

Parliament, Public Engagement and Poverty Mitigation
in Ethiopia: Preliminary Findings

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Twelfth Workshop of Parliamentary Scholars and Parliamentarians
Wroxton College, Oxfordshire, UK
25-26 July 2015

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Introduction

In a democracy, parliaments are important institutions with three key functions---making laws, exercising oversight over the executive, and serving as representatives of the people. These roles assume particular significance in poor countries like Ethiopia and Bangladesh because parliaments contribute not only to strengthening democracy but also play a pivotal role in the governments' efforts to reduce poverty. By making pro-poor policies and through active engagement with constituencies, parliamentarians can also greatly aid the efforts of poverty reduction in poor countries, such as Ethiopia.

Parliament and public engagement is an important aspect of the democratic process. Apart from broadening the democratic space, the interaction can help parliamentarians to be responsive to the needs and concerns of their constituencies. In addition, when citizens regularly engage their representatives, public voices can be better heard in laws and policies made by the government. Public input into the legislative process enhances legitimacy and garners support for government's anti-poverty plans and programs. As the Ethiopian experience suggests, the imperative for parliament-public engagement cannot be aided without the political system's commitment to be participative, widening of the political space, and recognition of the constructive role that non-state actors, such as the media and civil society, can play in strengthening democracy.

In recent years, parliament in Ethiopia has been supportive of pro-poor and pro-growth policies, and this has contributed to significant reductions in poverty levels. For example, according to the World Bank Group's latest poverty assessment, poverty in Ethiopia fell from 44 percent in 2000 to 30 percent in 2011. Simply put, assuming Ethiopia's population was 82 million in 2000, the number of poor people went down from 36.08 million in 2000 to 24.6 million in 2011. This translated to a 33 percent reduction in the share of people living in poverty (World Bank, 2015).

However, this economic success has not been accompanied by an equal measure of democratization and widening of the political space. Simply put, despite the dawn of multi-party politics in the early 1990s, the system of rule has long been dominated by a single ruling party, and no viable alternative has emerged over the years. Neither have there been a vibrant civil society and independent media, which are essential ingredients of a democratic and competitive political process. It needs to be pointed out, however, that there are some strong civil society organizations that have been able to operate within a very difficult political environment.

Since the early 1990s, Ethiopian politics has been monopolized by a single domineering party, which controls both the executive and the legislature. This has been a consequential process in terms of parliamentarians dealing with constituencies, and the role of parliament in exercising oversight functions. Preliminary findings in the on-going research on *'Parliamentary Effectiveness: Public Engagement and Poverty Reduction in Bangladesh and Ethiopia'*, which is funded by ESRC-DFID, suggest Ethiopian parliamentarians' engagement with citizens leaves

much to be desired in order to serve as a vehicle for democratic participation and accountable governance.

On the surface, there is some degree of checks and balances in the Ethiopian parliament. For example, the Prime Minister is by law required to report on his/her Government's performance every six months. All ministers and heads of federal agencies and commissions have also to report to parliament on their department's performance and plans during formal question and answer sessions. However, these exercises remain largely formal and are subdued affairs because there is very little debate on alternative policies and laws thanks to the fact that the ruling party has an overwhelming control of parliament, and in such a system, as the Ethiopian experience suggests, it is not easy for parliamentary representatives to offer options or question plans and programs presented by the executive.

As part of the parliament-public engagement process, ruling party rules in Ethiopia dictate that parliamentarians must visit and talk to their constituencies at least twice a year. This interaction can be taken as a sign of the party's commitment to consider voter concerns and preferences in laws and policies, as well as remain accountable to the electorate. Nevertheless, as indicated earlier, these exercises are far from being perfect expressions of effective democratic engagements. In interviews conducted with parliamentarians and constituency discussions with the community, these interactions were not viewed as exercises in democracy and accountable governance, but rather attempts to entrench the dominance of the ruling party among the voting public. Focus group discussions and interviews with constituencies revealed that the public generally lamented the fact that they were not presented with alternative economic and political choices other than those by the ruling party.

