

Bridging Communities: CSOs and Peacebuilding across the Ethio-Kenya Borderlands

Adonias Adugna¹ & Mercy Fekadu²

Abstract

In a world increasingly affected by violent conflicts, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) play a crucial role in addressing the root causes of violence and promoting peacebuilding. This study investigates the contribution of rights-based CSOs to cross-border peace efforts in the Ethio-Kenya borderlands, where the Dassanech and Nyangatom communities in Ethiopia frequently clash with the Turkana community in Kenya. Employing a qualitative case-study approach and utilising both primary and secondary data, the research centres on the Ethiopian Institute of Peace (EIP) and its experiences in fostering peace in this conflict-prone region. The Ethio-Kenya border remains a hotspot for communal and cross-border violence, driven by cattle raids, killings, and cycles of retaliation. The study reveals that EIP exemplifies how CSOs can effectively bridge divided communities through impartial engagement, context-specific strategies, the inclusion of livelihood components, and strong partnerships with women, youth, elders, peace committees, and traditional institutions. Despite recent funding cuts, these elements have enabled EIP to promote dialogue, reconciliation, and healing. The findings highlight the need for increased government and donor support to enhance the role of CSOs as key peace actors in the region.

Keywords: Civil Society Organizations, conflict, cross-border, peacebuilding

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ejossah.v21i1.2>

¹PhD Candidate, Institute for Peace and Security Studies, Addis Ababa University, Email: adoniasadugna@gmail.com, Tel: +251 913804570

²Associate Professor at the Institute for Peace and Security Studies, Addis Ababa University, Email: mercy.f@ipss-addis.org, Tel: +251912083840

This work is licensed to the publisher under the Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derives License.

Article History: Received 28 May 2025, Accepted 30 November 2025, Published online 16 April 2026

Introduction

Violent conflict remains a persistent challenge in the Ethio–Kenya borderlands, where communities such as the Dassanech, Nyangatom, and Turkana experience recurring cycles of cattle raiding, resource competition, and retaliatory attacks. Despite government and donor-led interventions, sustainable peace has remained elusive, partly due to limited state presence and the underutilisation of civil society actors in cross-border pastoral settings. This paper examines how rights-based CSOs—with particular focus on the EIP—contribute to addressing these conflicts through community-centred, hybrid peacebuilding approaches. By analysing EIP’s strategies, experiences, and challenges, the study seeks to understand the extent to which CSOs can bridge divided communities, strengthen local peace infrastructures, and foster long-term stability in the South Omo–Turkana corridor.

Peacebuilding has become a central pillar of international conflict management, emphasizing inclusive dialogue, reconciliation, institutional strengthening, and long-term resilience (Richmond, 2011; Mac Ginty, 2014). Contemporary scholarship highlights the limitations of purely top-down or externally driven approaches and instead advocates hybrid peacebuilding models that combine local agency with national and international support structures. These models are especially relevant in pastoral and borderland settings where state presence is limited, and traditional institutions continue to shape conflict dynamics.

In Ethiopia, the need for peacebuilding is both urgent as the country suffers from recurrent communal conflicts, political instability, and cross-border violence. The South Omo–Turkana borderlands, home to the Dassanech, Nyangatom, and Kenya’s Turkana communities, represent one of the most volatile pastoral frontiers in East Africa. Competition for grazing land, water scarcity, cattle raiding, and retaliatory attacks contribute to cyclical violence that undermines social cohesion and development (Gebrehiwot, 2021). Despite various governmental and non-governmental initiatives, the region remains a hotspot, necessitating multi-actor collaboration and long-term community engagement for sustainable peace.

A range of stakeholders contributes to peacebuilding in Ethiopia, including federal and regional governments, local administrations, elders, women’s groups, youth associations, peace committees, and regional organisations such as IGAD. Donors and NGOs also facilitate cross-border dialogue and early-warning systems. However, the effectiveness of these initiatives is influenced by Ethiopia’s political and legal environment, which has historically limited civil society participation.

