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## **Closing Civic Space and Inclusive Development in Ethiopia**

Tony Roberts

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Available from:

Communications and Engagement Unit, Institute of Development Studies, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK

Tel: +44 (0) 1273 915637

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# Closing Civic Space and Inclusive Development in Ethiopia

Tony Roberts

## Summary

This paper presents findings from a case study exploring the prospects for measuring the impacts of restricted civic space on development in Ethiopia. It is part of a larger inquiry into the phenomenon of restrictions on civil society activity around the world, including but not only in developing countries, most notably in the past decade. This case study of Ethiopia was a rapid exercise to test an approach to measuring the relationship between closures of civic space and development outcomes by tracing the implications of restrictions on NGO activities in relation to poverty, hunger and food insecurity, gender equality, with a focus on efforts to reach the poorest and most marginalized populations. The research involved gathering multiple sources of data, published and grey literature, and interview material, and analysing it in relation to a conceptual framework proposing mechanisms through which closing civic space impacts on development outcomes. The paper concludes that there are good reasons to believe that recent restrictions on civil society, and in particular on NGO activities, have played or have the potential to play a clear and adverse role in Ethiopia's development, and specifically to the extent that it is inclusive, equitable, and 'leaves no one behind'. NGO service delivery capacity has been severely reduced in key areas by the closing of civic space in Ethiopia. Effects include that legal aid and advocacy for women and children is no longer widely available, while 1,741 NGOs were closed down completely; many of the remaining NGOs now have significantly reduced service delivery capacity, especially in the areas of advocacy for gender, ethnic and minority rights.

Wider implications include clear signs that some of the most marginalised are being left behind due to regulations that impose strict limits on NGO travel costs, and which mitigate against rural outreach, inclusion and participation. In addition to direct controls on NGOs, an effort to restrict the media and to clamp down on new virtual public spaces has also shaped the Ethiopian experience with closing space. NGOs have had to curtail their service provision in the areas of research, policy analysis, legal advocacy, rights and campaigning and have restructured themselves around less-politically contentious areas of service provision such as food-aid and poverty-relief. There is currently no civic capacity to hold the Government to account at a time of large-scale forced evictions, state killing of protestors, mass arrests and penal violence without recourse to legal process, and less capacity to support those suffering gender-based violence, detained without trial, or ethnic groups and minorities suffering disadvantage and being left behind. There is growing optimism that the new political leadership since 2018 may lead to a reconsideration of restrictions on civic space; if so, conditions for and measurable contributions of civil society deserve to be tracked and monitored closely, to help make the case for civic space in relation to development.

The patchy evidence and hard figures available provide robust enough indications that the restricted civic space is likely to mean increased inequality and exclusion, and to reverse progress made towards poverty reduction and food security, at least for many of the most marginalized and impoverished groups. However, existing data systems are too weak to support aggregate analysis of the impacts on NGO beneficiary populations, even within the selected policy domains or sectors. Other impacts included qualitative changes in programme approaches, towards more welfarist service delivery models with less change of transformative change and greater chance of dependence. Services may also be lost in other policy domains not surveyed here, and while many NGOs adapt to the restrictions and the generalized 'chill' in the political climate, the human and organizational costs of such adaptation tend to go uncounted. Hard-to-reach areas, including regions undergoing conflict,

were among those likely to suffer the most, and about which verifiable empirical data was most scarce. It would seem that data collection and research is particularly vital in such areas, to help establish the losses or changes in civil society provision, as well as any replacement Government or Government-sponsored activity. The restraining role of civil society and free media on macroeconomic management and corruption, key mechanisms of political and economic crisis in developing countries, are further factors likely to add to the developmental costs of closing civic space, even if not immediately apparent. The new political leadership gives reasons to believe that civic space may reopen in Ethiopia, providing a valuable opportunity to track and assess the contributions of civil society to inclusive, equitable and sustainable development in a low-income country which has made rapid, yet problematically uneven, development progress.

**Keywords:** Ethiopia; civil society; NGOs; closing civil space; EPRDF, inclusion.

**Tony Roberts** is a Research Fellow in the Digital and Technology Cluster at the Institute of Development Studies. He has been working at the intersection of digital technologies, international development and social justice since 1988. Tony founded and directed two international development agencies, Coda International and Computer Aid International before completing doctoral research with women using participatory video in Zambia. He joined IDS after a period as a Research Fellow in the Gender Technology Lab of the United Nations University (UNU-CS). His research focuses on power, participation and digital technologies in international development.

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## Acronyms

ACLED	Armed Conflict and Location and Event Data Project
CSA	Federal Charities and Societies Agency
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CSSP	Civil Society Support Programme
CUD	Coalition for Unity and Democracy
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
ESAT	Ethiopian Satellite Radio and Television
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GTP	Growth and Transformation Plan
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OMN	Oromo Media Network
PSNP	Productive Safety Net Programme
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
TPLF	Tigrayan People's Liberation Front

# 1 Introduction: the implications of closing civic space for development in Ethiopia

This paper presents findings from a case study designed to explore the prospects for measuring the impacts of restricted civic space on development in Ethiopia. It is part of a larger inquiry into the phenomenon of restrictions on civil society activity around the world, including but not only in developing countries, most notably in the past decade. Civil society refers to all forms of voluntary organization that mediate between the state, market, and societal actors and interests. In developing countries, civil society is often taken to refer to often aid- or foreign-funded non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) involved in service delivery or providing a 'watchdog' function, holding Government and other actors to account. However, civil society generally means a broader category of those active within the civic space to include the media and human rights defenders, professional associations, academia and thinktanks, as well as social movements such as land and indigenous people's rights groups, women's and peasant movements, workers' organizations, and environmental activists.

A key overall conclusion of an initial literature review (Hossain *et al* 2018) was that globally, civic space had changed rather than shrunk, and that new actors and spaces for civic engagement, including digital, have flourished in the past decade. Yet it is clear that groups with liberal democratic and human rights mandates and/or receiving international aid financing have been directly targeted. Land and indigenous rights defenders and their supporters in the media, academia, and the wider agrarian or social movements of which they are part, have faced particularly deadly opposition in a number of settings. Advocates of freedom of speech and association, minority rights or empowerment of marginalized groups, or environmental protection, also face new more restrictive laws and regulations, arrests and detention, as well as more informal efforts such as pressures to align, a 'chilling' atmosphere that restrains public debate, stigmatization and impunity for attacks on civil society. The present case study is part of an inquiry aimed specifically to assess the implications of closing civic space for development. It is focussed on the implications for achieving specific 'frontline' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) such as poverty and hunger reduction, gender equality, health and education, outcomes which may broadly be termed 'inclusive development', recognizing the SDG principles of equity, inclusion, sustainability, and 'leaving no one behind'.

## 1.1 About this paper

This paper is organized as follows. In this first section, a summary of key findings about the measurability of development outcomes in Ethiopia is provided. The conceptual basis of the study is briefly outlined, followed by a description of the methodology used. Section 2 sets out the main understandings of the political economy of inclusive development in relation to the specific development challenges facing Ethiopia, situating these within a typology of political settlements. Section 3 describes the role of civil society in development in Ethiopia, and discusses the changing nature of the 'fit' between civic actors and those in the state or political society, including episodes of closure and contention over the roles of NGOs and CSOs in the development process. Section 4 sets out key episodes of closure and contention for civil society, traces the outcomes of regulations on NGO activities in specific policy domains, as well as their impacts on service delivery capacity and on beneficiary populations. Section 6 concludes with discussion of the measurable impacts and lessons in Ethiopia, and the wider implications for the analysis of the impacts of civic space on development.

## 1.2 Key findings of the Ethiopia case study

This case study of Ethiopia was a rapid exercise to test an approach to measuring the relationship between closures of civic space and development outcomes by tracing the implications of restrictions on NGO activities in relation to poverty, hunger and food insecurity and gender equality, with a focus on efforts to reach the poorest and most marginalized populations. This involved gathering multiple sources of data, published and grey literature, and interview material, and analysing it in relation to a conceptual framework discussed in more detail below.

The paper concludes that there are good reasons to believe that recent restrictions on civil society, and in particular on NGO activities, have played or have the potential to play a clear and adverse role in Ethiopia's development, and specifically to the extent that it is inclusive, equitable, and 'leaves no one behind', as the SDG principles put it. NGO service delivery capacity has been severely reduced in key areas by the closing of civic space in Ethiopia with results including that legal aid and advocacy for women and children is no longer widely available, while 1,741 NGOs were closed down completely; many of the remaining NGOs now have significantly reduced service delivery capacity, especially in the areas of advocacy for gender, ethnic and minority rights. Wider implications include clear signs that some of the most marginalised are being left behind due to regulations that impose strict limits on NGO travel costs, and which mitigate against rural outreach, inclusion and participation. NGOs have had to curtail their service provision in the areas of research, policy analysis, legal advocacy, rights and campaigning and have restructured themselves around less-politically contentious areas of service provision such as food-aid and poverty-relief. There is currently no civic capacity to hold the Government to account at a time of large-scale forced evictions, state killing of protestors, mass arrests and penal violence without recourse to legal process. Civil society has less capacity to support those suffering gender-based violence, detained without trial, or ethnic groups and minorities suffering disadvantage and being left behind.

The case study offers robust insights into the magnitude and nature of selected likely development impacts, but concludes this is a limited and fragmented view of the whole. Services may be lost in other policy domains not surveyed here, and while many NGOs adapt to the restrictions and the generalized 'chill' in the political climate, the human and organizational costs of such adaptation are generally ignored. The restraining role of civil society and free media on macroeconomic management and corruption, key mechanisms of political and economic crisis in developing countries, are further factors likely to add to the developmental costs of closing civic space, even if not immediately apparent.

However, data systems are too weak even to support aggregate analysis of the impacts on NGO beneficiary populations even within the selected policy domains or sectors. Within civil society itself, there is limited transparency and coordination, and collective efforts to engage with new restrictions have been weak. Other impacts included qualitative changes in programme approaches, towards more 'welfareist' service delivery models with less chance of transformative change, and greater chance of dependence. Hard-to-reach areas, including regions undergoing conflict, were among those likely to suffer the most, and about which verifiable empirical data was most scarce. The conclusions of the case study are that the 'frontline' development implications of restrictions on civil society can be measured in part, but the current evidence base is thin, patchy, and unintegrated. Key questions remain left unanswered, and the case study very likely underestimates the overall extent of the adverse development impacts of such shifts, while also excluding consideration of the countervailing factors, such as civil society resilience and adaptation, and the growth of Government-sponsored citizen groups and entities to replace externally-funded NGOs and CSOs.