From the preceding discussion, it can be observed that formal rules and reality are quite different in parliament-public engagement in Ethiopia. Preliminary findings of this study suggest that politicians/parliamentarians neither actively engage the electorate nor do parliamentarians carry out their oversight functions effectively because of single party dominance of the political space. Simply put, in a situation characterized by one-party rule, such as the one in Ethiopia, and where alternative outlets are not available for citizens to sound out public opinions, it is not easy to assess the extent to which parliament-public engagements are, or might be, effective tools for promoting democracy and representative governance.

In a nutshell, preliminary observations of this study suggest that Ethiopian politicians'/parliamentarians' interaction with citizens is formal and highly structured. The omnipresence of one party has meant that constituency visits are pre-arranged either by the party or local government, and it is the party which determines the terms of engagement, such as how often, whom to meet and what issues will be discussed. This has created a situation where citizens cannot discuss or debate community concerns freely and openly as they will be constrained to express their views about politics or economics because of the risks of being accused of being critics of the government.

For their part, politicians see their engagements as exercises in democracy and accountability but also as fulfilling party requirements to meet their constituencies twice a year, which is a characteristic of a highly organized and ideological party, such as the Ethiopian Peoples

Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRD). Simply put, parliamentarians perceive dual roles in dealing with their constituencies: as representatives of the ruling party and as conveyors of the interests and concerns of those who elected them. While this has been in many cases a source of discontent and criticism by the public, who continue to demand more accountability and responsiveness from their parliamentary representatives, politicians have accepted it as a legitimate form of engagement with citizens with no potential conflict of interest.

In addition, one-party monopoly of the political space has also meant that parliament is constrained from exercising the oversight functions over the executive. In many parts of Africa including Ethiopia, where the executive is dominant, legislatures are not very active in initiating legislation or policy, and their roles are limited to endorsing bills or policies presented by the executive. Debates on policy are often limited in the interest of towing the single-party line, which means the range of policy choices for citizens is very limited too (Bereket, 1967). In other words, debates critical of government policy are often ignored or suppressed. In many one-party African states, parliament's control over the executive is ceremonial, and is intended to provide legitimacy to the ruling party rather than an exercise in checks and balances.

The objective of this paper is to present some findings from an on-going study on parliament-public engagement for poverty reduction in Ethiopia. It will examine the level of interaction of the public with their parliamentary representatives, and suggest ways and means of enhancing this engagement for strengthening democracy and meaningful poverty reduction. As this work is in progress, the observations are tentative.

Country Background

It is necessary to provide an overview of the demographics and political economy of Ethiopia in order to understand the relationship between parliamentarians and civil society. Such an approach can provide a proper political and socio-economic context for understanding the dynamics of parliament-citizen interaction, and its contribution to accountable governance and the growth of representative institutions.

With an estimated population of more than 85 million inhabitants, Ethiopia is Africa's second populous nation after Nigeria. For much of the last half century, population increase has outpaced economic growth; and, currently grows at 2.9% per annum (2012 estimated). At this rate, it is projected to reach 175 million by 2050², and this will make it one of the most densely inhabited countries in the world. The population is largely young with 40% falling under 24 years or less, and this is a reminder of the challenges that the country can face in terms of meeting the demands of a fast expanding population (US Census on World Population, 2013).

Most Ethiopians are followers of two world religions----Christianity and Islam³. A significant majority of Ethiopians are Christians, accounting for nearly 63% of the total population. Among these, Orthodox Christians constitute 43.5%; Protestants 18.6%; Catholics 0.7%, and about 3% belong to different religions. Muslim Ethiopians constitute about 33.9% of the total. While all

² Some sources project the figure at 278 million depending upon varying assumptions.

³ The number of Ethiopian Jews otherwise known as 'Bete Israel' has diminished since their exodus to Israel beginning in the mid-1980s.

believers can be found in almost every community, Islam is most prevalent in the Somale (98.4%), Afar (95.3%) and Oromia (47.5%) Regions (CSA, 2007 Eth. Cal.).

Ethiopia is unique in very many respects. It is Africa's oldest independent country that has enjoyed an uninterrupted tradition of statehood, and has never been colonized by Europeans except for the brief five-year occupation by Fascist Italy during World War II. The country has a distinctly indigenous alphabet and calendar system that set it apart from other nations. The rich heritage and diversified value systems and traditions of Christians and Moslems point to the possibility that Ethiopia might have for centuries been a meeting center of African, Arab and Asiatic cultures.