Following the disputed 2005 national election, the government alleged that opposition parties were benefitting from the activities and funding of civil society organisations (CSOs). Accordingly, it enacted restrictive laws, including the 2009

Charities and Societies Proclamation (CSP), the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation, and the 2008 Mass Media and Freedom of Information Proclamation—that narrowed civic space and curtailed CSO advocacy (Dupuy et al., 2015). These regulations, particularly the 10/90 rule limiting foreign funding, forced many rights-based CSOs to cease peacebuilding activities or shift their focus to development-oriented programming. This significantly weakened independent peacebuilding initiatives, especially in cross-border areas, where CSO presence is vital.

Only a handful of organisations managed to survive this restrictive period. Among them, the Peace and Development Center (PDC), renamed, the Ethiopian Institute of Peace (EIP), stands out for its active engagement in peacebuilding across Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. Operating in regions such as Amhara, Afar, Oromia, Gambella, Sidama, and Tigray, EIP has extensive experience in cross-border interventions, making it an ideal case for examining CSO-led peacebuilding in the Ethiopian Kenyan borderlands. Despite the growing literature on hybrid peacebuilding, the role of CSOs in cross-border pastoral conflicts remains underexplored. This study addresses this gap by analysing how EIP navigates legal constraints, community needs, and cross-border dynamics to promote sustainable peace.

Theoretical framework: CSOs and hybrid peacebuilding

Civil society is a contested concept, influenced by a variety of historical and regional experiences. Despite some ambiguities in its definition, a widely accepted understanding—such as that provided by CIVICUS—characterises civil society as the sphere of voluntary collective action that is distinct from the state, market, and family, where individuals and groups pursue shared goals (CIVICUS, 2011). CSOs play a crucial role in peacebuilding by facilitating dialogue, resolving conflicts, delivering services, and fostering social cohesion (Richmond, 2011; Paffenholz, 2015).

The global evolution of CSOs demonstrates how historical and political contexts shape their roles within civil society. In Eastern Europe, civil society emerged as a counterforce to authoritarian socialism, promoting democratic norms and political participation (Merkel & Lauth, 1998). In Latin America, CSOs resisted military regimes in the 1960s and 1970s, advocating for human rights and mobilising communities against state repression. In Africa, decolonisation, conflict, famine, and weak governance led to the rise of CSOs as vital actors filling the gaps left by the state (Fisher, 1997). These historical trajectories illustrate that CSOs often emerge in contexts of state fragility, exclusion, or authoritarianism—conditions that are also characteristic of conflict-prone environments.

The study adopts a pragmatic or hybrid peacebuilding framework that combines international peacebuilding norms with locally grounded, culturally relevant conflict management systems. Liberal peacebuilding, which often focuses on external actors and top-down reforms, has faced criticism for neglecting local agency and context (Paris, 2004; Louis-Alexandre, ND). Scholars such as Mac Ginty and Richmond (2013) advocate for a “local turn” by stressing the importance of indigenous actors and knowledge in fostering sustainable peace processes. Similarly, Mamdani (2016) underscores the significance of acknowledging local norms and practices when designing peacebuilding interventions.

Utilising this framework, the strategies employed by EIP exemplify hybrid peacebuilding in action. While securing international funding and adhering to global norms, the institute actively integrates indigenous conflict resolution methods, including community dialogues facilitated by elders, and engages local stakeholders on both sides of the Ethio-Kenya border. This integration enables context-sensitive interventions that effectively address historical grievances, resource-based tensions, and cross-border disputes.

Cross-border pastoralist conflicts have long characterised the region between south-western Ethiopia and North-western Kenya. Ethnic groups, including the Dassanech, Nyangatom, and Turkana, have historically competed for scarce resources such as pasture and water, particularly in areas lacking clearly demarcated territorial boundaries (Sagawa, 2010; European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, 2021). Colonial policies in Kenya, including divide-and-rule administrative strategies, exacerbated interethnic divisions, creating long-term sources of tension (Gemedu; 1990; Sagawa, 2010).