### **1.3 Inclusive development and the civic space: key concepts and questions**

The design of this case study drew on a conceptual framework which recognized that restrictions on civic space were part of wider national political struggles around development, and specifically an effort by political elites to concentrate political power over the development process. Theories of the political economy of inclusive development indicate that how this matters for inclusive development outcomes depends on elite commitment and state capacity to deliver broadly inclusive outcomes, in turn shaped by how the balance of political power, or political settlement, prioritizes inclusive development (Hossain et al. 2018 based on authors cited in the text).

Countries also differ on the extent to which elite commitment and capacity state operate in pluralist political settlements, in which civic actors have a voice and a claim, or through dominant systems, in which civil society may be co-opted, aligned, or silenced. A key question is whether inclusive development outcomes can be delivered in settings where political power has closed the space for public debate or participation, or if they depend on inclusive civic space, in which civil society actors, marginalized groups and the media are empowered to participate in and scrutinize public policy debates and institutions. The evidence suggests a range of civil society roles in inclusive development processes, including in:

- the historical process of building institutions and establishing values that underpin economic growth;
- the development of partnerships and alliances for aid and development financing;
- holding governments and market actors to account in its 'watchdog' role;
- the empowerment and inclusion of marginalized groups, including through mobilization and service delivery;
- protective functions in relation to humanitarian assistance and human rights;
- information and communication, generating evidence and debate about development processes.

A safe conclusion seems to be that inclusive processes play some functions necessary to sustaining development over the medium- to long-term, by enabling the management of difference and the inclusion of the most vulnerable. However, inclusive processes are generally insufficient conditions for inclusive outcomes, if they coexist with – or exacerbate - a lack of elite commitment or state capacity to deliver. The term 'inclusive development' is used here in a broad sense, to signal pro-poor and equalizing patterns of economic growth alongside robust progress on human development indicators. Among other aims, this paper aims to establish the extent to which inclusive outcomes are associated with freer civic space in Ethiopia.

Which impacts can be measured depends on different histories of civil society and state-society relations, and on the 'fit' between civil society and the state. This means that it is not only free space to operate that matters, but the extent to which civil society can usefully engage with or exert influence on the state when it needs to. This 'fit' will change over time and circumstance, with civic actors at times in opposition to, and at others aligned with, state power. Freedom in civic space is important, but capacity to engage is equally so. The case study was designed to analyse this fit, through an analysis of key moments of contention around civic space between civil society and the state.

### **1.4 Case study methodology**

The case study tested a methodological approach to direct measurement of the impacts of restricted civic space, by tracing restrictions on civic space through to impacts on beneficiary populations. The methodology included selecting episodes when civic space had been in

contention in policy domains where ‘frontline’ inclusive development outcomes (poverty and hunger reduction, gender equality, etc.) were at stake. It documented and analysed how NGOs and CSOs responded to new restrictions, the organizations or programmes that faced closure or adaptation, and assessed the overall impacts on specific policy domains or SDGs, with numerical estimates of impacts on beneficiaries or services.

NGO responses to closures of civic space and how those in turn impact on beneficiary populations are shaped overall by the nature of the political settlement on inclusive development in a country, and on its specific history of state-civic engagement around development processes. Despite recent shifts towards a more inclusive elite pact at the heart of political governance, Ethiopia can be classified as a dominant kind of political system, with limited and highly regulated space for civic engagement on development issues. The ruling elites are committed to fast growth and rapid human development, but civic space has been heavily restricted, in particular in the past decade. According to the conceptual framework this set of characteristics is likely to impact adversely on:

- the rights and needs of marginalized and excluded groups, possibly through a rise in rights violations with impunity, or a loss of service access or quality;
- accountability for macroeconomic performance, as scrutiny and checks by the media and civil society are weakened or disabled, possibly leading to impacts on the business environment and political trust;
- environmental sustainability, across a wide range of potential areas and sectors, but particularly in relation to land- and resource-grabbing.

In addition,

- freedom of speech and association are likely to be seen as direct threats to state power, particularly with the growth of cyberspace; efforts to constrict entry to this space are as likely as efforts to tap its potential for development;
- contestation over ‘foreign’ norms promoted by human rights defenders and civic actors may be politicized and deployed to rationalize restrictions on civic space motivated by political power struggles; such contestation is particularly likely to affect women’s rights struggles and other purportedly Western or liberal-democratic value systems; and
- wage, resource, and commodity price struggles are likely in each kind of political system, reflecting the volatilities of global economic integration.

The Ethiopia case study consisted of a series of key informant interviews sandwiched between two periods of literature review. Twenty eight semi-structured interviews were conducted in person in Addis Ababa in collaboration with local researchers, as well as by telephone and internet. A purposive sample of key informants was developed which included domain expertise from a range of CSOs directly affected by the issues, senior researchers from Ethiopian think tanks and universities, a blogger arrested after the closing of civic space, staff from international and local NGOs, representatives of bilateral and multilateral funders, and university academics with specific expertise in Ethiopian development and civil society. In addition to this primary data, desk research, and data provided by expert referral the study generated secondary data in the form of statistical and development indicator data in order to better situate and illuminate the case further.

Three time periods emerged as significant from the data and are used as a comparative analytical and organising device: the period between the current Government coming to power in 1991 and the elections in 2005; the post-election period of 2005 and 2010 in which the Government developed a range of measures to close civic space; and the period since 2010 during which time the effects of those measures have unfolded with consequences for

NGO service delivery and development impacts. As assessing the full breadth of multi-dimensional development is beyond the capacity of any single report in order to provide focus, the study concentrates on food security and land policy and the implications for women and hard-to-reach groups.

From this analysis, the paper then draws methodological conclusions, including about the limitations of available measures of potential development impact. The analysis of episodes in contestation over civic space highlighted that quantitative measures were mainly either projected (what would happen if a programme closed or cut), or difficult to verify (because in the past, and because data systems on civil society are very weak). Systems to collate such data across policy domains or CSOs would need to overcome several disincentives to share such data.

The research faced a number of methodological challenges and limitations. The first was the challenge of contemplating a counterfactual: that of lost services if civic space had not been closed. Legal changes happened a decade ago, civil society has adapted, personnel have moved on, and no detailed records exist of the loss of NGO service delivery capacity or the number of citizens affected. Although we know that 1,741 NGOs were shut down completely and that many others were forced to withdraw from service provision in crucial areas, in this scoping study we were only able to speak to a small fraction of them. Those with whom we spoke provided evidence of substantial reductions in service delivery capacity and development impact.

The research timeframe and the state of emergency also made it impossible to travel to outlying areas during fieldwork for this research. Key informants with extensive experience of working in remote areas of Ethiopia suggest that it is there that the comparative advantages of CSOs are greatest. NGOs reported that the restrictions placed on NGOs mean that it is now much harder for them to travel and to engage with marginalised ethnic groups and minorities in rural areas. More extensive research would be necessary to measure the nationwide impact of reductions in NGO service delivery among these groups at risk of being left behind.

The atmosphere of fear and secrecy, and a leadership transition during the period of the research also affected the fieldwork, which affected visa access and travel to and within Ethiopia, and the very real ethical and security concerns about asking Ethiopians to comment on Government policies at a time when hundreds remain in jail for outspoken criticism of the Government. The fieldwork was carried out during the state of emergency but after the appointment of a new Prime Minister had reduced tensions.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the suspension of freedom of speech and jailing of Government critics might reasonably be expected to limit the candour of interviewees to questions about Government policies. Indeed two of the interviewees declined to comment directly on the Government. However others openly criticised Government policies, as well as acknowledging its achievements. Anonymous interviews proved easier to organise than a planned focus group, which was cancelled when confirmed invitees failed to attend. Given the circumstances it was necessary to promise interviewees confidentiality. This report therefore provides no detail about the identity of respondents or names of the organisation they work for, in order to protect the security of those involved.

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of fieldwork Abiy Ahmed had just been appointed Prime Minister of Ethiopia by the ruling party. His appointment was widely welcomed as a positive move and this had the effect of reducing tensions in the country. During this period it was not yet clear what policy directions would accompany his appointment or whether it amounted to anything more than a necessary reshuffle in the ruling elite.

## 2 The political economy of inclusive development in Ethiopia

The country case studies were selected in part to represent different pathways in the political economy of development. Ethiopia is representative of a 'developmental state' with a non-competitive 'dominant' political settlement in which a single regime has held political power for seventeen years. A developmental state is characterised by proactive Government intervention in the economy to prioritise development goals – often at the expense of democratic liberties and participatory governance (Johnson 1982, Haggard 2018). Some Ethiopian scholars have argued that the Government has effectively resisted the neo-liberal economic model of free-market and a retreating state that has been prescribed for African countries by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (Ayenew 2014). Instead Ethiopia has actively expanded state functions and sustained long-term investments in pro-poor expenditure on health, education and infrastructure, in a mixed economy alongside a growing private sector and significant aid income. The extent to which this mix is determined by an economic vision or is contingent and opportunistic is open to debate, but the result has been a substantial and sustained economic growth, poverty reduction, and human development gains measured as Millennium and Sustainable Development Goals. It has however come at the price of human rights and freedoms.

The developmental state can be interventionist in the social as well as the economic sphere, occupying space which in other countries may be the preserve of an independent civil society. In Ethiopia, partly in frustration at what it saw as the fragmented and disorganised efforts of a myriad of private civic organisations, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) expanded its own 'mass organisations' staffed by party members. These centrally-controlled structures were then used to deliver large-scale national programmes of relief and development, many of which are widely acknowledged as having delivered significant successes and as having contributed to Ethiopia's achievement with respect to the Millennium Development Goals (Ayenew 2014). The existence and capacity of these mass organisations may be seen to distinguish Ethiopia from many other countries in the region, which may experience a greater reliance on CSOs to deliver their poverty reduction programmes.

The Ethiopian developmental state is built in part on the model of Asian developmental states such as Japan, South Korea, Thailand and Malaysia. In these Asian cases once development was assured the state progressively divested itself of some of its centralised economic and civic functions – passing them over to private business and civil society. This withdrawal of the state from the market and civic space is not however a certain outcome. Ethiopian citizens were not consulted about whether they wished to have a developmental state nor have they been consulted about its duration; the prioritisation of development has come at the cost of civil rights and democratic freedoms supposedly guaranteed in Ethiopia's constitution (Rahmato 2008). The danger perceived by some analysts is that the Ethiopian developmental state "becomes a Trojan Horse for authoritarian rule" (Ayenew 2014; 9) and delays interminably the day that it relinquishes its power and onset of democratic governance and political liberty. There will always be additional developmental targets available to an authoritarian state that wishes to further delay the provision of civil liberties and human rights that citizens are entitled to.

