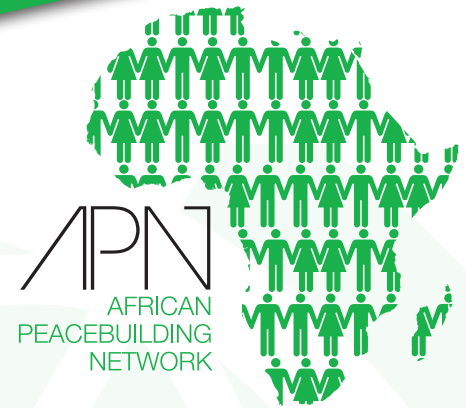




SSRC



**APN Briefing Note  
Number 36  
May 2023**

# Working Toward Peaceful Relations between Oromia and Somali Regional States, Ethiopia: Policy Options

By Ketema Wakjira Debela

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Institutionalize horizontal inter-regional states relations

The consultative horizontal IGR forums can create and promote harmonious relations between regional states, enabling them to resolve conflicts in a win-win and amicable manner without interference from the federal government.

### Promote existing bilateral agreement for joint development and peace programs

The bilateral agreement for joint development and peace projects/ programs between the two regions should be reframed in terms of the IGR Proclamation 1231/2021, a legal framework that aims to strongly institutionalize the IGR system of Ethiopia, including horizontal IGR forums.

### Empower traditional and cultural institutions to resolve conflict

Traditional and cultural institutions can play complementary roles to institutions and forums of IGRs for resolving interregional conflicts.

### Clear demarcation of interregional state boundary

As far as the 2004 referendum was applied as a final and legal solution to resolve boundary/border-related conflict between the two regions, discrediting the perspective that the result of this referendum detrimentally affects the rule of law and the respect for popular votes.

In recent years, Ethiopia has increasingly faced violent conflicts which are intergovernmental, interparty, and interethnic in nature. In this regard, the conflict between Oromia and Somali regional states, which used to be local and confined to border areas prior to 2017, expanded its scale from local to the regional level, from clan to ethnic level. By drawing on research about intergovernmental conflict resolution and peacebuilding between Oromia and the Somali Regional State, this policy brief identifies the root causes of conflict along the borderlands between Oromo and Somali, examines the effectiveness of the measures taken to address the conflict, and recommends key areas for policy interventions to resolve the conflict.

Unlike the previous conflicts, the most recent Oromia-Somali conflict transcended local boundaries, drawing in multilevel actors at the local, state, and federal levels. The recent conflict between Oromia and Somali in 2017/2018 is complex. Some informants describe it as an inter-ethnic conflict, while others see it as a territorial and boundary conflict, based on attempts towards territorial expansion and claims for territorial self-rule in some adjacent areas. There are also some who describe it as resource conflict over scarce land and water resources due to their depletion by recurrent drought and environmental degradation.

Various attempts, including dialogue and negotiations, have left the contested border issue unresolved from its inception. In 2004, a referendum was conducted to decide the fate of 422 *kebeles* (small Ethiopian administrative units of land) on the grounds that the two regions were unable to peacefully resolve their disputes over their boundary. Though the demarcation of the boundary was delayed up until 2012/2013, the 2004 referendum helped in the demarcation of boundaries in many *kebeles* save for a few, which became part of the sources for the recent conflicts. Moreover, cognizant of the fact that the two regions share a 1,400 km

**Ketema Wakjira Debela (PhD)** is an assistant professor at the Center for Federalism and Governance Studies of Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia. He is a 2022 APN Individual Research Fellow, and his research interest centers on federalism, intergovernmental relations, conflict resolution, displacement, and urban local governance. He can be reached at: [dwketema@yahoo.com](mailto:dwketema@yahoo.com).

long boundary with established socio-cultural, economic/trade, and religious ties, the governments of Oromia and Somali Regional State signed bilateral agreements in 2006 for joint peace and development endeavors. Oromia and Somali regional states are said to be the pioneers in terms of establishing joint institutions for dealing with matters of shared concerns for peace and development. However, this bilateral agreement did not prevent the unprecedented conflict in 2017/2018 between Oromia and Somali.

Due to the change in the political landscape since 2018, there have been cordial relations between the political elites of the two regional states. However, durable institutions for consolidating good and constructive horizontal relations are yet to be built. It is therefore necessary for the peacebuilding initiatives to be implemented to resolve the long-running conflict between the two regional states. Towards this end, the following policy recommendations are being put forward for the attention of Oromia, Somali, and the federal governments of Ethiopia:

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### ● Institutionalize horizontal inter-regional states relations

The consultative horizontal IGR forums can create and promote harmonious relations between regional states, enabling them to resolve conflicts in a win-win and amicable manner without interference from the federal government. In fact, horizontal relations between Oromia and Somali have been recognized for their role in cooperatively addressing issues of common concern between regional states within the Ethiopian federation. However, such IGR forums should be underpinned by principles of equality, mutual respect, partnership, consultation, consensus, and compromise. Responsible IGR institutions at the federal level, like the House of Federation and the Ministry of Peace, need to support and do capacity-building tasks for strongly institutionalizing horizontal inter-regional state relations with the aim of preventing and managing conflicts and building a culture of dialogue between mutually interdependent regional states such as Oromia and Somali.

### ● Promote existing bilateral agreement for joint development and peace programs

First, the bilateral agreement for joint development and peace projects/programs between the two

regions should be reframed in terms of the IGR Proclamation 1231/2021, a legal framework that aims to strongly institutionalize the IGR system of Ethiopia, including horizontal IGR forums. Second, the capacity of the Joint Development and Peace Program coordination office based at Jigjiga must be rebuilt through professional staffing and an adequate budget allocation.

### ● Empower traditional and cultural institutions to resolve conflict

Traditional and cultural institutions can play complementary roles to institutions and forums of IGRs for resolving interregional conflicts. The political elites at all levels of government should allow clan and religious leaders to resolve conflict according to established values and norms between the two communities. This also includes strengthening local institutions and the practices of sharing scarce resources such as grazing land and water at the border areas.

### ● Clear demarcation of interregional state boundary

As far as the 2004 referendum was applied as a final and legal solution to resolve boundary/border-related conflict between the two regions, discrediting the perspective that the result of this referendum detrimentally affects the rule of law and the respect for popular votes. Besides, bilateral agreements for the joint peace and development program were not effective because of continued territorial/boundary contests in some adjacent places between the two regional states. Thus, the result of the 2004 referendum needs to be effectively implemented in the remaining *kebeles*.

## CONCLUSION

Work toward sustainable peaceful relations between Oromia and Somali regional states requires promoting traditional and cultural institutions as structures with the capacity to resolve local and clan-level conflicts at border areas and enhance the clear demarcation of boundaries and pocket areas based on the outcome of the 2004 referendum. This will also help in nurturing the strong institutionalization of horizontal inter-regional forums and joint peace and development endeavors within the spirit of IGR Proclamation No. 1231/2021.