Historically, these communities relied on indigenous conflict management practices—such as councils of elders and customary reconciliation mechanisms—to resolve disputes (Michael et al., 2005; Miyawaki, 2008). For instance, the Turkana employed socialisation and communal norms to prevent intra-ethnic conflict, while the Dassanech maintained mixed patterns of enmity and alliance with neighbouring groups (Sagawa, 2010). Resource pressures—including access to Lake Turkana, grazing lands, and water—have intensified competition and conflict, particularly where state oversight is limited or absent (Akall, 2021; Lokuruka & Lokuruka, 2006; Opiyo et al., 2016).

These historical patterns illustrate the enduring need for civil society organisation (CSO) engagement in peacebuilding. EIP's interventions, grounded in indigenous knowledge and hybrid strategies, aim to mediate disputes, facilitate cross-border dialogue, and reduce resource-based tensions. By explicitly linking historical conflict dynamics to its operational strategies, EIP demonstrates how

CSOs can fill governance gaps, foster social cohesion, and implement context-sensitive peacebuilding approaches.

The paper situates EIP's activities within broader theoretical and historical contexts. Indigenous organisations like *iddir* and *iqub* illustrate the foundations of community-based peacebuilding, which modern CSOs have adapted to contemporary challenges. Historical conflicts in the Omo-Turkana corridor highlight persistent resource and boundary disputes, emphasising the relevance of hybrid approaches that combine local and international practices.

Taken together, these dynamics underscore that contemporary peacebuilding in the Omo–Turkana corridor cannot be divorced from its historical roots. The legacies of indigenous governance systems, shifting intercommunal relations, and intensifying resource pressures continue to shape patterns of conflict and cooperation. By drawing on this historical landscape while integrating inclusive, hybrid approaches, CSOs like EIP are uniquely positioned to bridge divides, strengthen local resilience, and support sustainable cross-border peace.

Methodology

This study utilised a qualitative research approach, which is particularly effective for exploring complex social realities, capturing diverse perspectives, and interpreting individual experiences of conflict and peacebuilding in specific contexts (Creswell, 2018). The research was conducted in the Ethiopian–Kenyan border areas of Dassanech and Nyangatom woredas in the South Omo Zone, where recurrent cross-border clashes occur between Ethiopian communities and Kenya's Turkana. Building upon this contextual focus, purposive sampling was employed to identify participants with direct knowledge of cross-border conflict dynamics and peacebuilding interventions. Key informants were selected based on three criteria: professional experience in peacebuilding, involvement in community conflict management structures, and institutional relevance to the Ethiopian Institute of Peace (EIP) or cross-border initiatives. Community participants were also purposively selected to ensure representation of elders, women, youth leaders, and traditional mediators.

To capture a broad range of community perspectives, the study incorporated two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with the Dassanech and Nyangatom communities, the study included in-depth interviews with community members who had personal experiences of cross-border violence and participation in local peace committees. This approach strengthened the community voice beyond the FGDs.

In parallel, key informant interviews were conducted with EIP leadership (Executive Director, programme manager, and programme officer), officials from the Ethiopian Civil Society Organisations Council (ECSOC), representatives of the European Union Delegation to Ethiopia, and officials from zonal and woreda-level public and security offices. For Kenyan participants, interviews were conducted by a trained data collector, while the researcher directly interviewed Ethiopian participants.

The study's primary data comprised interviews, FGDs, and organisational documents from the EIP and local administrations. Secondary literature was used solely to contextualise known elements of the study area, not for triangulation. Primary data triangulation was achieved by comparing multiple informant perspectives.

Data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006), which involved familiarisation, coding, theme development, and interpretation. The identified themes included cross-border conflict drivers, community coping mechanisms, CSO intervention strategies, and institutional challenges.

Ethical consideration was observed throughout the research. Participation was voluntary, and informed verbal consent was obtained according to participant preference. Confidentiality was maintained, and no identifying information was recorded. As the study involved non-experimental social research, formal ethical approval was not required; however, ethical standards for qualitative inquiry were strictly upheld.