### 2.1 Development without freedom

If development is understood simply as economic growth there is no question that Ethiopia is making rapid progress from a very weak starting position. Ethiopia's development progress also rates very well when evaluated against a multi-dimensional index such as the Human

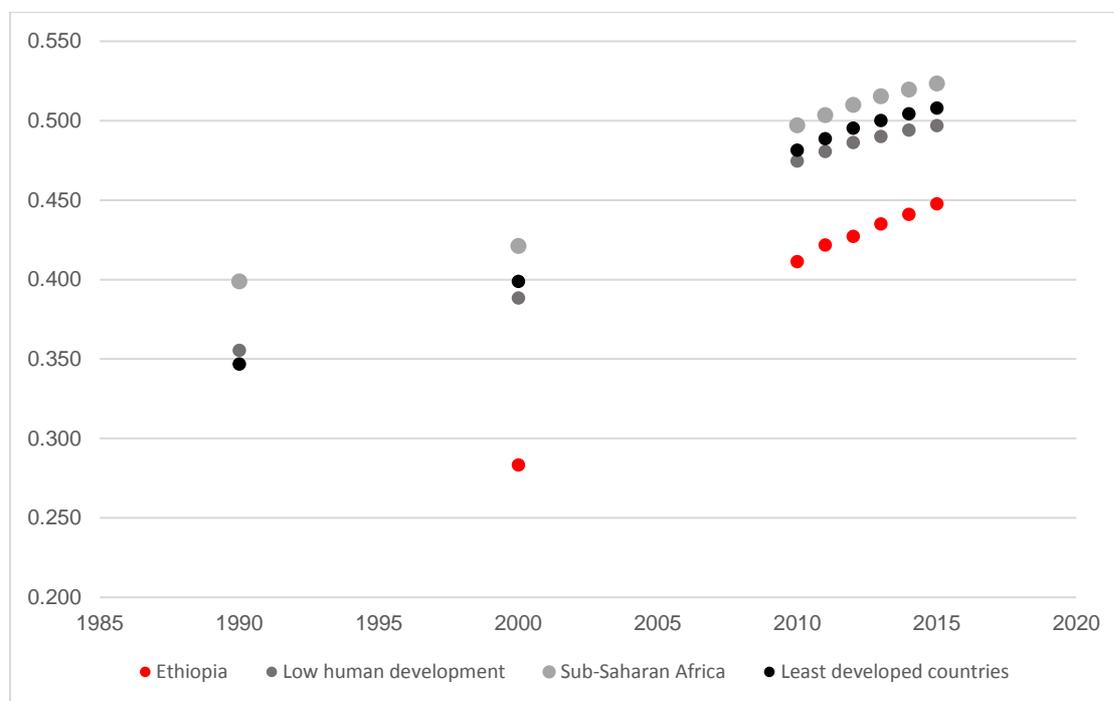
Development Index that measures health and education as well as income. Even against broader measures such as the Millennium Development Goals or Sustainable Development Goals, Ethiopia measures up well.

It is only if we equate *Development As Freedom* as Amartya Sen (1999) and adherents of the human development tradition argue that we should, that Ethiopia’s development success is questionable. Sen has argued that any comprehensive evaluation of development must include an assessment of the freedoms (or capabilities) that citizens have to live the lives they choose. Sen (1999: 3) defines development as “a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy”, as well as “the removal of major sources of unfreedom: poverty as well as tyranny, poor economic opportunities as well as ... intolerance or over-activity of repressive states”. Ethiopia is improving average education, health and income but it is doing it at the expense of freedoms that people have reason to value.

According to the Ethiopian Government’s own figures GDP growth has averaged around 10 per cent for a decade and a half. The analysis of independent economists within Ethiopia and economists from the World Bank suggests that these figures are likely to overstate growth (Alemayehu and Addis 2014). However, even lower estimates of 5-8 per cent are impressive, in regional and global comparison. Ethiopia has had the fastest growing economy in the world (World Bank 2017) and its progress is also outstanding when measured using multi-dimensional poverty indexes (Alkire and Santos 2010) or assessed in terms of the remarkable progress they made in achieving most of the Millennium Development Goals (Assefa 2017), and now in relation to progress against the Sustainable Development Goals.

Figure 2.1 depicts Ethiopia’s progress using the Human Development Index, showing that the country has indeed made relatively rapid progress from a lower base compared to regional and income-level average performance.

**Figure 2.1 HDI trends, Ethiopia and comparators 1990–2015**



Source: Human Development Index; <http://hdr.undp.org/en/composite/trends> (accessed 30 August 2018)

These substantial achievements notwithstanding, Ethiopia remains a low-income country at a low overall level of human development, in which millions continue to live in poverty, including around 8 million per year who rely on food aid from international donors (WFP 2018). There is general recognition that, despite the overall reduction in absolute poverty, disadvantaged groups are being left behind. This concern was reflected in prioritisation by DFID and other donors of these hard-to-reach groups in their £28 million Civil Society Support Programme (CSSP) that ran from 2011-2016 (DFID 2016).<sup>2</sup>

## **2.2 Three periods of EPRDF in power**

Emperor Haile Selassie ruled Ethiopia until he was deposed, in 1974, by the Derg military dictatorship. The Derg regime lasted until 1991 when after two decades of civil war the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) came to power. Tigrayans only account for 3 per cent of the Ethiopian population whereas the people of Oromia and Amhara combined account for 61 per cent of the population. In order to broaden its popular base the TPLF formed the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) which incorporated three other ethnic-based parties from Oromia, Amhara and Southern regions (excluding five other regions). The EPRDF established an ethnically-based federal structure through which to govern the country, with each ethnic group forming its own ruling party (Rahmato 2008).

Prior to taking power in 1991 the TPLF had been vocal critics of the Derg's autocratic rule, so when they formed a Government there was great expectation that there would be an opening of political and civic space. Relative to the Derg's military dictatorship the new Government did represent an opening of political space and some powers were devolved through the new federal structure to provincial and district administrations. However critics claim that those devolved administrations remain under EPRDF control and that power resides with a small elite of mainly Tigrayan politicians, military and police officials, and business leaders. Over time tensions emerged within the EPRDF ruling elite and wider society about the disproportionate power wielded by the minority Tigrayan community especially in relation to the more populous Oromia and Amhara regions. Other regions and ethnic groups including the Somalis, Afars and Gambelis were never incorporated within the EPRDF and have never benefited equally from Ethiopia's economic growth or poverty reduction programmes.

### **2.2.1 1991–2005: A political opening**

Nevertheless, the EPRDF represented an opening of economic, political and civic space relative to the Derg regime. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was incorporated into the Charter of the Transitional Government in 1991 signalling support for civic freedoms and rights. New space opened for the formation of opposition political parties, a free press, and the flourishing of CSOs. NGOs that been limited to relief and rehabilitation activities prior to 1991 now begun to extend their scope to include human development and human rights. From the year 2000 onwards regular elections took place in Ethiopia with independent opposition parties. Particularly in the run-up to the 2005 elections an "unprecedented liberalisation" took place in Ethiopia (Aalen and Tronvell 2009; 194). Alternative newspapers were launched and an Ethiopian blogosphere developed (Gagliardone *et al* 2018). In this opening of civic space a number of new political parties and coalitions were formed in the context of a flourishing of public debate and civic education about the nation's priorities for social and economic development (Zewde and Pauseway 2002). A dynamic and vibrant civil society threw itself into nationwide programmes of voter registration and civic education. The mass media hosted hugely popular live discussions that raised public consciousness of political and civic issues to unprecedented levels.

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<sup>2</sup> The CSSP originally ran from 2011-2016 and was extended 2016-2017. At the time of this research a new programme was being established but had not been launched.

### **2.2.2 2005–10: Post-election closures of civic and political space**

The political temperature changed drastically following the election of 2005. The EPRDF lost its electoral support and was only able to stay in power by using military force and arresting opposition leaders (Nega and Milofsky 2011). When the opposition Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) won 84 per cent of the vote in Addis Ababa, the regime blamed the 'foreign influenced' civil society. The EPRDF took a series of reactive measures to close civic space, restrict media freedom and discipline outspoken activists. In the years following the election the Government issued a slew of laws that closed space for civil society and restricted freedoms of speech and association. An anti-terrorist law gave the state arbitrary power to arrest and jail suspects without charge. The arrest of hundreds of journalists, opposition politicians, bloggers and activists had a chilling effect<sup>3</sup>: taming the media and leading to self-censorship by journalists and public intellectuals (Dupuy *et al* 2014). Ethiopia's 2009 Charities and Societies Proclamation made it illegal for organisations who receive more than 10 per cent of their funding from foreign sources to work on gender or human rights, ethnic inclusion, or voter education (Hailegebriel 2010).

### **2.2.3 2010–18: A hostile environment**

Following its electoral shock the EPRDF became more authoritarian and intolerant of political opposition or civic activism. The progressive stifling of dissent and the closing of space for civil society has resulted in periodic outbursts of uncivil society and periods of unruly politics. The Government's land grab in Oromia and the associated forced removal of populations became the catalyst for widespread and sustained demonstrations from 2015 (Freedom House 2017). The EPRDF responded by imposing a ten-month<sup>4</sup> State of Emergency in 2016/7. New youth movements in Oromia and Amhara have emerged, combining street demonstrations with social media campaigns within Ethiopia and linking electronically to the Ethiopian diaspora in the USA and Europe to amplify their actions. Key elements in these new youth movements have refused to be divided along ethnic lines and created unity between Oromo youth and Amhara youth that presents a serious challenge to the Tigrayan leadership of the EPRDF. As demonstrations escalated again in early 2018, a second State of Emergency was declared and the EPRDF was forced once more to rely on authoritarian measures to retain power. That State of Emergency remained in place at the time of writing this report<sup>5</sup>.

It is claimed by some that the political dominance of the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) within the ruling EPRDF is reflected in uneven distribution of political power which translates into unequal development (Gagliardone *et al* 2018). Minority control by Tigrayans is resented by the other EPRDF parties from Oromia, Amhara and Southern, who far outnumber Tigrayans in population terms. Five other regions are not represented within the EPRDF at all, including the country's least developed regions, and the impressive aggregate national economic growth figures mask significant regional inequalities.

Although there has been no war since June 2000 it is not possible to characterise Ethiopia as peaceful due to on-going regional conflicts and state violence against opposition groups. According to the Armed Conflict and Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) Oromia and Somalia regions are the most dangerous. According to ACLED:

*The Government is the main perpetrator of political violence, which often aims to suppress various forms of political opposition. Prominent anti-government movements and... localised political militias, violent clashes between these*

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<sup>3</sup> [www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/27/ethiopia-zone-9-bloggers-jailed-freedom-expression](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/27/ethiopia-zone-9-bloggers-jailed-freedom-expression).