In 1991, Ethiopia's political boundary was redrawn following the separation of Eritrea, which used to be its northern most province, from the rest of the country. This rendered the country land-locked with no outlet to the sea. As a result, Ethiopia continued to depend on the port of Djibouti and to some extent on other ports in East Africa, such as Mombassa, Port Sudan and Berbera in Somaliland, for economic and international trade contacts. Between 1998-2000, Ethiopia and Eritrea fought a bitter border war that cost the lives of about 100,000 people on both sides; and relations have not healed since (Abbink, 2003; Banks, et.al., 2005).

Ethnicity is an important feature shaping national politics in Ethiopia; and, has been in recent years an important factor in restructuring the state and political representation at national and regional levels by the current government led by the ruling Ethiopian Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Indeed, upon assuming power in 1991, the EPRDF Government reorganized the country along ethnic and linguistic lines, and established a federal state structure that consisted of nine autonomous ethnic regions and two administrative areas. These are Gambella, Harari, Oromiya, Somale, Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples and Tigray regional states with Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa city administrations designated as self-governing administrative areas. These regional states manifest enormous differences in population, territory and level of infrastructural development, etc. and this has produced important implications for the functioning of the federal arrangement.

Ethiopia is said to be inhabited by more than 85 ethno-linguistic groups, and as such is considered one of Africa's diverse nations. According to the 2007 census, the two biggest ethnic groups are the Oromo and Amhara, who together constitute 61.4% of the total population. The breakdown of the country's major population groups is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Ethnic Composition of the Ethiopian Population

No.	Ethnic group	%age share
1.	Oromo	34.5
2.	Amhara	26.9
3.	Somale	6.2
4.	Tigre	6.1
5.	Sidama	4
6.	Gurage	2.5
7.	Welaita	2.3

8.	Hadiya	1.7
9.	Afar	1.7
10.	Gamo	1.5
11.	Gedeo	1.3
12.	Others	11.3

Source: CSA 2007 Census

As can be observed in the above table, there is a great variation in the population size of the different ethnic groups. For example, the first seven among the groups in the order that are presented constitute about 83% of the population. There are more than 75 other ethnic groups, which make up about 17% of the national population. This means the vast majority of the ethnic and linguistic groups have varying yet small population distributions. In addition, most of these peoples live in different ecological areas and depend on diverse livelihoods ranging from predominantly pastoral and semi-pastoral modes of life in the lowlands to sedentary peasant farming systems in the highland areas. Forging a cohesive nation-state out of this conglomeration of diverse ethnic groups is a big task in nation building that should not be underestimated.

Economy

Ethiopia's economy is predominantly agriculture based, which accounts for 46% of GDP and 85% of total employment. Historically, the agricultural and rural sectors of the economy have been suffering from low productivity and poor harvests resulting in recurrent famines and food shortages that affected millions of people in the 1970s and 1980s. This started to change beginning in the early 1990s as agricultural output has been augmented, and the country's vulnerability has significantly decreased resulting in less number of people facing imminent starvation and death (MoFED, 2005/06).

In recent years, Ethiopia has progressively achieved success in economic growth resulting in significant reductions in national poverty levels. The Government has been spearheading development by undertaking major infrastructural projects in the power and communication sectors, and significant investments in developing large-scale sugar industries and allied activities. The role of the Government is also preponderant in other areas. For example, land is held by the state, and the banking, insurance, and micro-credit industries are restricted to domestic investors, and telecom services are off limits to foreign investment. Through the relatively successful implementation of the country's Growth and Transformation Plan I (GTP I), 2011/12-2014/15, significant progress has been attained in the provision of education and health services, and also in infrastructure expansion (MoFED, 2014). The economy is also showing signs of structural transformation with industry and the services sector contributing 13.4% and 45.6% to GDP respectively (MoFED, 2010; Dessalegn, et.al, 2014).

Despite recent economic successes, Ethiopia is a very poor country, and one of the most aid-dependent nations. According to UNDP, it stood at 173 out of 187 countries in terms of human development index (HDI) in 2010/11 (UNDP, 2011). It also has the following unenviable record: infant mortality rate: 60.9 deaths/1000 live births; population below poverty line (FY 09/10 estimated); and, life expectancy at birth: 56.56 years (CIA Fact book, 2013). In addition, the

government's less than desirable record on democracy, human rights and media freedom has also been a subject of much criticism.