Results and discussion

The Role of EIP in cross-border Peacebuilding

The Ethiopian Institute of Peace (EIP) has emerged as one of the most active CSOs engaged in conflict prevention, management, and resolution in Ethiopia's borderlands. Insights from key informant interviews (KIIs), community interviews, and document reviews collectively highlight EIP's pivotal role in facilitating cross-border peacebuilding in the South Omo–Turkana corridor (EIP, 2017; EIP, 2020). A representative from the Ethiopian Civil Society Organisations Council (ECSOC) noted that EIP's long-standing involvement in pastoral conflict zones sets it apart from other rights-based CSOs. The informant stated, "EIP is one of the very few CSOs that never left conflict areas, even during the restrictive CSP era. Their experience in conflict-sensitive programming is unmatched" (KII 1, April 13, 2025). This observation aligns with previous literature that underscores the

significance of continuity in CSO-led peacebuilding within restrictive political contexts (Dupuy et al., 2015).

International donors also acknowledge EIP's strategic importance. A key informant from the European Union Delegation to Ethiopia remarked that the EU considers CSOs vital intermediaries between the government and local communities. According to the informant, "For us, CSOs are cross-cutting actors. We fund them because they connect communities to institutions, especially on governance, democracy, human rights, and peacebuilding" (KII 2, April 15, 2025). The informant further noted that EIP is among the few Ethiopian CSOs capable of implementing large-scale cross-border projects: "EIP has consistently been our strongest partner in pastoral peacebuilding, particularly in the Turkana–South Omo corridor" (KII 4, April 14, 2025). EIP staff also reflected on the organisation's comparative advantage. One senior programme officer described EIP as "one of only two Ethiopian CSOs with a direct government waiver to work on Conflict Prevention, Management, and Resolution," a status that has enabled the organisation to operate even under restrictive legal frameworks (KII 2, April 15, 2025). Document reviews confirmed that this institutional flexibility allowed EIP to sustain peacebuilding activities throughout both the pre-2019 restrictive era and the post-2019 civic space reforms (EIP, 2017; EIP, 2020).

Community informants supported these evaluations. A Nyangatom elder explained, "When government people come once and leave, it is EIP who stays and talks to us again. They know our problems" (Informant 3, March 21, 2025). Similarly, a Dassanech woman remarked, "We trust EIP because they come to us with solutions, not orders. They sit with women and listen" (Informant 2, March 25, 2025). A youth participant also underscored EIP's consistent presence: "Before EIP, no one asked the youth how we feel. They invited us to be part of peace, not just fighters" (Informant 1, March 20, 2025).

EIP's Peace III and SEEK programmes exemplify the organisation's broader peacebuilding strategy, which combines traditional conflict management with structured dialogue, capacity building, and cross-border institutional linkages. Peace III, implemented before the 2018–2019 CSO reforms, focused on strengthening traditional conflict management institutions in the Lake Turkana–South Omo corridor. SEEK, introduced after the reforms, expanded these efforts into coordinated cross-border peace committees, joint women's forums, and livelihood-oriented interventions. Key informants emphasised that both programmes illustrate EIP's long-term commitment to cross-border peace. An EIP staff member reflected: "Peace III opened the door, but SEEK deepened the relationships. Both demonstrate our belief that peace cannot be built in one project

cycle" (KII 7, April 18, 2025). Thus, these findings illustrate that EIP integrates field presence, institutional legitimacy, donor trust, and community acceptance—positioning it as a central actor in Ethiopia's cross-border peacebuilding landscape.

Women-led forums in local cross-border peacebuilding

Women-led peace forums have become a crucial part of efforts to enhance local cross-border conflict management systems between communities in South Omo (Ethiopia) and Turkana County (Kenya). According to an EIP key informant, "the women-led intra-community healing dialogue in Nyangatom was designed to expand women's participation in peacebuilding and conflict resolution, beginning first within their own community" (KII 2, April 15, 2025). These dialogues aimed not only to facilitate healing and reconciliation but also to empower women to mobilise their communities toward peaceful coexistence. EIP's (2017) annual report highlights the urgency of this approach, noting that women in Dassanech and Turkana communities were "among the most affected by conflict and yet had the least role in peacebuilding" (EIP Annual Report, 2017). During women-only healing dialogues, participants themselves emphasised this gap, stating that "women's participation in community affairs is very poor, and this trend must change" (EIP Annual Report, 2017). They further observed that despite women bearing the disproportionate costs of violence, "none—including government or NGOs—give adequate attention to women's engagement in peace efforts" (Informant 2, March 25, 2025).

