flexible enough to respond to emerging developments/concerns, sustainable and based on ethical rules of conduct.

### **III. Possible thematic areas for collaboration, coordination and support**

21. Subject to further discussion and agreement, some of the possible areas of CSOs-parliament engagement raised and discussed include, but are not limited to:
  - 21.1 achieving lasting peace/stabilities throughout the country,
  - 21.2 participatory, gender inclusive and victims centred transitional justice,
  - 21.3 implementation of Sustainable Development Goals,
  - 21.4 protection of the civic space

21.5 human rights, including translation and publishing of ratified international and regional instruments into the official Negarette Gazzete, ratification of those not ratified yet, and following-up implementation recommendations emanating from international and regional human rights mechanisms, etc.

#### IV. Way Forward

22. Participants agreed to further continue the Dialogue and expand the scope of participation to include all parliamentary committees towards establishing parliament-wide sustained strategic and effective collaboration/cooperation, beyond the Women's Caucus.
23. Participants agreed to explore the formalization of their engagement through a written and more formal framework, such as through the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding, Terms of Reference or any other appropriate and mutually agreed instrument of choice. Particularly, they agreed to advance the dialogue between ECSOC & HOPR to establish standing CSO- HOPR platforms to strengthen the participation of the CSO sector in the legislative, oversight and budgetary functions of the legislature.<sup>2</sup>
24. For OHCR-EARO to continue providing technical assistance, including refining this draft Proceedings and Key Outcomes Document, which shall be circulated to participants of the dialogue and finalised once input/comment are incorporated.

Done at Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

09 December 2022

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<sup>2</sup> See

[https://www.facebook.com/hoprparliament/posts/pfbid026gEGecRvD5YQuTC5GorYaXJew6mxDpyKbMw7UykYFxXcRwGWbmpnaDeS2UAnAfPgl?\\_cft\\_\\_\[0\]=AZVnZQF64GY76O0KaYA7VidAXW9PchlA7k7ss7wrSHkxWQEW\\_jL3xJk4-tESHCRxlls2ssFFAHbKz1pdCwFKX93Su5zfWK\\_aM8\\_BPxBGyyw6qaTPXiV7I0cFE5Kvdz5liddmo3\\_nVFie--mu0iDjUnhi4Ezzlqee56AT4rh2NvOmh8QN8uc\\_k\\_EHa80DDDzctGo&\\_tn\\_=%2CO%2CP-R](https://www.facebook.com/hoprparliament/posts/pfbid026gEGecRvD5YQuTC5GorYaXJew6mxDpyKbMw7UykYFxXcRwGWbmpnaDeS2UAnAfPgl?_cft__[0]=AZVnZQF64GY76O0KaYA7VidAXW9PchlA7k7ss7wrSHkxWQEW_jL3xJk4-tESHCRxlls2ssFFAHbKz1pdCwFKX93Su5zfWK_aM8_BPxBGyyw6qaTPXiV7I0cFE5Kvdz5liddmo3_nVFie--mu0iDjUnhi4Ezzlqee56AT4rh2NvOmh8QN8uc_k_EHa80DDDzctGo&_tn_=%2CO%2CP-R)