

ETHIOPIA:

CONFLICT
DYNAMICS AMID
SWEEPING
REFORMS REQUIRE
A PEACEBUILDING
APPROACH



**Alliance for
Peacebuilding**

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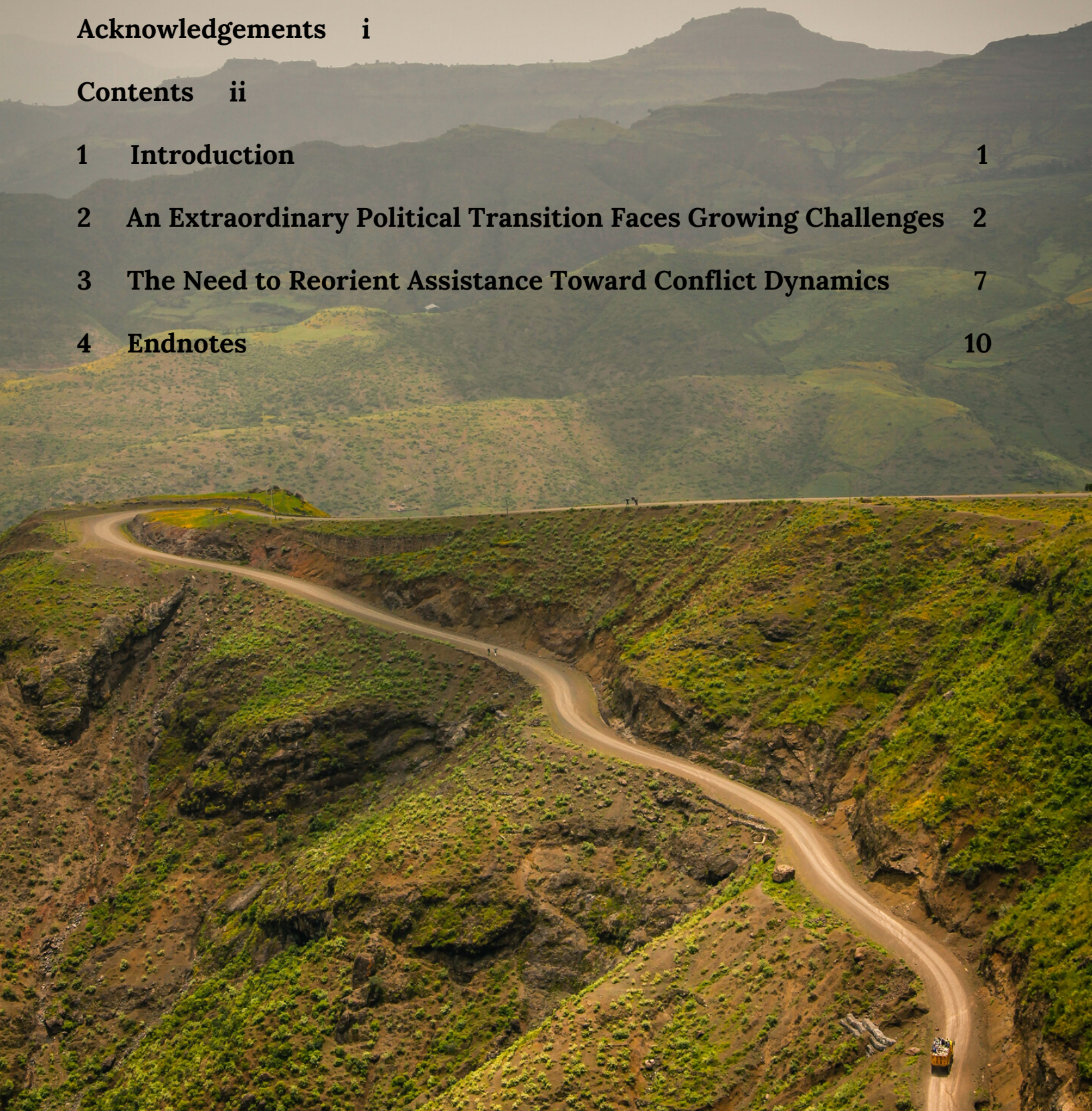


Contents

Acknowledgements **i**

Contents **ii**

1	Introduction	1
2	An Extraordinary Political Transition Faces Growing Challenges	2
3	The Need to Reorient Assistance Toward Conflict Dynamics	7
4	Endnotes	10



Introduction

Ethiopia is undergoing a historic political transition that has opened civic space considerably and propelled major democratic reforms.