Focus group discussions reinforced the significance of these initiatives. Participants from Nyangatom explained that the women-led healing dialogue "brought members of the regional women forum together and initiated conflict management training for women, as well as plans for regional dialogue among Dassanech, Nyangatom, and Turkana women" (FGD 1, March 28, 2025). A Kenyan participant recalled that the dialogue helped raise awareness about "the importance of healing, reconciliation, and sharing natural resources peacefully across the border" (Informant 8, March 27, 2025). Community perspectives consistently affirm women's cultural legitimacy as peacebuilders. One FGD discussant noted, "Nyangatom women are known for promoting peace through cultural dancing and music, while Dassanech women discourage their sons from engaging in revenge through songs and traditions" (FGD 1, March 29, 2025). Another participant explained that "whenever there is anger or a sense of revenge, women can calm the situation easily because they are capable of facilitating healing and reconciliation" (Informant 6, March 26, 2025).

EIP's commitment to engaging women was repeatedly acknowledged during interviews. An EIP staff member stated, "In many of our women's healing dialogues, we discussed how to empower women to play their role in conflict management. Women in Dassanech appreciated the initiative and asked that it continue" (KII 1, April 13, 2015). Women participants even pledged to "convince their children not to incite conflict with Turkana" and emphasised "the power of forgiveness for reconciliation" (FGD 1, March 28, 2025). The agency of women in these contexts stems partly from their profound suffering. As one FGD participant explained, "Many women are tired of burying their sons and husbands. They told us they suffer both in giving birth and in burying their loved ones" (FGD 1, March 28, 2025). This emotional burden motivates their engagement in peace initiatives. Recognising this, EIP intentionally brought women to the forefront of communal leadership. An informant affirmed that "bringing women into leadership was the right decision—it helped ease tensions" (Informant 4, March 26, 2025).

Aligning with global scholarship that highlights both women's peacebuilding potential and their historical marginalisation, key informant interviews noted that "women's roles have long been undervalued, so we designed activities targeting women alone, recognising their inherent peacebuilding abilities" (KII 3, April 15, 2025). Thus, enhancing women's participation is not only a matter of equity but also essential for sustainable, locally grounded conflict resolution.

Chiefs-led forums: A bridge for cross-border peacebuilding

In addition to women-led dialogues, the Eastern Interpeace (EIP) initiative engaged local chiefs to utilise their traditional wisdom in addressing violent conflict. According to an EIP informant, "like the women-led forum, EIP established chiefs-led inter-community forums tasked with discussing and monitoring the security situation across the corridor" (KII 1, April 13, 2025). One informant confirmed that not only EIP, but also other civil society organisations (CSOs) and international NGOs, had established peace committees comprising elderly chiefs from both sides of the border. These committees meet regularly to assess security developments and resolve conflicts through indigenous mechanisms, thereby fostering peaceful coexistence among border communities (Informant 5, March 26, 2025).

The chief-led forums included representatives from all communities and focused on enhancing resource-sharing, which is a major source of tension among the Dassanech, Nyangatom, and Turkana communities. One FGD participant noted, "Chiefs from Nyangatom and Dassanech agreed to share pasture in their common border, highlighting practical outcomes of dialogue" (FGD 2, March 29, 2025). The issue of cattle rustling and theft also emerged as a recurring topic.

Traditionally, cattle raiding has been seen as a rite of passage for young men to gain status, with cattle and firearms symbolising prestige across generations. As an informant explained, "Traditional mechanisms of conflict management used to change and break the cycle of violence. We were strengthening these by bringing chiefs together from the three communities to discuss and solve common problems" (Informant 7, March 27, 2025).