<sup>4</sup> Initially a six-month state of emergency later extended to ten-months.

<sup>5</sup> Fieldwork was conducted immediately after Dr. Abiy Ahmed was installed as the new Prime Minister representing a period of change in the composition of the ruling elite. The new Prime Minister was seen by those that we spoke to as a positive move as he could bridge Oromia - Tigray divisions and as was more progressive on human rights.

*movements and the Government resulted in almost 7,000 reported fatalities over the past ten years.<sup>6</sup>*

There have been brief openings as well as closings of civic space. In addition to the opening prior to 2005 some of those we interviewed noted an opening in 2013-14. A university-based interviewee who has closely analysed civic space in Ethiopia commented that:

*In 2013 there was a brief period of relaxation, a little bit of dialogue, at least cosmetically, but once the protests happened in 2015 the real EPRDF reappeared. They imposed the State of Emergency. Rounded up the opposition and jailed them.*

## 3 Civil society in Ethiopia

### 3.1 The growth of civil society, 1991–2005

Prior to the Derg coming to power in 1974 Ethiopia had a tiny number of formal CSOs. During the famines of the 1970s and 1980s the Derg accepted foreign aid and a modest expansion of CSOs. The small number of mainly international NGOs that did exist under the Derg were focused primarily on food-aid and basic service delivery. When the EPRDF took power in 1991 a gradual opening of civic space took place. Despite the EPRDF's initial suspicion that CSOs were part of the opposition and represented a threat to their authority (Rahmato 2008) in the aftermath of the Eritrean war the regime needed the assistance of civil society to manage the relief effort and the civic space opened further (Dupuy *et al* 2014). The expansion of civil society within Ethiopia coincided with the prioritisation of civil society as a policy objective by international development donors who invested heavily in CSOs as means to promote global liberal values of rights, equality and social justice (Reimann 2006).

From a total of just 70 CSOs in 1991 the number of nationally registered organisations grew to 600 by 2001 and to over 2,300 by 2007 (Rahmato 2008; Dupuy *et al* 2014). Adding nationally-registered CSOs to those organisations registered in the regions, the total reaches 3,822 CSOs (CCRDA 2011),<sup>7</sup> not including traditional structures and informal associations.<sup>8</sup> During this period it was not only the scale of Ethiopian CSOs that expanded, it was also their scope. CSOs grew in numbers, extending their areas of operations beyond famine relief and basic service provision to engage citizens in advocacy, rights-based work and awareness-raising about the root causes of poverty and injustice. The numerical expansion of CSOs reflected in part the rapid expansion of foreign funding available; the expansion of objectives reflected in part the changing policy concerns and priorities of those funders (Reimann 2006).

Prior to 2005 a space had also begun to open up for civil society to participate in national development policy formation including the consultation for the 2000-2005 Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (known as SDPRP). A senior policy analyst told us,

*CSOs became increasingly engaged in development activities and awareness creation to make policy formulation participatory. Accordingly, CSOs facilitated*

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<sup>6</sup> [www.acleddata.com/dashboard/#231](http://www.acleddata.com/dashboard/#231)

<sup>7</sup> This total is still low compared to neighbouring countries like Kenya that have half the population of Ethiopia but where there are 70,000 registered CSOs.

<sup>8</sup> A comprehensive analysis of Ethiopia's civil society would also require consideration of the very many local faith-based, savings societies and other non-registered CSOs that are part of the fabric of community life and of community development but which are not captured in national statistics.

*several grass root level public discussions in the formulation and implementation of such development policies as PRSP, SDPRP AND PASDEP.*

This movement towards more inclusive institutions is noted by Rahmato (2008) who argues that whilst this opening of space for civic participation in the 2000-2005 PRSP (known as SDPRP) was a welcome step in the right direction it was a largely tokenistic process undertaken in order to satisfy the donor community. Ayenew (2014) further notes that five years later the process of developing the 2005-2010 PRSP (known as PASDEP) eschewed participation and was Government-dominated by comparison. This period is the focus of the next section.

### **3.2 2005–10: The closing of civic space**

The opening of civic space under the EPRDF prior to 2005 was dramatically reversed in the wake of the 2005 elections in which the EPRDF experienced significant electoral losses (Aalen and Tronvoll 2009). The EPRDF accused ‘foreign-funded’ civil society of serving foreign interests (Hailegebriel 2010a). Interviewees noted that among the mechanisms employed to delegitimise civil society were EPRDF use of the state media control to use popular soap operas to portray CSOs as over-paid, corrupt and untrustworthy. The EPRDF criticised what it saw as the uncoordinated inefficiency of CSOs’ scattergun programme, entreating Ethiopians to join their own ‘mass organisations’ to deliver centrally-coordinated nationwide programmes of development and relief. National women’s and youth structures were mobilised as were development associations in each province in an example of the developmental state attempting to directly shape civic space. This capacity to substitute Government-led citizen organisations to carry out work, which in other countries requires foreign-funded CSOs, may be a significant distinguishing feature of Ethiopia when compared to other closing civic space case studies.

The Civil Society Proclamation required all CSOs to re-register with a new Federal Charities and Societies Agency (CSA). CSO registration categories were now based on the organisation’s source of funding, as illustrated in Table 3.1. The Proclamation made advocacy and rights-based work illegal for any organisation receiving more than 10 per cent of their income from foreign sources (Dupuy *et al* 2014); this is referred to as the ‘90/10 rule’ on funding. Any organisation receiving more than 10 of its income had to register as a ‘Resident CSO’ and was prohibited from working on advocacy or rights-based work or campaigning. Most advocacy and rights-based CSOs had been predominantly foreign-funded (CCRDA 2011). They now faced the choice of either refusing foreign income and registering as an ‘Ethiopian CSO’ or shut down the advocacy and rights-based elements of their work.

**Table 3.1 CSO categories and restrictions**

<b>CSO Category</b>	<b>90/10 Funding Rule</b>	<b>70/30 Spending Rule</b>	<b>Activity Restriction</b>
<b>Ethiopian CSOs</b>	Maximum of 10% Foreign Funding	Maximum 30% Spending on Admin	None
<b>Resident CSOs</b>	10% to 100% Foreign Funding	Maximum 30% Spending on Admin	No advocacy, rights or campaigning
<b>International CSOs</b>	100% Foreign Funding	Maximum 30% Spending on Admin	No advocacy, rights or campaigning

Source: Author based on document review and interviews

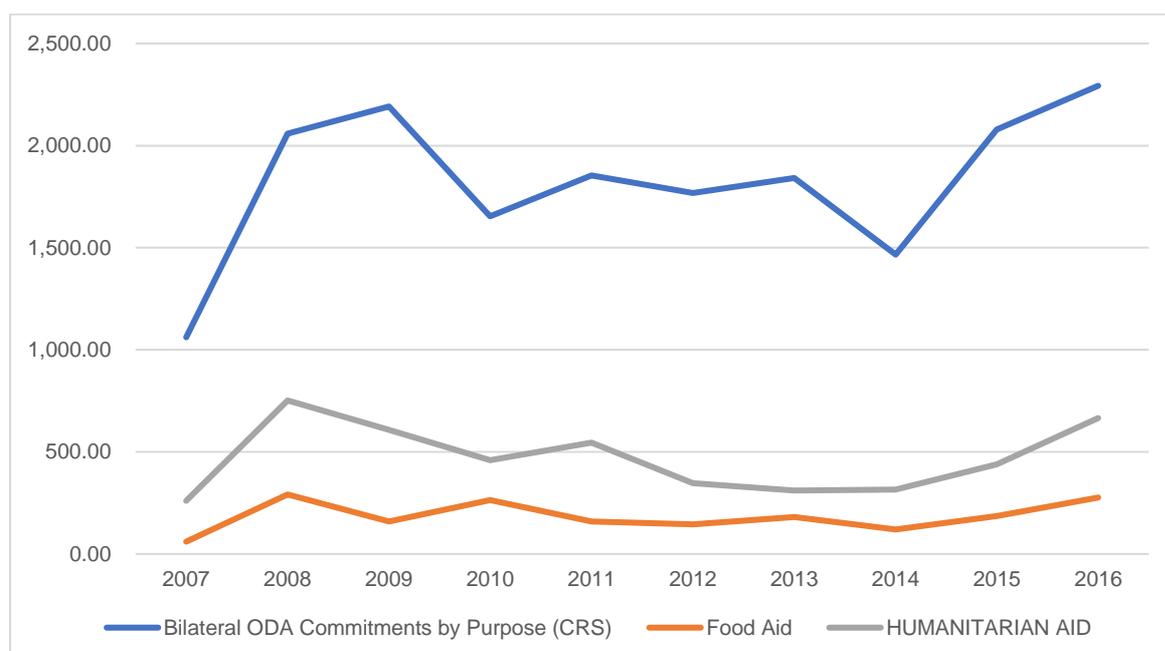
The Proclamation also ruled that no CSO could spend more than 30 per cent of its total income on administration; this is referred to as the ‘70/30 rule’ on spending. The major challenge of the 70/30 rule was that the CSA considered capacity-building, training,

research, policy development, advocacy and campaigning, monitoring and evaluation as administrative costs - and all travel expenses were treated as administration costs too. Under standard CSO accounting rules these would be considered core CSO activities not administration. This severely limits the ability of CSOs to travel and to provide services that facilitate the inclusion of hard-to-reach communities or enable their participation in development processes. The 70/30 Rule then made it difficult even for locally-funded 'Ethiopian CSOs' (who were not subject to the 90/10 Rule at all) to conduct advocacy work, to engage in systematic research to inform policy alternatives, or to conduct outreach programmes that leave no one behind.

As a result of the Proclamation many advocacy and rights organisations shut down altogether or rebranded themselves as food relief or service delivery organisations (Dupuy *et al* 2014). As we learned from interviewees in this research, the organisational capacity of many remaining organisations was drastically reduced and many previously vibrant organisations have now fallen into decline.

The uncertainty and confusion caused by the fallout of the 2005 election created a hiatus in funding for Ethiopian CSOs as donors and CSOs tried to process the implications of the Government's new hostile environment towards civil society and especially toward foreign-funded CSOs (Nega and Milofsky 2011). As a result of the change of Government attitude some funders pulled out of Ethiopia altogether; others suspended making new funding decisions and reviewed their programmes. It is worth noting that this hiatus coincided with the economic crash of 2008 in donor countries and the recession that followed it, so some funding suspension and reductions may be properly attributed to these external factors. In any event the fallout was that the number of CSOs working on advocacy and governance issues was greatly reduced and the capacity of those who continued to work on rights-based issues was dramatically reduced. The words 'advocacy' and 'rights' became taboo. Many CSOs that had been working on civic education, gender rights and policy advocacy either reinvented themselves as focused on poverty reduction or withered away.