Despite the extraordinary political transformation, there are increasing and existing conflict dynamics that threaten not only reforms but also Ethiopia's fragile stability, especially as the proposed August 2020 elections approach. There are systemic and long-standing socio-economic development challenges that have kept Ethiopia classified high on fragile state and conflict watch lists for decades. Unfortunately, the Fund for Peace Fragile State Index reports increasing conflict dynamics in Ethiopia over the last year, may erase the positive trends that were on an upward trajectory. There is a high chance Ethiopia will be one of the most worsened states on the their index in 2020.[1]

Despite significant achievements by the administration of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, the country is experiencing a major drought, ongoing ethnic violence and even the reversal of new political reforms.[2] Therefore, it is critical for bilateral and multilateral donors to avoid a “business as usual” approach and adapt and provide assistance targeted towards addressing the causes of violent conflict. Significant aid, including investment in much-needed peacebuilding priorities in governance, climate resilience, trauma healing, and reconciliation, is critical to ensure Ethiopia's historic political transition is both successful and sustainable.

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An Extraordinary Political Transition Faces Growing Challenges

In 2014, protests began in Oromia and spread to the Amhara region throughout 2015. The culmination of civil unrest, including widespread nonviolent civil disobedience and violence in the most populous regions of Oromia and Amhara, led to the resignation of Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn in February 2018. The peaceful transition of power to successor Abiy Ahmad, the head of the Oromo Democratic Party (ODP), a sub party of the EPRDF, was praised widely as the change Ethiopia needed to enact political reforms.

Since taking office in April 2018, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's agenda has been marked by dramatic and quick political reforms. He released political prisoners, implemented judicial and media reforms, passed legislation that opened space for civil society, boosted political inclusiveness by inviting opposition parties into dialogue with the government, and appointed women to 50% of the cabinet positions. The Prime Minister also ended the state of conflict with Eritrea, earning him the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize.

Through these and other sweeping reforms, the Prime Minister lifted much of the iron grip the government held over the nation and allowed the return of organized political opposition.

While the political transformation has been extraordinary, it has not come without significant challenges.

Violent ethnic conflict under the previous and current government more than doubled the number of internally displaced people in 2018 to 2.6 million, affecting nearly all regions of the country. The violent clashes have led to mass arrests in locations across Ethiopia, including Addis Ababa.[3] In the wake of unrest in the past few months, analysts in Ethiopia report that protests have been disallowed.

The Ethiopian government faces the challenge of liberalizing the media landscape while curbing incitements of violence online. There are worrying signs that state-owned media is reverting into a machine that supports the government.[4] In response to disinformation campaigns and hate speech, Ethiopian lawmakers passed a law to monitor hate speech online. Human rights advocates fear the vague definition of hate speech proposed in the law could be exploited to censor political dissent.[5] U.N. officials have also raised concern about the use of internet shutdowns as a government tool to restrict communication.[6]

Amid these sweeping political reforms, Prime Minister Abiy is experiencing challenges to his political leadership. He recently merged the four ethno-regionally based parties of the EPRDF coalition into a single national party called the Prosperity Party. This decision has been heavily criticized by both the founders of the EPRDF— the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), and other ethno-nationalist politicians.

Although proponents of the merger see it as an opportunity to foster national unity, critics claim the reform process was undemocratic and the new party sacrifices group rights for forced assimilation. There is also an intra-Oromo power struggle between the Prime Minister and Jawar Mohammed, an Oromo activist and media magnate, who has been vocally critical of Abiy's reforms.

The 2020 elections, initially scheduled for May, now scheduled for August, could also catalyze further violence. Holding elections is critical for the current Ethiopian government – which promised Ethiopia's first free and competitive elections in 2020—to be perceived as legitimate and effective. A failure to conduct elections, already postponed once, could exacerbate mistrust and weaken the standing of the central government. Holding elections if the country is not ready, however, could delegitimize the government and spark more violence and conflict. Additionally, the elections in August will coincide with the rainy season in Ethiopia, when heavy rainfall compromises roads and critical infrastructure needed to access polling sites. The presence of international actors also decreases in Ethiopia during the rainy season, which will complicate efforts to monitor elections.