To sum up, the economic landscape has started to change for the better in Ethiopia. Over the past few years, the country has been judged to be one of the fastest growing non-oil economies in Africa thanks to massive government investments in education, health and infrastructure provision. The effort has paid off in terms of increased incomes for a significant segment of the population and reducing poverty levels in rural and urban areas. Recent economic successes have given rise to optimism that the country can position itself on a fast economic growth trajectory and provide improved living standards for its people.

Parliament in Ethiopia: Brief Historical Review

An elected parliament and a genuinely representative body is a relatively young institution in Ethiopia's political history. Despite the country's record as Africa's oldest independent state, a formal parliament was established under the long-reigning monarch Emperor Haile Selassie I in 1931. At the time, it was popularly accepted as a benevolent act of imperial reform and a progressive measure to build a centralized and modern state. It was also around this period that the first written constitution was promulgated to lend modernity to a traditional monarchy whose legitimacy was largely derived from tradition and culture (Clapham, 1969; Perham, 1948).

At the time, parliament could hardly be characterized as democratic or representative because it was not an elected body, and the members, almost all of whom belong to the feudal gentry, were appointed by the monarch as a dispensation of imperial favor. The Emperor used these parliamentary appointments as a means to undercut the regional support bases of potential rivals for power, and place them under the watchful eyes of the central government---no wonder for a regime whose overriding motive was effective control of the periphery to create a centralized state and forge national unity (Asmelash & Kohen, 1972; Kohen & Hayes, 1978).

Starting in the mid-1950s, the Imperial regime instituted some reforms aimed at modernizing parliament and the constitution. This was intended to pave the way for a constitutional monarchy, and also institutionalize some form of parliamentary democracy, however embryonic it might be. These measures did not bring about substantial change in the composition and workings of parliament, and the Imperial regime continued with business as usual until it was swept away by a popular revolt. It was later replaced by a left-wing military dictatorship in 1974 (Clapham, 1969; Markakis, 1974). It needs to be observed, however, that despite its feudal and decidedly traditionalist credentials, the Imperial regime (1931-1974) had introduced significant administrative reforms, such as the creation of a modern professional standing army and a civil service bureaucracy, and expanded modern education and health services (Bahru, 2002). Equally important, the Imperial government enjoyed a great deal of legitimacy and public popularity that none of its two successors had been able to attain.

When the Imperial regime collapsed in 1974, a military group widely known as the *Derg* took over the mantle of power. Subsequently, the First Ethiopian Republic was set up with the military disguising itself as a civilian government. This proved to be a notoriously repressive regime, which had no bounds for its egregious human rights record, including ruthless

suppression of individual freedoms, arbitrary and unlawful arrests and killings en masse. The governance structure was highly authoritarian and devoid of any semblance of participatory democracy. Economic management was modeled after the ex-Soviet prototype and largely controlled by the government. A one-party state masquerading as representing the working class and rural farmers was crafted slamming the door on any competitive and participatory politics. The parliament, or the *Shengo* as it was then called, was an institution with no authority at all but to rubberstamp the decisions of a ruling military clique (Meheret, 1997; Andargatchew, 1993; Halliday & Molyneux, 1983).

The *Derg's* (1974-1991) misrule generated widespread discontent and resistance among the people. As a result, a number of ethnic-based opposition movements proliferated throughout the country and waged an armed struggle to topple the regime. This became a recipe for instability and destruction of the country's economy and infrastructure. Incessant civil wars ensued plunging the country into unprecedented turmoil. The economy was left in ruins, living standards reached an all time low level, and the country's infrastructure was in total disrepair. The mismanagement of the state and society inevitably brought about the violent downfall of the regime in 1991, and its replacement by the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which is a coalition of ethnic-based organizations currently ruling the country (Harbeson, 1988).

As a movement, the EPRDF espoused a leftist economic and political ideology. Upon coming to power in 1991, however, the group appeared to abandon much of the left-leaning economic and political posture adopted during many years of armed struggle, and opted for a market driven economy, and a competitive political process, including free and multi-party elections. Because of the historic changes in the world scene with the ex-Soviet Union gone and the rest of the world dominated by the USA and the West, the EPRDF did not have much option but to reaffirm its commitment to democracy and elected government, and an economic growth model that would recognize the private sector as an important player. In addition, the new rulers changed course to be able to obtain aid for recovery and reconstruction of a devastated economy and infrastructure.