**Figure 3.1 ODA, food aid and humanitarian aid commitments to Ethiopia (in US\$ millions)**



Source: Dataset: Total receipts by country and region (ODA+OOF+private); Data extracted on 27 Apr 2018 17:41 UTC (GMT) from OECD.Stat.

### 3.3 2010–18: Adapting to a hostile environment

After the initial contraction and restructuring of CSOs to comply with the legislation organisations have accommodated themselves to this new order. However, the environment for civil society action continued to be hostile, and marked by the pro-active de-registering of hundreds of CSOs for failure to comply with the new regulations. By 2011 the number of local NGOs registered at the national level fell by 25 per cent from 2,275 to 1,701, whilst the total number of all civic organisations including religious and cultural organisations at the regional and national level fell from 3,800 to 2,059 (Dupuy *et al* 2014). Some 1,741 previously registered organisations disappeared during the first two years after the Proclamation.<sup>9</sup> For many of those that survived the cull, falling income levels, and the new activity restrictions progressively reduced their operational effectiveness. Perhaps ironically, given the EPRDF's attribution of the problem to 'foreign interests', the number of registered international NGOs was unaffected.

Two positive aspects of the Proclamation were widely acknowledged by interviewees: for the first time a level of transparency and regulatory control over CSOs had been established, and new provision was made for the existence of CSO networks. The proclamation officially recognised CSO networks and consortia, providing them with a legal basis for operating, whilst making them subject to the same regulations.

CSOs accommodated themselves to the new order in various ways. Some interviewees told us that after the initial hiatus they managed to keep operating without fundamental changes by altering the language that they used to describe their work. For example instead of describing their work as women's rights and awareness raising they spoke of essentially the same work in terms of women's empowerment and training. Larger organisations, where advocacy was only one of a broad portfolio of activities, tended to fare better, in particular than smaller CSOs focused exclusively on gender rights and advocacy. After an initial pause to make sense of the new regulatory landscape and its implications for civil society, donors made possible workshops and new funding channels for CSOs seeking to identify pathways to development impact within the new operating landscape. The multi-donor Civil Society Support programme has been the largest sustained effort to support this work (DFID 2016).

## 4 Episodes of closure and contention over civic space

This section presents the empirical findings from interviews and data collected in this case study and analyses the evidence in order to trace the impact pathways from the Government's closing of civic space (including laws, finances and regulations) through particular mechanisms (such as reduced income, staffing and self-censorship) resulting in development impacts such as reduced inclusion, growing inequalities, and increased injustice. An exhaustive assessment of the impacts on all aspects of development is beyond the scope of any single study and so here, in order to provide focus, the study limits the discussion to the areas of hunger and food security, land policy, and the implications for gender equality and hard-to-reach groups as issues most likely to shed light on how civic space may impact on development outcomes. It will in addition consider some wider civic space issues, including with respect to the role of the media and new forms of virtual or digital public space. Each issue will be considered with reference to the three time periods

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<sup>9</sup> One source (Yntiso *et al* 2014) put the total of registered CSOs in 2014 at 3,077 but states that the majority of those registered are not operational. We were told anecdotally that the official figure has remained around 3,000 for some years but that most were not operating.

established in the preceding section in order to understand the changing contribution of civil society in meeting Ethiopia's poverty-reduction and inclusive-development goals.

#### **4.1 Food security and land policy**

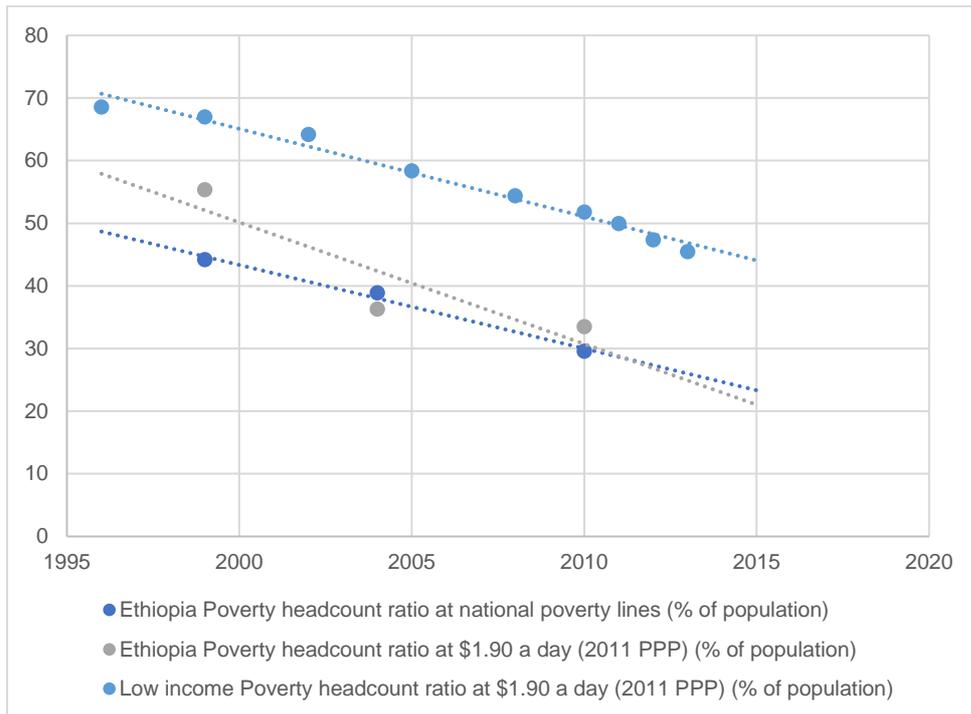
The EPRDF commitment to peasant farmers was reflected in its early agrarian policy. Eighty five per cent of Ethiopia's population depended primarily on small-scale agriculture (MoFED 2003) so investing in small farm development had widespread popular appeal and broader developmental significance. EPRDF land policy provided security to smallholders and helped them increase their productivity as a means to accumulate a national surplus to invest in industrialisation. This encouragement of labour-intensive smallholder agriculture was consistent with the developmental state policies that had been successfully applied in South Korea and Taiwan. By investing in small farms the Government also avoided the growth of a land-owning class and ensured that gains in farm productivity were widely shared: socialised rather than privatised. During this period inequality was significantly reduced and Ethiopia achieved some of the lowest levels of inequality on the continent (World Bank 2014). As we see later in this section a change in EPRDF policy in favour of land-clearance for industrial-scale farming by foreign investors carries significantly higher risks for food security, economic growth, and equitable and inclusive development (Lavers 2012).

The EPRDF's record on delivering food security and famine prevention is generally strong. There is perhaps no other Government that has been as single-minded, over such a long period, and that has achieved as much success as the EPRDF in pursuing these poverty-reduction goals (de Waal 2018). None of the interviewees that we spoke with denied the progress that the Government had made in these key areas. One rural development expert noted:

*There is no doubt that the Government is sincere in its desire to reduce poverty or that it has been successful in producing economic growth and improved food security.*

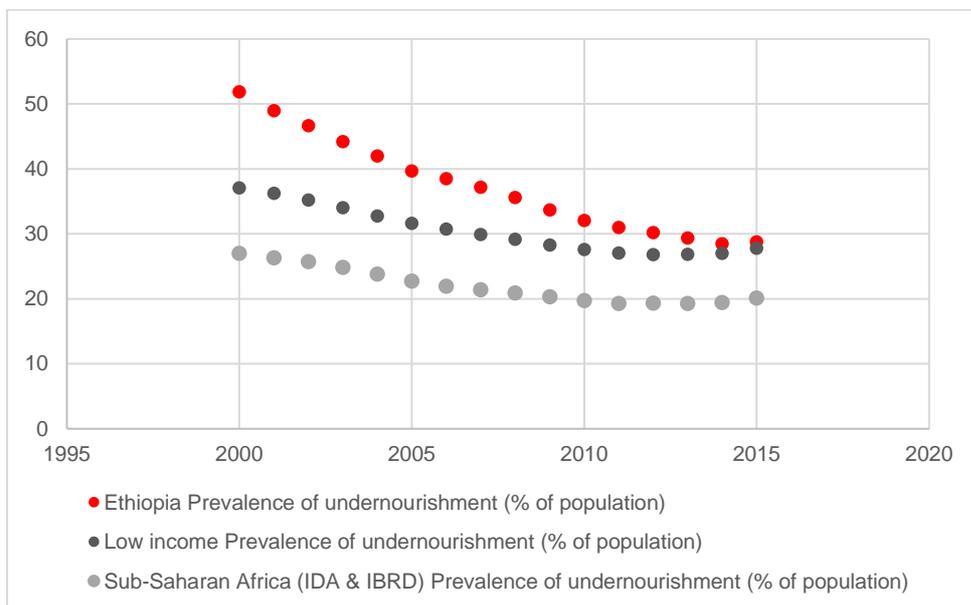
At the heart of the EPRDF programme has been the linked commitments to famine prevention and smallholder productivity. When the EPRDF came to power Ethiopia was characterised by famine and war, and had one of the highest poverty rates in the world. Since the end of their war with Eritrea, the record of the EPRDF in reducing poverty and ending famine is remarkable. By making sustained investments in the productivity of small land-holdings the Government managed to more than double cereal production in the decade between 2004 and 2014, significantly increasing rural household incomes and food security. In 2001, 56 per cent of the population was living on USD1.25 PPP a day or less and 44 per cent of the population was below the national poverty line. By 2011, those living on less than USD1.25 PPP a day had fallen to 31 per cent, and the number living in poverty had fallen below 30 per cent for the first time (World Bank 2014). Ethiopia's progress in reducing poverty and food insecurity, when compared to countries at similar levels of development, is reflected across a wide range of indicators (see Figures below).

**Figure 4.1 Prevalence of poverty, Ethiopia and comparators**



Source: World Development Indicators / SDGs database

**Figure 4.2 Prevalence of undernourishment, Ethiopia and comparators**



Source: World Development Indicators /Millennium Development Goals database

Reducing poverty and hunger was central to the concerns of the EPRDF leaders even before they came to power. Land reform and avoiding famine has always been at the heart of their political strategy, leading some to characterise their overarching policy as a kind of ‘anti-famine political contract’ (de Waal 2018; 150). Famine had played a key role in the downfall of both regimes that preceded the EPRDF. The 1973 famine catalysed popular opposition to the lavish lifestyle excesses of His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie. The revolutionary committee or Derg regime that replaced HIM introduced new measures to

enhance food security, but ten years after coming to power, drought, famine, and their own use of mass starvation as a weapon of war fatally undermined their rule (de Waal 2018).