FGD participants emphasised that intermittent tensions were often fuelled by prolonged periods without direct interaction, which fostered mistrust. One participant stated, "The forum provided a rare opportunity for Dassanech and Turkana communities to engage. While Turkana participation was lower than desired, the messages of the forum were expected to resonate with other Turkana leaders" (Informant 8, March 27, 2025). Despite these efforts, resource-sharing with the Turkana was limited due to insecurity along the border and the deep-rooted culture of cattle raiding. EIP's annual report highlighted that armed groups from Kenya often accessed water and pasture without regard for the Nyangatom, undermining previous peace efforts (EIP Annual Report, 2017). Key informants from public peace and security departments stressed the structural challenges of cross-border peacebuilding: "Peacebuilding attempts are temporary and frequently disrupted by recurrent conflicts, rooted in cultural practices and the cycle of revenge" (KII 10, April 18, 2025). This underscores that while CSO-led interventions are vital, sustainable peace requires coordinated engagement by both national governments and regional bodies such as IGAD, integrating policy reconciliation with resource management strategies.

Integrating livelihood elements in peacebuilding projects

Peacebuilding initiatives carried out by civil society organisations (CSOs) often neglect to include livelihood components, which limits the sustainability of peace networks once project funding concludes. An informant from EIP noted, "If communities are networked across livelihood activities, there is a higher probability of continuity for peace networks and their engagements" (KII 1, April 13, 2025). In response to this, EIP and Kenyan CSOs like SAPCONE provided technical support and capacity-building training to enhance cross-border collaboration.

One informant highlighted specific interventions, stating, "Twenty mobile phones, four fishing boats, and numerous fishnets were distributed to fishing committees to improve communication among cross-border committee members and local administration, thereby enhancing community livelihoods" (Informant 9, March 27, 2025). Strengthening communication channels was critical for

preventing conflicts, as participants remarked, "The more information flows between communities, the more incidents can be prevented from happening" (KII 1, April 13, 2025).

The Kenyan Marine Unit acknowledged the improved sharing of fishing grounds between the Dassanech and Turkana communities during a follow-up celebration event. EIP's 2017 annual report noted that the event "strengthened government ties from both Ethiopia and Kenya, where officials agreed to maintain peace initiatives along the lake delta area" (EIP Annual Report, 2017). An EIP informant added, "The Kenyan marine unit and local Ethiopian officials agreed to identify stolen nets from either side so that exchanges could occur in coordination with security bodies" (KII 9, April 18, 2025). These interventions illustrate the significance of context-specific approaches and the inclusion of livelihood elements in peacebuilding projects. By integrating economic activities with conflict resolution mechanisms, CSOs can enhance local ownership, facilitate sustained engagement, and reduce the recurrence of disputes over shared resources.

Elders and youth forums of discussion: Turning conflict into cooperation

Hostilities between the Turkana of Kenya and the Dassanech and Nyangatom communities of Ethiopia have historically heightened tensions and led to recurring conflicts, particularly among fishing and pastoral groups along the border. Various peace and development initiatives implemented by CSOs have aimed to foster sustainable coexistence among these communities. Central to these efforts are elders, who hold a respected position in local society and play a pivotal role in conflict resolution. Customary institutions led by elders are crucial in the peacebuilding landscape of South Omo and northwestern Kenya, particularly in managing youth, administering justice, and facilitating community decision-making (KII 2, April 15, 2025).

Recognising this, the EIP organised forums for elders to discuss and utilise their traditional wisdom in addressing conflict. According to an EIP informant, "the forum encouraged traditional leaders and councils of elders, who are also custodians of their communities' natural resources, to participate in advocacy, peace, and development meetings, and mentor youth to adopt non-violent approaches to conflict resolution" (KII 1, April 13, 2025). This approach exemplifies the integration of the "local turn" in peacebuilding theory, which emphasises using locally available conflict resolution mechanisms while leveraging international funding to facilitate cross-border dialogue—resources that are otherwise unavailable to local communities and government actors.