Upon assuming power, the EPRDF government expressed commitment to freedom of expression, assembly and organization. In the first few years of its rule, there were some prospects that encouraged the emergence of an independent and free private media functioning competitively alongside a government-owned counterpart. Unwarranted and gross violations of human rights that characterized the *Derg* era were capped, and there was more respect for individual rights and freedoms. On the whole, the EPRDF offered Ethiopian society better prospects for a more democratic, humane and participatory rule than its predecessor, the *Derg*. It needs to be observed, though, that these commitments in many instances were easier said than fulfilled, and the Ethiopian people still yearn for the full realization of these political rights after over 23 years of EPRDF rule (Dessalegn & Meheret, 2004; Assefa, 2014).

Parliament and Elections under the EPRDF

Since coming to power in 1991, the EPRDF had committed itself to parliamentary democracy. As a result, a number of elections were conducted, and among these the most important ones

have been the 2005 and 2010 nationwide elections. The 2005 elections in particular have been the most democratic, free and competitive in the country's history. Non-state actors, including civil society organizations, professional associations and the media, all played active roles in the election, and there were lively debates and discussions by all contestants on important national issues.

The 2005 elections generated wide public interest in the democratic process and encouraged voter participation. The opposition made significant gains winning more than a third of the parliamentary seats, and also scored important victories in Addis Ababa, which is a highly significant electoral jurisdiction, taking over all city council seats. Unfortunately, the results of the election were contested by the government and opposition parties, and violence ensued. This resulted in the unwarranted killing of innocent civilians. This was a serious setback for prospects of democracy and competitive politics in Ethiopia.

In relative terms, the 2010 elections were less violent but not as free and competitive. According to election observers from within and outside of the country, there was little by way of a level playing field for all parties contesting the country's politics. In addition, non-state actors and other democratic forces showed little interest in the election process, the media was muted, and there was very little of the debate and discussion characterizing competitive elections. As a result, the final outcome was overwhelmingly dominated by the ruling EPRDF claiming all but two (i.e., one sole opposition and one independent) out of the 546 seats parliament. There have also been several other regional and local elections, but the real impacts of most of these on democratizing local politics and governance remain to be seen because the process has been dominated by political parties organized along exclusively ethnic and linguistic lines.

After the 2005 national elections, the Government instituted measures that severely restricted the role of civil societies and the media in political activity. Parliament, in which the ruling party has an overwhelming majority controlling 544 of the 546 seats, passed the civil society, media and anti-terrorism laws that imposed restrictions on independent organizations and the private media. The laws were widely criticized by human rights organizations and independent observers as being infringements on civil and political rights. The government was accused of using the laws to suppress dissent, and control opposition parties, the media and civil society organizations. The criticisms have been justified because the cumulative effect of the measures has been the progressive narrowing of the political space, the weakening of the opposition, a restricted media, and the entrenchment of an authoritarian single-party rule that controls the executive and the legislature (U.S State Department, 2004, 2013; Human Rights Watch, 2014, 2015). For its part, the Government claims that these measures are necessary to curb foreign or external interference in the country's internal affairs, and also fight terrorism and fundamentalism.

In May 2015, Ethiopia held the third important national elections under the EPRDF. The elections resulted in a landslide victory for the ruling party that won all the seats in the 546-seat parliament. The opposition was decimated, and lost even the one seat that it held in the previous parliament. Many observers and critics of the government characterized the election as flawed and not up to international standards for a free and fair election. No external election observers

from the European Union and the U.S.A. were invited, and only observers from the African Union were allowed to oversee the elections (U.S. State Department, 2015).

In sum, despite repeated elections, multi-partyism has not taken root in Ethiopia. As such, parliament has remained a one-party institution because the opposition has not made much headway in contesting the ruling party. Although the country has attained significant economic progress in recent years, this victory has not been repeated in the political realm because the opposition has not developed into becoming a viable alternative to the ruling party. The blame for this state of affairs can be apportioned between the ruling party, which continues to be heavy handed, and the opposition, which has failed to develop a coherent political and economic program acceptable to the electorate.