Since the end of the Eritrean war the EPRDF has delivered not only strong economic growth but increased agricultural output, livestock production and, in non-drought years, decreased reliance on wheat imports (EEA 2017). Ethiopia remains a low income country where one third of the population still live on less than \$1.90 per day and remain acutely vulnerable to food insecurity. Approximately 8 million Ethiopians required food aid in both 2017 and in 2018 in addition to the 8 million already supported through the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP). The next section examines how changes in the space for civil society have impacted on poverty reduction and food security over the lifetime of the EPRDF Government.

Ethiopia is now famine-free partly because of the sustained commitment of the EPRDF to increasing domestic agricultural output and improvements made to disaster preparedness and resilience (de Waal 2018). Ethiopia has also benefited from improved relations and drought response support from international donors. When it came to power the EPRDF oversaw a significant expansion in the number of local and international CSOs. These CSOs made significant contributions in supporting agricultural extension to improve smallholder productivity, drought preparedness, and food aid delivery.

However, in 2000-1, when drought struck in South-East Ethiopia whilst the EPRDF was fighting a territorial war with Eritrea on Ethiopia's north-western border, as many as 25,000 children died. International donors were reluctant to assist the regime at a time when it was spending heavily on pursuing a war with Eritrea. Two years later in 2002-3, after the war had ended, a more serious nationwide drought struck Ethiopia, again raising the spectre of famine. The EPRDF had significantly upgraded its drought preparedness and was able to deploy an effective national disaster response programme in collaboration with hundreds of CSOs. This domestic mobilisation was soon reinforced by a major mobilisation of international food aid and Ethiopia successfully averted famine. Since ending the Eritrean war, donor support for Ethiopia had increased significantly in part due to Ethiopia's new role as the USA's key strategic ally in the region in the so-called 'war on terror' (de Waal 2018).

Experts that we interviewed described an explosion in the capacity of foreign-funded CSOs in the years preceding the 1999-2000 and 2002-3 droughts. The majority of these CSOs included poverty reduction, food security or emergency relief among their core activities (Rahmato 2008). Recalling that pre-2005 period one civil society leader argued that CSOs had contributed significantly to national poverty reduction and drought relief efforts:

*Non-state actors in Ethiopia played a vital role in providing social protection services to address poverty, inequality and vulnerabilities, affecting livelihoods ... [and] helping Ethiopia achieve its development goals.*

Despite success in averting famine, the 2002-3 drought revealed the continued fragility of Ethiopia's food security and its continued dependency on food-aid. This led, in 2005, to the Government and donors putting in place a more robust food aid and social protection programme called the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP). The PSNP was initially rolled out to five million Ethiopians and later expanded to eight million, providing food aid to people experiencing chronic food insecurity. To fund the PSNP the Ethiopian Government relies on money from international donors. To deliver the PSNP it draws on its own mass organisations, international NGOs and on the service delivery capacity of local civil society.

The opening of space for CSOs as service delivery agents in the PSNP, service delivery has been in marked contrast to the closing of space for the same organisations in advocacy and rights-based work. Aalen and Tronvoll (2009) are among those to show how dramatically the

EPRDF changed its orientation to CSOs in the wake of the 2005 elections. While the 2009 Proclamation on Civil Society legally prevents foreign-funded 'resident' CSOs from engaging in advocacy or rights-based work, the EPRDF permits the same CSOs to play a supporting role as service providers delivering food-aid as part of the PSNP or other poverty reduction programmes.

These changes to the legal and funding environment forced CSO actors whose work had previously included women and children's rights to redirect their organisational energies to service delivery. As the CCRDA Impact Assessment (2011) and other studies have illustrated, the 2009 legal changes resulted in an overall reduction in CSO capacity for advocacy and rights and a relative increase in CSO capacity for food security and other basic service delivery.

Most interviewees readily acknowledged the Ethiopian Government's progress in addressing food-security and famine prevention. At the same time they identified ways in which the Government's approach acted as an obstacle to inclusive and sustainable development. A senior researcher that we interviewed in Addis suggested that the Government's nationwide, centralised, one-size-fits-all programme was both its strength and its weakness:

*The Government-led programmes were lifesaving. They had nationwide reach, but large Government-driven programmes are not flexible enough to tailor services to the most excluded. It's smaller, agile, CSOs with local knowledge and specialist skills that's better there.*

The PSNP is widely acknowledged to have increased food security and to have been effective in protecting the poor from drought (Cochrane and Temiru 2016). Nonetheless critics have argued that the PSNP has been used to benefit party loyalists and to entrench EPRDF political control at the local level (de Waal 2018). The Director of a large CSO commented that:

*Food-aid distributed by party loyalists can be a form of patronage, not always, but I've seen it. Some ethnic groups and some minorities are discriminated [against]. The 70/30 rule means that [since 2009] regular travel to marginal areas is impossible, because travel expenses are treated as 'administration'. It works against participation and inclusion of rural minorities.*

## **4.2 Land policy and land rights**

According to Lefort (2015) Ethiopia's per capita annual cereal output of 270 kg is well over the 180 kg/person/year required for domestic food security. However, Ethiopia remains dependent on international economic and food aid. The Government's strategy for progressing to middle income status by 2025 (EEA 2017) remains one of rapid industrial expansion led by agriculture. This strategy requires Ethiopia to generate and use an agricultural surplus in order to accumulate the capital necessary to invest in industrialisation projects. Thus the EPRDF argues in its Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP) that further gains in agricultural productivity are key to food-security and economic growth (Lavers 2012). This felt need for further increases in agricultural productivity has led the EPRDF to pivot away from investing in smallholdings and toward support for large commercial farms. To make this possible the EPRDF has earmarked 3.6 million hectares of land for commercial farming (and area equivalent to the Netherlands).

The Ethiopian Government has introduced the compulsory relocation of the indigenous populations from this land, including farmers on smallholdings, in order to provide the land to foreign companies (Lavers 2012). None of the land set aside for commercial plantations is in Tigray; half is in Oromia, Amhara and Southern region (Lavers, 2012) creating significant

potential for inequalities between and within ethnic communities. The most contentious of these 'land grabs' to date have been in Oromia on its border with Addis Ababa. Protests by farmers evicted from their ancestral lands were met by police firing live rounds. Thousands of protesters, activists and journalists were arrested in widespread police crackdowns, and many were held for months without charge or trial (Amnesty 2018). According to Amnesty International there are persistent claims that arrested citizens are regularly beaten or tortured.

The logic offered in support of these policies is to increase food security and drive export-led economic growth. However, the policy is vulnerable on both counts. Predicating growth on agricultural exports is a high-risk strategy due to volatile commodity prices. Although foreign investors may plan to sell a percentage of their food crops into Ethiopia (especially when world prices are low) when world prices rise they would be entirely free and powerfully incentivised to redirect food crops to more lucrative overseas markets, with a potentially negative effect on Ethiopia's food security. Some of the investing companies exist specifically to secure the food-security of their own countries; the largest land-holdings so far have been sold to nationals of Saudi Arabia, Germany, Djibouti and Israel (Lavers 2012).

Whilst interviewees praised the Government's record on food security and poverty-reduction, signs of growing inequality was a common refrain. As one interviewee with long experience of programmes in twenty villages across different regions commented:

*Government-led programmes have led to significant improvements across the country in terms of improved agricultural methods, increased average incomes, higher participation levels for rural women and reductions in gender-based violence. At the same time we are also seeing a widening inequality gap with some signs of class formation between the wealthiest and poorest.*

Despite active opposition to its land clearance programme the EPRDF has pressed ahead. In 2015, during the most repressive period of its rule to date, the EPRDF succeeded in organising a highly effective emergency relief programme in the face of widespread drought. The World Food Programme assessment was that ten million people were in need of food aid in addition to the eight million already enrolled in the PRSN. The EPRDF responded by employing 6 million people in an ambitious food-for-work programme and importing a fleet of trucks to distribute food and water (de Waal 2018). While the Government led at the national level and through its mass-organisations, a wide range of Ethiopian and International CSOs played a major role in service delivery. The EPRDF was able to respond with positive effect because it had significantly increased domestic food supply and reserves, made dramatic improvements in its road and market infrastructure, improved mobile communications, and significantly upgraded the Government's disaster risk reduction and resilience systems, with the result that no excess mortality was reported and the price of basic grains was kept under control during the harshest food crisis the Government had experienced (de Waal 2018).

De Waal (2018) points out that the map of drought relief and the map of anti-government protests in 2015-16 do not overlap: those in receipt of food relief were evidently not motivated to bite the hand that was feeding them. The EPRDF have significantly advanced the country's ability to avert famine, even under the most difficult conditions. There have however been accusations that the EPRDF's famine relief has been better organised and more generous in Tigray than elsewhere and that some other areas have fared less well (de Waal 2018).

From a Western liberal perspective there is a jarring contradiction between the EPRDF's sincere determination to reduce poverty and hunger, and its denial of civic freedoms and access to justice to its citizens. One interviewee, an Ethiopian development consultant, articulated the EPRDF developmental state priorities without fully supporting them:

*The strategic imperative for the EPRDF is to restructure the economy away from subsistence agriculture and toward rapid industrialisation. Allowing foreign-interests to advocate for other agendas is a diversion. Freedom and justice are luxuries that we cannot currently afford.*

Some of those we interviewed argued that this strategy could not be sustained as people valued civic and political freedoms as well as freedom from hunger. People were impressed by the Government's poverty reduction accomplishments but felt that it had become deaf to citizen's other concerns causing public support to ebb away. One political economist suggested during interview that,

*The Government's strategy is not sustainable in the long run. You cannot take people's land and convince them it is good for them. People's concerns are not being heard, not taken into consideration. No one supports them anymore.*

In this section we have seen that despite the EPRDF's impressive record on food security and their successful measures to avert famine, there are questions about whether Ethiopia's pattern of development can be considered either inclusive or equitable. The 2009 Proclamation realised the Government's objective of closing civic space for advocacy and rights-based work, which the EPRDF saw as a threat to its political and developmental project. The proclamation also had the effect of redirecting CSO capacity towards food-security and other less politically-contentious service-delivery functions. Recent forced land-clearances have been met by episodes of violent contention and have resulted in hundreds of deaths and the arrest of tens of thousands of citizens without due process. Denied civic space in which to offer alternative policy proposals, street protest has been the public response. Denied recourse to legal advocacy or to legal defence by CSOs those dispossessed of their land or finding themselves in prison without charge or trial are excluded from anything that can be considered inclusive or equitable development. Interviewees suggest that as long as citizens are denied space for civil expression of their constitutional and human rights, further uncivil and unruly contestation is inevitable.