In addition to elders' forums, the EIP facilitated youth dialogues in Demich and Ocholoch within Dassanech Woreda to enhance youth participation in peace promotion. The youth had frequently been involved in conflicts with the Turkana and Gabra from Kenya, as well as the Nyangatom and Hamer from Ethiopia. An EIP informant highlighted that the youth themselves did not hold intrinsic grievances but were often incited by elders and seers (traditional medicine men) to engage in cattle theft and revenge attacks. "Once the youth have finished their raid missions, the looted animals are handed over to seers, leaving them with nothing," noted the informant (KII 2, April 15, 2025).

The youth forums provided a platform to discuss the underlying causes of youth engagement in conflict, including harmful cultural practices, competition for grazing land and water, theft, restocking, revenge, drought, land disputes, government involvement, and the social valorisation of violent heroism. Through these dialogues, youth associations explored peaceful resource management strategies and behavioural change. As the informant observed, "the intervention by EIP led to noticeable changes within the youth group, transforming them from troublemakers into active peacebuilders. Unlike before, they now focus on promoting peace" (KII 2, April 15, 2025).

A key outcome of these forums is reflected in the SEEK project, which significantly transformed the peacebuilding landscape in southwestern Ethiopia. One informant recounted a success story of the project in facilitating grazing field sharing agreements between the Hamer and Dassanech communities:

"The SEEK project, through EIP, has organised Peace Committees from both sides of the corridor. The project trained and capacitated the committees from the beginning. Many events took place to bring change, helping them build peace. During the River Omo flooding incident, the Hamer Peace Committees initiated the resource-sharing idea to the government and community leaders. Officials took influential members to the flood-affected areas to witness the impact, enabling a shared understanding of the crisis and the need to share grazing lands" (KII 12, April 19, 2025).

The project's success is further corroborated by verbatim accounts from youth leaders recorded in EIP's 2020 annual report. One Hamer youth leader stated:

I have killed a Dassanech member and stolen animals without knowing myself. It was only hatred I had for them. When elders

advised me to refrain, I always disagreed. Thanks to EIP, the SEEK project, the government, and the elders who guided me, I now reflect on my actions. I visited the Dassanech areas with Peace Committee members and elders, saw animals dying, and felt the pain. I realised what I did was inexcusable. I must compensate and serve as a role model for this and future generations. Today, I beg my community to allow us to share grazing lands. We are all human, and no one will help us unless we help each other (EIP Annual Report, 2020, p. 18).

This narrative demonstrates the transformative potential of combining traditional leadership structures with youth engagement and structured dialogue. Elders' involvement ensures respect for customary authority, while youth participation facilitates the behavioural change necessary to break cycles of violence. The integration of local knowledge and customary practices within a structured peacebuilding framework aligns with the principles of participatory and context-sensitive approaches, emphasising that sustainable peace requires both social and economic consideration.

In conclusion, the dual focus on elders and youth forums illustrates a successful model of turning conflict into cooperation. Elders provide legitimacy and guidance rooted in customary law, while youth forums cultivate awareness, responsibility, and agency among younger generations. Projects such as SEEK, facilitated by EIP, reveal that peace is most sustainable when local cultural institutions are harnessed, youth are actively engaged, and interventions are responsive to the social and environmental realities of border communities. This approach highlights the significance of context-specific, community-driven peacebuilding efforts that combine local wisdom with external support, ultimately fostering cross-border coexistence, resource sharing, and long-term stability (EIP Annual Report, 2020).

Conclusions

Cross-border peacebuilding in the Ethio-Kenya borderlands is inherently complex, necessitating engagement with two sovereign states and multiple communities that harbour deeply entrenched historical grievances. This study highlights the crucial role of civil society organisations (CSOs), particularly the Eastern Interpeace (EIP), in bridging divides between the Dassanech and Nyangatom of southwestern Ethiopia and the Turkana of Kenya. By partnering with Kenyan CSOs such as Saint Peter's Community Network (SAPCONE), EIP facilitated cross-border

dialogues, elders' and youth forums, and livelihood-linked interventions that harnessed local knowledge while fostering trust across the border.

