

REGIONAL DEMOCRACY CONFERENCE ON THE HORN OF AFRICA

Held in Addis Ababa

Addis Ababa, March 11th - 12th, 2024, the Horn Center for Democracy (HCD), officially launched the Regional Democracy Conference on the Horn of Africa (HoA) at the Radisson Blu Hotel. HCD Board Chair Sinkinesh Beyene, in her welcoming remarks shared the exciting journey in the establishment and works of HCD and extended gratitude for HCD partners and the staff for organizing the Conference. HCD Partners Institute for Security Studies (ISS) represented by Dawit Yohannes; and Joachim Beijmo, the Head of Regional Development Cooperation in Africa at the Swedish Embassy in Addis Ababa reiterated the much-needed relevance of HCD and the conference for the HoA region. The Conference was officially opened by Hassan Shire, the Executive Director for DefendDefenders and the AfricanDefenders-Pan-African Human Rights Defenders Network who gave a Key note speech. The opening session was also distinguished by the captivating orchestral performance by Hadinko Band.



The Conference featured key presentations by Dr. Dereje Feyissa on democratization contexts, challenges, and prospects in the HoA, a study commissioned by the HCD and Dr. Muhammad Dan on the conflict sensitivity of democratic processes and institutions in the region. Panelists, Dr. Sarah Bireete, a founding Partner and Executive Director for Center for Constitutional Governance (CCG), a Uganda Constitutional Watchdog (Non-Governmental Organization), discussed democracy's foundational pillars, stressing the rule of law and checks and balances, while referencing specific country experiences within the HoA region. Building on these discussions, Dr. Michael Voldemariam, an associate professor in the School of Public Policy at the University of Maryland, examined the impacts of violence and conflict on democratization, alongside political culture considerations. Prof. Kidane Mengisteb, a Professor of African Studies and Political Science at the Pennsylvania State University, provided an overview of the democratization journey in HoA countries since the early 1980s to unravel more contemporary democratization challenges and prospects, setting the stage for a lively discussion based on participant inquiries. The morning session was chaired by Mr. Brian Kagoro, managing director of Programs at the Open Society Foundations.

MARCH 11-12, 2024
ADDIS ABABA



In the afternoon session Dr. Seife Ayalew, presented the study findings on the Exploratory Mapping of Pro-Democracy Civic Actors and civil Society in the HoA. The panelists, Mutemi Wa Kiama, A fervent revolutionary and community organizer, highlighted experiences of social movements and community organizations to amplify voices in the democratization processes. Hassan Shire, DefendDefenders-Executive Director, reflected on prospects and impediments in the Civic Space and shared a lived experience in coalition building among civil actors in the region. Gilbert Sendugwa from the Africa Freedom of Information Centre (AFIC) briefly discussed the potentials and challenges of the digital space; its role in the democratization and peace building processes including youth participation and the need for policy review and reform to realize the potential of the digital space. The Session was chaired by Professor Kwasi Prempeh, who is the Executive Director of the Ghana Center for Democratic Development, and he stressed the importance of coalition building and solidarity to amplify voices, providing protection, and capacity building for civil actors in the region.



ADDIS ABABA



Session three of the Conference continued in the afternoon with presentation by Dr. Addiswork Tilahun, on Gender in Democratic and Governance process in the HoA, a study commissioned by HCD. Panelists, Namara Claire, women and marginalized group rights defender, reflected on participation of women in democratic process and the impact of social norms. Naomi Mwangi from Equality Now, briefly discussed the legal and policy framework and the implementation gaps for women equal participation in democratic processes and institutions. Azmera Kassahun, an expert in gender equality, women rights and inclusion, also highlighted the specific challenges hindering women's full and meaningful participation in politics and governance. The session was chaired by Dr. Elshaday Kifle, a lecturer and researcher on women rights and governance in Ethiopia.



Notable discussions unfolded during the second day, the fourth session of the Conference; Charting the Way Forward: Expert Opinions on Strategic Interventions. Professor Kwasi Prempeh, Executive Director of the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), illuminated the session with insights on cross-border coalition building. His reflections on the West African Democracy Solidarity Network (WADEMOS) highlighted its pivotal role in advancing and defending democracy across the region. Professor Prempeh also underscored the significance of inter-governmental organizations, such as ECOWAS, in fortifying democratic consolidation. Dr. Adem Kassouba accentuated the imperative of social engagement in cementing the democratization process. He delved into the requisite forms of democracy and governance, advocating for an environment conducive to open discourse and strategic interventions. Frew Demeke, HCD Executive Director chaired the panel, concluded the discussions with a profound statement: Democracy transcends elections and necessitates broader interventions to fulfill and deliver public demands.



The second day continued with a breakout session, culminated in vital insights for HCD's efforts to foster democracy in the HoA. In the breakout session dedicated to "Crafting Policy & Programmatic Interventions for HCD," participants engaged deeply in strategizing democratization interventions in a context oriented and locally grown democratization in the region, conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and gender mainstreaming within democratization initiatives at a programmatic level. They also discussed strategies for coalition and network building. Key areas identified for engagement includes research for evidence-based advocacy, intersectional and inter-regional analysis to grasp unique democratization contexts, knowledge production and drive influences, program design using conflict-sensitive approaches, mapping organizations active in peace and security within the HoA, and amplifying grassroots efforts. The major takeaways from the breakout sessions are presented to the house by Yemisrach Kebede, HCD's Program Director and Rabel Desalegn, Advocacy and Communications Advisor.

The two days Conference concluded with the closing remarks delivered by Mr. Frew Demeke, Executive Director of the HCD. In his address, he expressed heartfelt gratitude to the HCD team for their meticulous organization of the Conference and extended appreciation to the participants for their active engagement in supporting the democratization initiatives championed by the HCD. Mr. Frew also assured attendees that the Conference would become Annual Tradition. At the end, participants pledged to collaborate closely, offering unwavering support and assistance to realize HCD's vision in nurturing Democracy in the HoA region.