Another issue that could severely impact the election is the lack of a credible census. The last census was completed in 2007. A new census should have been completed in 2017 but is indefinitely postponed. The government stated it would be logistically difficult to conduct a census due to the number of displaced persons and local violence.

Prior to 2018, the security apparatus had tight control of the country down to the local level, which resulted in low crime and virtually no political opposition.[7]

The new government pulled back the federal level security personnel across the country, which has provided room for local-level violence and old conflicts to flare, particularly along district and regional borders.[8] Felix Home, an Ethiopian expert at Human Rights Watch, stated, "One of the manifestations of this rise in insecurity and breakdown of law and order is the rise of local armed groups. ... At the same time there's a proliferation of weapons in many parts of the country." [9] Abiy's reforms allowed former rebels to return to Ethiopia from neighboring countries, but efforts to demilitarize, demobilize and reintegrate them into society have largely fallen short.[10]

There is also a growing youth population. More than 28 percent is aged 15 to 29, and youth unemployment is estimated at nearly 27 percent. Widespread youth movements segregated by ethnicity have been disruptive and destabilizing, and these highly organized youth movements have created blockades along roads and markets, including blocking access to Addis Ababa.



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Universities are fertile ground for violent clashes between students and security forces. In November 2019, three university students were killed during violent clashes that erupted on campuses in the Amhara and Oromia regions.[11] In January 2020, thousands of Ethiopians took to the streets to protest the government's failure to rescue a group of mostly Amhara university students abducted close to their university in Oromia. [12]. This violence and other destabilizing trends have further fueled perceptions that the government is ineffective at providing security to different ethnic communities.

In October 2019, there was significant ethnic violence in Oromia that left many dead. Ethnic strife and clashes between the politically marginalized and politically affiliated have left hundreds dead and displaced millions across the country over the past 18 months. While the government claims the majority of the IDPs have returned, there are concerns about the "voluntary" return process and the safety of the returnees.[13]

These local conflicts have also transformed isolated identity and natural resource-based disputes into large-scale clashes. Such community-level violence has led to the closing of ranks within ethnic groups and further mistrust of other ethnic groups and the central government. Credible assessments find this violence has resulted in perceptions at the community level that the federal level government is ineffectual and self-interested due to its inability to protect its citizens and prevent and stop violence. There has been a significant deterioration in the rule of law, and vigilante mob justice is on the rise.

Regional states have also flexed their autonomy by disregarding dictates coming from the federal government.

The Tigray region, for example, ignored an arrest warrant for Getachew Assef, the former Chief of Intelligence, who was fired by the Prime Minister and accused of serious human rights abuses. Powerful regional strongmen are also demanding more rights for their regions.

Ethiopia's constitution gives the right to seek autonomy to its more than 80 ethnic groups. Under the new political reform agenda, the government granted the zone of Sidama located in the Southern Nations Nationalities and People's Region of Ethiopia (SNNP) their request for a referendum for greater autonomy.

The Sidama referendum was held in November 2019 and was a good litmus test of how well the government of Ethiopia and the regional states were able to manage a free, fair, competitive, and nonviolent election process. Sidama voted overwhelmingly to form a self-governing region. While the election was peaceful, members of other ethnic groups living in the area are now fearful the outcome of the vote could result in discrimination and marginalization of their rights. In the SNNP region, numerous ethnic groups now have formal claims for statehood, and these regional referendum elections will likely be more pervasive.

Competition over natural resources has been a significant driver of violence in the nation over the last decades and is growing.[14]

Ethiopia's population is highly vulnerable to perennial environmental shocks, including flooding and drought. There has been an increase in the frequency and severity of climate disasters that devastate livelihoods in Ethiopia. For example, in the Hamar region, 1.5 million livestock out of 3 million died due to the drought in 2015-2016.

These environmental shocks, which hit local communities especially hard, exacerbate local level instability, resulting in more competition for resources, conflict, and displaced persons.

Climate change also threatens agricultural exports, which make up 40% of Ethiopia's GDP. While the threat from severe drought is high, rising temperatures threaten the viability of the coffee harvest, Ethiopia's largest cash crop. Climate change also threatens to reduce the quantity and accessibility of food within the nation and to eliminate livable areas needed for Ethiopia's growing population.