EIP's grassroots engagement, combined with its neutrality and adaptive approach, enabled it to mediate tensions and prevent escalation in volatile environments. However, the study also uncovers limitations and challenges regarding sustainability. Peace initiatives are often project-dependent, constrained by limited funding, and vulnerable to cultural practices such as cattle raiding that perpetuate cycles of violence. Structural issues, including a lack of government coordination and sporadic engagement from national authorities, further impede the long-term effectiveness of CSO-led interventions.

These findings have broader implications for peacebuilding theory and policy. They reinforce the argument that sustainable cross-border peace requires the integration of local mechanisms with institutional support, and that CSOs are not merely charitable actors but strategic partners capable of implementing context-sensitive interventions. Policymakers and donors should prioritise sustained investment in CSOs, capacity building, and measures to ensure their protection in politically and financially restrictive environments. Future research should explore innovative funding models, the role of digital technologies in enhancing cross-border coordination, and strategies for embedding CSOs within national and regional peace frameworks. Ultimately, durable peace in the region will depend on the alignment of local knowledge, institutional support, and adaptive, well-resourced civil society engagement.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References

- Akall, D. (2021). *Pastoral conflicts and resource management in East Africa*. Nairobi: African Studies Press.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- CIVICUS. (2011). *State of Civil Society Report 2011*. Johannesburg: CIVICUS.
- Creswell, J. W. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Dupuy, K., Ron, J., & Prakash, A. (2015a). Who survived? Ethiopia's regulatory crackdown on NGOs. *Review of International Political Economy*, 22(2), 419–456.
- Dupuy, K., Ron, J., & Prakash, A. (2015b). *Who survived? Ethiopia's regulatory crackdown on non-governmental organizations*. *Voluntas*, 26(5), 2150–2177
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-015-9581-6>
- Ethiopian Institute of Peace (EIP). (2017). *Annual report*. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.
- Ethiopian Institute of Peace (EIP). (2020). *Annual report 2020*. European Institute of Peace.
- European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa. (2021). *Horn of Africa: Cross-border conflict and stability report*. Brussels: EU.
- Fisher, W. (1997). *Civil society and democratization in Africa: Perspectives from Eastern and Southern Africa*. London: Routledge.
- Gemeda, A. (1990). *Historical dynamics of ethnic relations in southwestern Ethiopia*. Addis Ababa: University Press.
- Gebrehiwot, A. (2021). *Pastoral conflicts and resource governance in the South Omo–Turkana borderlands*. Addis Ababa: Institute for Peace and Security Studies.
- Louis-Alexandre, N. D. (n.d.). *Liberal peacebuilding and its critics*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Lokuruka, M. N. I., & Lokuruka, P. A. (2006). Ramifications of the 1918 patrol: Narratives by NgTurkana. *Ethnohistory*, 53(1). Duke University Press.
- Mac Ginty, R. (2014). *Everyday peace: Bottom-up and local agency in conflict-affected societies*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mac Ginty, R., & Richmond, O. P. (2013). The local turn in peacebuilding: A critical agenda for peace. *Third World Quarterly*, 34(5), 763–783.
- Mamdani, M. (2016). *Citizen and subject: Contemporary Africa and the legacy of late colonialism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- Merkel, W., & Lauth, H. J. (1998). Systemwechsel und Zivilgesellschaft: Welche Zivilgesellschaft braucht die Demokratie. *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 6(7), 3-12.
- Michael, P., Akong, J., & Nyaga, L. (2005). *Conflict resolution mechanisms among pastoralist communities*. Nairobi: African Peacebuilding Institute.
- Miyawaki, M. (2008). *Ethnic groups and social structures in the Turkana Basin*. Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press.
- Opiyo, F., Wasonga, J., & Nyangena, M. (2016). Pastoral resource conflicts in the Kenya–Ethiopia borderlands. *African Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 16(1), 45–66.
- Paffenholz, T. (2015). *Civil society and peacebuilding*. Oxford University Press.
- Paris, R. (2004). *At war's end: Building peace after civil conflict*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Richmond, O. P. (2011). *Peace formation and political order in conflict-affected societies*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sagawa, A. (2010). *Pastoralist conflicts and cross-border relations in the Omo-Turkana Corridor*. Tokyo: United Nations University Press.