### **4.3 Marginalized and 'hard-to-reach' groups**

Previous sections have shown that the EPRDF Government has successfully reduced poverty and improved food security. When aggregated across the whole population Ethiopia's economic and human development indicators are indeed impressive. A closer analysis shows that progress has been uneven across the population. After a brief analysis of the broader equality landscape this section focuses on the inclusion of hard-to-reach groups. This is in order to assess how closing civic space has affected pathways to development impact for relatively disadvantaged groups.

In a nation where 85 per cent of the population depends directly on agriculture, the EPRDF's policy focus on increasing small farm productivity enabled them to produce growth with very low levels of inequality. Even today inequality levels in Ethiopia are very low when compared to other countries in the region, but the trend is now negative (World Bank 2017). Prior to 2005, as the Ethiopian economy grew, the consumption of the poorest 40 per cent increased faster than the top 60 per cent and inequality reduced. Between 2005 and 2010 that trend reversed, however, and the top 60 per cent saw their consumption grow the fastest, rising inequality (World Bank 2016). Rising economic inequality was a common theme that emerged strongly in our research, an issue which warrants closer tracking.

There are some groups that have been consistently disadvantaged across all of the chronological periods discussed in this report. Even though the decade preceding the 2005 elections was the most open and inclusive period in Ethiopia's modern history, ethnic

minority and stigmatized groups, as well as LGBTQI<sup>10</sup> communities were consistently excluded from development, and experienced human rights violations. Providing services for rural women, people living with disabilities and those at the intersection of multiple dimensions of disadvantage often prove to be the hardest-to-reach.

A combination of increasing inequality and the closure of CSOs that used to advocate for marginalised groups is causing concerns in some places. One interviewee who worked with rural communities in different regions of Ethiopia commented that she saw the improvements in the general level of income and health almost everywhere across the country:

*But what we are also starting to see is the growth of different classes. The gap between richest and poorest is growing. You can see it in people's houses and cars. Inequality is noticeable now.*

Many of those that we spoke to were of the opinion that the Government's national poverty reduction programmes had delivered substantial benefits. At the same time they argued that it is a feature of centrally driven programmes that they are insufficiently nuanced or flexible enough to meet the diverse contextual needs of marginalised communities or people with special needs. One international NGO Director that we interviewed claimed that such flexibility is what CSOs are best-placed to provide:

*Even the Government agrees that civil society is best placed to serve the hardest-to-reach: the geographically remote, people with disabilities, socially excluded. We found that the Government had lost political support by closing down organisations that people depended on. They shot themselves in the foot really.*

Several interviewees argued that identifying the complex needs of 'hard-to-reach' communities is a comparative advantage of CSOs. Government officials and disadvantaged rural minorities often speak different languages. Civil society can play an intermediary role, researching people's needs, devising bespoke projects, and advocating for policy alternatives to make sure that inequality is addressed. One former poverty campaigner interviewed for this research pointed out that:

*The poorest and least educated often don't sit at the decision-making table. They go unheard. Closing civil society down means there is less capacity to advocate [on their behalf]. They are being left behind.*

While acknowledging the EPRDF's achievements in reducing poverty, one interviewee we spoke to argued that the Government could have been even more successful if it had partnered constructively with civil society where they add specific value in relation to hard-to-reach groups:

*Government's comparative advantage is national reach but the comparative advantage of civil society is the flexibility to tailor provision to minorities and people with special needs.*

According to more than one expert that we consulted the Government's 70/30 spending restriction is a mechanism that particularly harms CSO's ability to reach the most remote and marginalised:

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<sup>10</sup> In the Kembatta Tembaro Zone, there are marginalized and stigmatized artesian communities known by the derogatory name 'Fuga'; the treatment of these communities is similar to that of 'untouchable' Dalit caste groups in India. Same sex relationship are illegal in Ethiopia and are punishable by up to 15 years imprisonment.

*To reduce inequality we need to include the voices of the most marginalised but the 70/30 [rule] counts all travel costs as admin. So everyone is forced to operate closer to Addis than before. It works against participation.*

#### **4.4 Gender equality and women's empowerment**

In the period leading up to the 2005 elections Ethiopian CSOs were adopting an increasingly rights-based approach to gender equality. In addition to palliative programmes that addressed women's immediate practical needs CSOs began involving citizens in a critical examination of the root-causes of gender inequality and in campaigns advocating for equality. This coincided with the period when the rights-based agenda was a priority for international donors. When the EPRDF closed down civic space following the outcome of the 2005 election the Proclamation on Civil Society prohibited all foreign-funded CSOs from engaging in any advocacy or rights-based work including women's rights and legal advocacy.

Several interviewees described the ways in which the Proclamation diminished their organisational ability to address gender-based violence and gender discrimination. Prior to the 2009 legislation, one organisation, a national leader in advocating for gender rights and securing gender equality, provided free legal aid and counselling to 20,000 women per year. The 2009 changes mean that it can now only support 1,000 women per year. An ex-employee, when interviewed explained:

*We didn't want to re-register as a 'Resident' organisation and be prevented from providing legal advocacy as we thought what was the point of existing if we can't pursue our objectives? ... But the Government seized two million Birr from our bank account and the loss of foreign-funding meant we had to scale down massively over the years.*

Even locally-funded organisations who registered as 'Ethiopian CSOs' found themselves substantially hampered by the 70/30 spending rule in ways that made it difficult to be inclusive of rural women and ethnic minorities. One interviewee who played a senior leadership role in a gender NGO explained:

*Before 2009 there was no restriction of any kind on gender CSOs. Now GBV trainings, monitoring and evaluation, programme and projects staff salaries, and all transport and fuel expenses are considered to be 'administrative' costs and may not exceed 30 per cent of total spend. As a result the volume of activities and geographical coverage is reduced.*

This reduction in collective capacity was echoed by an experienced leader who worked for a network of Ethiopian women's organisations and who commented:

*Since 2009 our collective capacity to work on gender-based violence is down by 80 per cent and capacity to work on legal service provision is down by more than half. We are less able to address gender inequality in Ethiopia. Much less.*

This scale of cuts extends beyond women's rights organisation to other human rights organisation in Ethiopia. One human rights expert that we interviewed provided insight into the service delivery impact on another key organisation affected:

*The [Proclamation] affected rights-based [organisations] most. The Ethiopian Human Rights Council was a vibrant CSO before the law. It had 56 employees and 13 offices across the country. Now it has only 9 staff in total.*

These drastic reductions in service provision capacity of CSOs took place in a context of the mass arrests of journalists, activists and opposition politicians making it impossible for Ethiopia to meet its SDG 16 objective of ‘making justice available to all’ and providing ‘inclusive institutions at all levels’.

Although Ethiopian women are guaranteed equality by the constitution, national laws and international treaties to which Ethiopia is a signatory, this is often unachievable in practice due to closing civic space. Many key CSOs that enabled women to realise these legal entitlements in practice no longer exist or now have severely diminished service delivery capacity.

Although the EPRDF has diminished the capacity of Ethiopian civil society to tackle gender inequality, women continue to pursue gender justice through a variety of creative means. Many CSOs adapted to 2009 by replacing the language of advocacy and rights in their work with the language of empowerment, modifying their rhetoric without abandoning work to increase gender awareness and agency for social change. Another women’s organisation that we visited has been innovative in diversifying its income streams from within the country.

Ethiopia successfully met six out of the eight Millennium Development Goals and made significant progress against the other two. The only targets that it did not meet related to gender. The evidence gathered from this research indicates that the EPRDF’s closure of civic space has further diminished its capacity to meet the goals of inclusive and equitable development and the Sustainable Development Goal to leave no one behind. The EPRDF closed civic space through a mixture of legal and regulatory measures, it reduced CSO’s funding using the 90/10 rule, and reduced their ability to serve marginalised groups with the 70/30 rule. By creating this disabling environment for rights-based and advocacy work the Ethiopian Government has made it practically impossible for thousands of women to access legal support in times of crisis. The beneficiaries of the Government changes are those who discriminate against women or commit against women and who now go free.

#### **4.5 The role of the media and digital public space**

One of the features of Ethiopia’s closing civic space has been the remarkably rapid opening and closings of media spaces, both mass media and new online media. In many ways the period leading up to the 2005 elections was a false dawn. New political parties were formed and civil society expanded rapidly. Then in the six months before the mass media hosted a series of wide-ranging discussions about people’s priorities for national development. We interviewed one of the key organisers of those media debates who told us:

*We took a central role in facilitating a series of policy dialogues between government leaders, academics and professionals. The debates were broadcast live on radio and TV. Nothing like it has ever happened before or since. Everybody listened to those debates – everyone. By 2005 we had the most engaged and informed electorate ever.*

The EPRDF’s response to electoral losses in 2005 was not only the closing of civic space for CSOs in the form of the Proclamation on Civil Society but also to introduce new media restrictions in the form of the 2008 Mass Media Proclamation and the 2009 Terrorism Law. The closure of space for critical media was followed by the regular harassment and arrest of journalists and bloggers. According to Reporters Without Borders:

*Terrorism charges have been systematically used against journalists ever since the 2009 Terrorism Law took effect. The charges carry long jail sentences and allow the authorities to hold journalists without trial for extended periods. There*

*has been no significant improvement since the purges that led to the closure of six newspapers in 2014 and drove around 30 journalists into exile<sup>11</sup>.*

There have however been some openings of civic space in online media. As offline civic space has closed activists have created new spaces online. New social movements of youth have appeared in recent years who make novel use of mobile and social media. Called *Qero*<sup>12</sup> in Oromia and *Faro* in Amhara, these groups have mobilised anti-government opinion and created powerful hashtags and memes to counter Government narratives and buoy opposition moral. Ethiopians interviewed for this research explained that these new social movements have created new online claimed spaces using mobile and social media technologies to say what cannot safely be said offline. They have used mobile and social media to bridge communication and build solidarity between the internal youth movements of different ethnic groups as well as to powerful groups in the Ethiopian diaspora. The *Qero* and *Faro* are not aligned to political parties or part of historic civil society structures, they are not donor-funded, do not have offices, or easily identifiable leadership. Unrestricted by logframes or the need to register with Government agencies these activists represent a clear threat to the ruling elites.