The Horn of Africa is a conflict affected region, and Ethiopia's relationships with its regional neighbors, including Somalia and Eritrea, has been fraught with conflict.

Ethiopia hosts more than 900,000 refugees, with the majority from Eritrea and Somalia. In recent decades, the emergence of global risks, including climate change and violent extremism, has led to the hardening of borders. Border closures directly counter the habits of isolated and marginalized borderland communities, for whom access to resources has traditionally been determined by cooperation between communities, as opposed to economic and social ties to the national capitals.

Additionally, even the current state of play between Eritrea and Ethiopia is worrisome. Overland borders have been closed and there have been no publicly announced next steps for normalizing diplomatic, economic, and security cooperation. In Ethiopia, some observers see the Prime Minister's cooperation with Eritrea as nothing more than a conspiracy against the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front and people of Tigray region.

Before the political reforms, Ethiopia was already a fragile state with a significant amount of foreign assistance pouring into the country.

With a current population of approximately 105 million and a growth rate of 3.02%, Ethiopia is the second-most populous nation in Africa and one of the continent's fastest growing populations. If Ethiopia follows its current rate of growth, its population will double in the next 30 years, hitting 210 million by 2060.[15] This significant population growth rate makes it difficult for development gains to keep pace.

Ethiopia also has one of the fastest-growing economies in the region, but much of that growth is centered in urban areas, resulting in high urban, rural disparities. Despite considerable economic progress, Ethiopia is among the 25 poorest countries in the world by per capita GDP, with more than 100 million people living in extreme poverty.

Economic, security, and political motivations have made Ethiopia a lucrative arena for great power competition.

Prime Minister Abiy's plans for privatization present opportunities for engagement in infrastructure, energy, aviation, and telecommunications. Currently, Chinese investments in Ethiopia are estimated to be around four billion dollars, and China holds almost half of Ethiopia's external debt.[16] However, these investments come at a price—the quality of infrastructure is poor, and large scale agricultural programs have compromised stabilization initiatives at the local level.

There are serious concerns within the U.S. government of great power competition in the region.

In February 2020, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Ethiopia as part of the Trump Administration's strategy to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative in Africa. The Prosper Africa strategy under the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation seeks to increase American trade and investment in the African continent.

In recent years, Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE have invested heavily in Ethiopia to gain favor with the new administration.[17] Despite the influx of foreign investment, the political transition in Ethiopia has halted many construction projects, particularly in Addis Ababa. Ethiopia's foreign currency shortage – linked to their trade deficit– dependence on aid, and need for foreign direct investment make the already fragile state vulnerable to political and economic coercion by foreign actors.

Abiy's political philosophy of "medemer," an Amharic term for "coming together" summarizes both the challenges and opportunities for a unified Ethiopia. Under medemer, Abiy reversed the 2009 Charities and Societies Proclamation (CSO law), which forbade organizations that received more than 10 percent of their funding from abroad from working on rights based issues, conflict prevention or governance.[18] Civil society is reemerging in these areas and can work on issues such as gender-based violence, improving governance, and increasing inter-religious dialogue. Despite the political, economic and ethnic problems, many Ethiopians have been inspired by the philosophy of medemer. However, this philosophy will not be enough to address the grievances, ethnic violence, and the challenges facing Ethiopia.

The Need to Reorient Assistance Toward Conflict Dynamics

While there has been economic progress in Ethiopia since 2007[19], it remains a fragile state and in the “alert” category, ranking 23rd out of 178 countries on the Fund for Peace Fragile States Index.

While the new government reforms and political openings are promising, there has also been a reopening of old conflicts resulting in significant community-level violence and intrastate regional power grabs. In this crucial moment, it is imperative to address the ongoing developmental challenges and conflict dynamics Ethiopia faces. Foreign assistance must address the historic under-investment in critical areas such as as governance, peace, security, and social cohesion to bolster positive reforms and address drivers of fragility and violent conflict.

According to foreignassistance.gov, "The Government of Ethiopia's (GOE) new five-year Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP) II (2016 - 2020), which includes ambitious targets for growth and allocates huge resources to promote development, reflects the GOE's commitment to provide health, education, and economic growth opportunities to its people. Consistent with GOE objectives, U.S. assistance will continue to promote peace and security, broad-based economic growth and development, democracy, governance, and human rights. Activities will align with GOE objectives to safeguard U.S. government development investments as well as those of the GOE and other donors.