Structure of Parliament

Like most parliaments elsewhere, the Ethiopian parliament has two houses: (i) the House of federation (HoF), and (ii) the House of Representatives (HoR). The former, which can be considered the upper house, consists of members designated by regional governments representing the different ethnic or nationality groups. It has only formal powers to deal with constitutional issues and ethnic or nationality matters. The latter, which is known as the House of Representatives (HoR), can be considered the lower house and is popularly elected. This constitutes the 546-seat parliament of the nation, and is in reality the main law-making body of the country.

Since Ethiopia is formally a cabinet form of government, both houses of parliament are controlled by the ruling party, which also controls the executive branch of government. This raises questions about the efficacy of the checks and balances arrangement, the more so in the Ethiopian situation where one-party monopoly of state and government is the norm. However, it can also be noted that parliament in recent years has been active in backing pro-poor policies and programs, which have aided a great deal of poverty reduction throughout the country. This issue will be addressed next in this paper, and will be based on an on-going study on ‘parliament, public engagement and poverty reduction in Ethiopia’.

Parliament, public engagement and poverty reduction in Ethiopia: some preliminary observations

Although the country in recent years has made significant progress in economic growth, much work remains to be done in democratizing the political space and creating a level playing field for different contestants to partake in the political process. For a viable opposition to emerge in Ethiopia, it is absolutely necessary that the ruling party ease the restrictions on independent political activity and create conducive conditions for vibrant civil society and media organizations. Simply put, the government must be put to task to respect the constitution, which provides for the full and unfettered exercise of citizens’ rights to free political activity and freedom of expression.

The Ethiopian parliament has a very influential and active women caucus consisting of 17 women parliamentarians in the executive leadership. The 152 women parliamentarians (27.9%

of the 546 seat parliament) vigorously work to have enough representation of women in the six permanent standing committees, and actively participate in the budget debates to ensure that gender is mainstreamed in education, health and infrastructure budget allocations. In field discussions, it was revealed that the caucus had prepared a checklist to guide discussions with constituencies by women parliamentarians. The aim is to ensure that women issues and concerns are given sufficient focus, particularly in national poverty mitigation efforts. It was also learnt that the checklist is shared with other male parliamentary peers who support the cause of women rights to help them in constituency engagements.

In addition, the caucus has been very active in championing pressing needs of women and girls. For example, it works closely with public health service providers and other interested parties to mitigate the adverse effects of HTPs on women and young girls. Working to reduce the attrition rate of female students in colleges and universities has also been yet another of their preoccupations. This can be seen as a significant achievement in a male-dominated and traditional society such as that of Ethiopia. It was explained that donors had shown interest to support these kinds of initiatives by the women's group.

Although the women parliamentary caucus has been effective in championing the causes of women, other civil society organizations, such as the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA) have not been lucky. This organization has been very much affected by the Government's civil society law because restrictions were imposed on its activity, and its funding levels from outside of the country were closely scrutinized. As a result, the organization is not allowed to work to advance women's rights or fight gender-based violence (GBV) if it receives more than 90 per cent of its funding from donors outside of the country.

Based on field discussions for this study, it was found out that the Ethiopian public is generally critical of their parliamentary representatives. Most participants in FGDs complained that there were not given many choices during elections because the playing field was largely filled by candidates from the ruling party. Also, there is very little trust in parliamentarians being able to adequately represent the needs and concerns of their constituencies. Parliamentarians are viewed as being more accountable to the ruling party than the electorate, and this is a natural outcome of one-party rule.

Among other things, many participants in the constituency discussions also criticized parliamentarians for not fulfilling election promises suggesting the view that they would not give their votes to such representatives again. Although party rules stipulate that parliamentarians should visit their constituencies twice a year, the public does not view these as effective forms of engagement between the public and their parliamentarians because the meetings are formal and structured in such a way as to promote party interests rather than serve as effective forums to promote dialogue.

In discussions with parliamentarians, it became clear that there was mistrust towards independent civil society organizations. While this may be taken as an indication of the antipathy of the party and the government towards the civil society sector and other non-government/independent actors, the observation should be considered as tentative because it involved a limited sample of parliamentarians so far. It can be argued that the views of politicians towards civil society are

very much influenced by the recently promulgated government law restricting the activity of civil society and charitable organizations. The main criticism from parliamentarians was that there was a lot of misuse of resources in the civil society sector, and these organizations were not transparent and were accountable to no one but only to themselves.