The EPRDF has responded to this threat to its hegemony by arresting bloggers, blocking social media sites and shutting down the internet.<sup>13</sup> The Government is the only internet provider in Ethiopia and the sole telephone operator. This enabled it to impose a complete internet shutdown outside of Addis and to impose a nationwide shutdown on more than one occasion. The Government also made it illegal to listen to or watch broadcasts by Ethiopian Satellite Radio and Television (ESAT) or Oromo Media Network (OMN), both of which are based abroad. Localized internet and phone blackouts are regularly reported following mass demonstrations. The mobile internet and social media including WhatsApp and Twitter have been blocked in parts of Oromia and other parts of the country on several occasions (Freedom House 2018). The Federal High Court has convicted many activists for comments made on social media, for emailing political parties outside the country, and even for expressing appreciation for someone who denounced the Prime Minister. One activist received a six-year prison sentence for his Facebook posts (Amnesty 2018).

The EPRDF fully dispensed with any pretence of democratic process in the 2015 elections when it declared itself the winner of every single seat in Government with fully 99 per cent of all votes cast. In protests that erupted later that year, primarily in the Oromia and Amhara regions, protestors called for an end to land-seizures and human-rights abuses. The Government admitted to killing 500 protestors with opposition leaders putting the death toll at 800 (Human Rights Watch 2016). In October of 2016, then-Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn announced a six-month state of emergency, which was extended until August 2017. Tens of thousands of protestors and suspected opposition activists were arrested, and reports of torture were widespread (Freedom House 2017). Under the state of emergency freedom of association and freedom of speech are suspended nationwide and meetings of more than four people require a licence from the military police 'Command Post'. A new wave of protests in 2017 led to the instigation of a second state of emergency in February 2018, which was still in place as this report was being drafted. More than one interviewee directly linked the continued protests to the closing of civic space.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://rsf.org/en/ethiopia>.

<sup>12</sup> [www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/mar/13/freedom-oromo-activists-geerroo-ethiopia-standstill](http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/mar/13/freedom-oromo-activists-geerroo-ethiopia-standstill).

<sup>13</sup> <https://qz.com/1157890/oromo-protests-ethiopia-has-blocked-social-media-sites-facebook-twitter-and-youtube/>.

Some of those that we interviewed argued that there was a direct relationship between the Government's closure of formal civic space and the outbursts of uncivil society, and unruly protest in the form of rioting and damage to Government property. A senior member of staff from a multi-lateral funding organisation commented:

*If there was active CSOs engagement in democracy-building and human right issues, open public dialogue, we would see less civil disobedience, which has led to police killing protesters. Civil society is a channel for civil influence.*

The same interviewees argued that when people are denied peaceful civic channels for political representation or means to influence civic debate and policy dialogue, outbursts of frustration and anger will increasingly be directed at the Government. A think tank researcher in Addis commented:

*That's what we are seeing in Oromia. Frustration boiling over. There is no civic outlet for people's frustrations. No channel for civil communication.*

## 5 Conclusions and implications

### 5.1 The implications of changing civic space for development in Ethiopia

The research set out to trace the pathways to impact from civic space closures in Ethiopia via the mechanism of CSO service delivery to any related changes in development impacts and to evaluate to what extent these effects were measurable. According to the conceptual framework, the domination of Ethiopia's politics by a developmental elite coalition suggests that closures of civic space are unlikely to impact adversely on overall growth and public service delivery efforts in the short- to medium-term. However, in the medium-term, the pressures on a political system with limited to no civic or political space started to show. Over a decade after the Government cracked down on its perceived opposition to civil and political society after the 2005 election, this played out in early 2018 in the selection of a new Prime Minister from an ethnic and cultural background different to the fraction of the elite that had ruled to date. This was triggered by a series of increasingly deadly protests by important population groups who had to date been marginalized by or relatively excluded from the benefits of development, and for whom land policy had become a particular concern. The reconfiguration of the Ethiopian elite post-2018 may not open a new, more democratic pathway to development. However, it does support the view that long-term regime stability is unlikely where civil society is prevented from playing its role in helping to build trust, amplify voice, empower the marginalized and powerless, demand accountability, protect the most vulnerable, build development partnerships, and create space for the peaceful management of difference through open dialogue and free public discourse.

The conceptual framework also proposed that closing civic space was particularly likely to impact adversely on *the rights and needs of marginalised and excluded groups, possibly through a rise in rights violations with impunity, or a loss of service access or quality*. The research results support this proposition, noting that how practical considerations of travel and physical access meant that NGOs and CSOs were dropping programmes in geographically remote populations, typically among the poorest and most politically powerless people. Programmes that had attempted to empower marginalized and impoverished groups, or protect their human rights, were pushed and pulled into urgent humanitarian relief, poverty reduction, and welfare service provision activities. Interviewees widely held the view that civil society has a unique and valuable set of advantages to offer the development process, in identifying and finding ways of reaching and serving these groups. Without this access and capacity to deliver needed services, significant sections of

the population may well be at risk of being left behind by development; closures of civic space makes such knowledge harder to come by, because travel to, programmes and research in remote regions have become highly restricted. Civil society generally plays a role in scrutinizing the distribution of humanitarian relief, a form of accountability which may be particularly important in the Ethiopian context. In addition, it was clear that gender equality and women's empowerment organizations had been hard hit, and that this posed a particular challenge for Ethiopia's efforts to meet the SDGs.

It was also proposed that *accountability for macroeconomic performance, as scrutiny and checks by the media and civil society are weakened or disabled, possibly leading to impacts on the business environment and political trust.* The research concluded that the role of the conventional media was indeed greatly constrained by fluctuations in the space for free speech, but that more recently, digital public space had become a key focus for control by the Government. The general absence of 'civil' civic space in which to raise public concerns appears to have contributed to the rising tide of land- and related protests which culminated in states of emergency and further political and civil rights violations. The research was unable to uncover any clear impacts on the business environment or on political trust due to lack of data, but these are issues on which further investigation is indicated, in particular as the Ethiopian Government is so strongly committed to demonstrating development performance.

A further set of propositions was likely adverse impacts on *environmental sustainability, across a wide range of potential areas and sectors, but particularly in relation to land- and resource-grabbing.* The study noted that land grabbing had been a significant cause of political turmoil, and that land reallocations and farm policy were likely to lead to the dispossession of marginalized and impoverished groups and to rising economic inequality.

Ethiopia's shrunken civic space is part of a wider pattern of such closures worldwide. The nature of these dynamic closings and openings of civic space, their causes and their consequences for development require on-going study, as does the relationship between the closures of civic space for human rights-based civil society on the one hand, and outbursts of uncivil rhetoric and unruly protest on the other. The new dimension of openings and closings of online civic space is even less well understood; its importance is increasing and requires dedicated research attention. The situation in Ethiopia remains dynamic. The underlying tensions within the ruling elites in the EPRDF have not been resolved. Whether the current political settlement endures or a new one emerges, the role of civil society and its service delivery capacity remains key and warrants on-going research attention. As this report was being finalised the new Prime Minister spoke on national television admitting for the first time that the EPRDF had committed human rights violations against its own citizens. A sceptical but hopeful civil society activist who played a central role in facilitating the inclusive national dialogue that took place prior to the 2005 elections:

*We would like to think that with the new Prime Minister a new process of dialogue might be possible.*

It seems clear that the new political leadership is likely to mean another series of changes in the Ethiopian civic space, and the changes, and the contributions of civil society in a more open civic space, should be tracked closely for their lessons about inclusive development processes and outcomes.

## **5.2 Measuring the implications of civic space for development**

The Ethiopia case study offers robust insights into the likely nature of the impacts of restricted civic space on selected aspects of development, but more limited insights into the magnitudes of impact on specific populations. It is possible to say with confidence that

marginalized and poor populations in remote areas are in general likely to suffer most, as are women's rights, gender equality, and the land rights and livelihoods of minority and marginalized groups and small farmers facing state-backed dispossession. It is impossible to comment on how many members of these populations may have experienced a loss of services, support, or protection as civic space has closed, or of the specifics in terms of how many people may have been made poorer or hungrier, or of how many women lost opportunities for livelihoods, training, or incorporation into markets. The Ethiopian case study also recognized the entry of new Government-organized citizen groups and entities into the civic space, but was unable to quantify the extent to which NGO or wider civil society functions of service delivery, accountability, and feedback for public services have been replaced by such institutions.

It is also clear that NGOs do adapt to restricted space, some more successfully than others. One irony of the closure of civic space on grounds of resisting 'foreign' influences is that international organizations appear to have been more resilient than smaller, more specialized, and more local groups. Restricted civic space appears to have meant weak capacities of Ethiopian civil society to organize and network, and to collect and aggregate data about their collective contributions and impact. Efforts to enable civil society to collectively generate and share data about their contributions to development are likely to make measurement of development impacts more feasible, but also to strengthen the collective voice of civil society in contesting closures of civic space.

CSOs and NGOs continue to undertake their activities, and in particular to provide services, within the space permitted. However, an additional methodological blindspot is that civil society actors also incur significant financial, institutional and human costs in adapting to and coping with restrictions on their activities. Staff tend to recognize that these adaptations mean a fundamental loss of quality in their programming, as well as in scale, chiefly through swapping efforts to empower citizens and strengthen public accountability between marginalized and poor populations and their national or local government for less contentious service provision. This plainly limits NGO capacities to bring about the more enduring forms of social change demanded by inclusive development. Few of these costs of civil society adaptation and resilience are clearly quantifiable, but the nature of the impacts can be gauged through closer tracking by and of civil society of their responses to changes in civic space.

The case study also indicates that the measurable impacts through these NGO service losses offer a limited and fragmented view of the wider effects of such closures. Services are likely to have been lost in other policy domains not surveyed here, such as education, health, or water and sanitation. It is also impossible to assess the question of which services and benefits may have been provided under conditions in which civil society had a voice in policymaking and scope to scrutinize and hold Government to account. Nonetheless, the case study provides clear indications that areas that are critical for Ethiopia's development progress, for instance, attention to gender equality and women's empowerment, are unserved by closures of civic space that target rights-based and advocacy groups.

Other issues that the study points to, but cannot quantify the effects of, include (the loss or weakening of) the restraining role of civil society and free media on macroeconomic management and corruption. Macroeconomic mismanagement and corruption are frequent triggers of political and economic crisis in developing countries, and can interrupt, stall or even reverse development progress. In the Ethiopia case, with its high degree of control over digital public space, innovative new methodologies will be needed to assess the developmental costs from the loss of a preventive role of the media and civil society activism on broader economic governance.

It is early days, but the new political leadership since 2018 gives reasons to believe that civic space may reopen in Ethiopia. If so, this will provide a valuable opportunity to track and assess the contributions of civil society to inclusive, equitable and sustainable development in a low-income country which in the past quarter-century has made rapid, yet problematically uneven, development progress.

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