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As a result of U.S. assistance, Ethiopians will continue advancing regional security; gaining access to better healthcare and education; improving food security; and advancing prospects for better livelihoods. Additionally, Relief to Development Transition (R2DT) activities continue to assure food security and includes improving access to services, natural resources management and strengthening disaster risk management at the community level."

The international donor community has provided significant development assistance to combat humanitarian and health crises, especially in combating infectious diseases and bolstering the health of women, newborns, and children. Between 2015 and 2016, USAID's humanitarian assistance supported food distributions to nearly five million Ethiopians and refugees in need of emergency food assistance. USAID programs also provided more than \$104 million in response to non-food emergencies.

In contrast to humanitarian and development funding, governance and conflict prevention programs have been historically underfunded globally as is the case in Ethiopia. While the deficit of prevention and conflict programming is partly due to the now defunct Charities and Societies Proclamation, these funding levels for Ethiopia's development assistance are not an anomaly. The emphasis on funding humanitarian, health and education sectors and not conflict prevention can be seen in other fragile and conflict affected states.

Funds need to be considerably increased and redirected toward programs that support the Ethiopian government's reform goals, especially programs that promote positive community government interactions, civic engagement, and support the central government's peacebuilding role.

Trauma healing and reconciliation must be a significant part of programs that include the youth population. The youth in Ethiopia has contributed largely to positive movement building but also to violence. As USAID stated, "Ethiopia's youthful population is an incredible asset and untapped resource for positive growth.[20]

Additionally, programs that look to the future effects of climate change and build resilience within the agricultural system are critical.

In any development assistance strategy, political leadership and governance programs must be front and center. A viable political compromise and solution must be agreed to and a workable road map needs to be developed for the upcoming national elections. This compromise must occur within the EPRDF coalition parties as well as several of the key influential opposition groups. The leaders, including formal government officials, opposition, and activists, especially youth activists, need to work together to build an effective, legitimate government. The long-term aspirational reforms should be taken forward by a government legitimately elected into office. The current government should lay the necessary groundwork in preparation for a free, fair, and competitive election in 2020 and, at the same time, work to ensure the rule of law and safety for the citizens.

The bold reforms and development plans that the current government is working toward are extensive. Therefore, donors, in partnership with the government, should focus on reforms related to safety/security and elections preparation. Donors must immediately provide targeted conflict prevention assistance to government institutions, civil society, media, and private businesses to address safety/security and elections.

During Secretary of State Pompeo's February 2020 visit to Ethiopia, Prime Minister Abiy announced that the US would provide financial assistance to support reforms. In response, a senior U.S. official announced the U.S. has committed \$37 million to support the upcoming elections.[21] At this point, with the elections scheduled in the next six months, it will be challenging to meaningfully program these funds. While the funding should support credible and transparent elections, funding must also support the long-term development of legitimate institutions and effective political leadership.

There are development bright spots in Ethiopia being designed and planned. The Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) at USAID is establishing new programs, which will make significant contributions to conflict prevention and stabilization programming. However, it is unfortunate that OTI programs did not start soon after the 2018 political transition commenced.

Current projects supported by USAID, are developing early warning and rapid response systems to address violent conflict. Other programs are working with elders and religious leaders within communities to develop localized solutions to conflict.

However, it can't be "business as usual," and the U.S. diplomatic and development approach in Ethiopia needs to adapt to the new conflict dynamics and changing political landscape. Within the USAID mission, there have been discussions about integrating peacebuilding and conflict programming into other development sectors, which is critical given the large amount of funding in health, education, and humanitarian assistance.

Reorienting assistance towards prevention in fragile states is the essence of the new Global Fragility Act (GFA), signed into law as part of the Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2020, on December 20th, 2019.

The GFA is a pilot strategy that would reorient the U.S. government's diplomatic and foreign assistance approach in conflict-affected and fragile states by shifting resources toward prevention. This requires a sustainable, evidence-based approach in which diplomatic policy is linked to development assistance. It also requires that other development programs, including health, education, and humanitarian assistance, not only be conflict sensitive but also work to prevent violent conflict and promote sustainable peace.

AfP is not advocating for Ethiopia to be a prevention country under the Global Fragility Act. However, the GFA outlines what is needed for the U.S. government to reorient development assistance to ensure a peaceful transition to sustainable democracy in Ethiopia.

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