On the contrary, a significant majority of the public that participated in the focus group discussions had a favorable opinion of the civil society sector. They believed that these organizations were good at delivering development and providing essential public services, such as water and health, to poor communities. The public also recognizes their immense contribution to poverty reduction and alleviating food insecurity. They were particularly credited for their contribution towards improving the situation of the marginalized and hard-to-reach segments of society. The useful roles that these organizations could play in promoting good governance, and empowerment issues for poor women, children and other disadvantaged groups of the society, were much more appreciated by the community than the politicians.

Civil society leaders/managers and some members of the public have complained that parliamentarians have not been accountable to their constituencies. In particular, the major complaint by the community was the absence of sufficient public consultation on laws and policies passed by the federal parliament and regional councils. This was particularly true in the adoption of controversial legislation, such as the anti-terrorism law, which has often been criticized as being unfairly used by the government to stifle dissent. For their part, politicians and parliamentarians believed that there was sufficient consultation and engagement of the public in policy issues while the electorate, as was explained earlier, asserted that these were largely formal rather than genuine attempts to encourage public participation in the policy process.

In many cases, civil society organizations and other actors, such as the private sector and the media, deal with the executive organ of government, and often their interaction with the legislators is somewhat limited. As a practical matter, it is the executive that registers and regulates the activities of civil society organizations in Ethiopia. It is the opinion of some civil society organizations that this vertical relationship must be accompanied by greater interaction with the legislature. This will provide more opportunities for civil society organizations to present cases to parliament directly, and this will aid their advocacy work for the rights of groups that they serve.

Finally, it can be observed that parliament in Ethiopia has established a good track record in poverty mitigation. Although dominated by the executive, the legislature has been credited with backing pro-poor and pro-growth policies that have contributed to substantial reductions in the levels and severity of poverty. In particular, it is worth mentioning that parliament has used the budget as an important tool for poverty reduction. This has become obvious in budget debates when members of parliament scrutinize the annual budget to insure that sufficient allocations have been made to programs targeting poverty alleviation. This was also a point repeatedly raised in the interview with the Chairwoman of the Budget Standing Committee.

As part of the national growth strategy and poverty eradication effort, the Ethiopian parliament annually allocates a significant chunk of the national budget to the regions. For example, in 2015 (i.e. 2008 Ethiopian fiscal year) 34.7 per cent of the total national budget was given as

general grant to the regions for implementing development programs and providing public services (MoFED, 2015; The Reporter, June 10, 2015). In addition, the federal parliament's regular 1 per cent allocation of total regional financial transfers as specific grants to regional governments to meet MDGs is indicative of parliament's support for poverty reduction efforts (Meheret, 2014). These and other concrete measures attest to parliament's commitment to stimulate balanced and equitable regional growth and aid poverty reduction efforts.

Future plans

As was explained earlier, this is an on-going study on parliament, public engagement and poverty reduction in Ethiopia. As such, it is planned to carry out between 30-35 interviews and discussions with parliamentarians in the next 6-8 months to assess their perspectives and experiences in dealing with their constituencies. In addition, about 5 more constituency focus group discussions will be conducted to draw more observations on how parliamentarians interact with citizens, and on how parliament's role can be enhanced in poverty reduction within the Ethiopian political context. As much as possible, FGD participants will be drawn from a cross-section of the Ethiopian public, including community and religious leaders, women, the youth, and representatives from the poor segments of society, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, etc.

In addition, more discussions are also planned with leaders of civil society organizations and representatives of the media and other interested parties, such as the private sector, researchers and academics, to obtain different views on how the public should be involved and consulted in the formulation of laws and policies made by parliament. The results of the study will be published and made available to Ethiopian parliamentarians and members of the executive and also the public to aid in improving the conditions for parliament-citizen interaction, and thereby strengthen democracy and the growth of parliament as a genuinely representative institution. Specific policy recommendations will also be provided to the Ethiopian Government and its major donors/development partners, such as DFID, to create conducive conditions for effective engagement of politicians with the public, and promoting responsive, accountable and representative governance.

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