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Reclaiming Civil Society Space in Ethiopia: An Analysis of Civil Society Trends, Structural Challenges, and Distribution Gaps

Zigiju Samuel Beyene [1] https://orcid.org/0009-0009-3206-6964

Abstract

This study examined the state of civil society organizations (CSOs) and consortia in Ethiopia. It looked at how they had grown, what structural problems they faced, how laws have changed, and what spatial differences exist. The study used a qualitative method, focusing on document reviews, interviews with key informants, and group discussions. The study found that while legal changes such as Proclamation No. 1113/2019 have made civic space more open, consortia are still weak due to monetary problems, political interventions, poor partnering, and lack of faith among the organizations involved. Moreover, CSOs are not spread evenly, as they favor cities, and their focus often misses important needs at remote and local levels. To help these organizations get better, we need to make them stronger, spread their services to more areas, create clear ways to handle financial resources, and ensure the involvement of remote and local CSOs and the community at the grassroots level.

Key words: Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), Consortium, Civic Space, Ethiopia, Legal and Institutional Setup

1. Introduction

Civil society organizations are very important in democratic countries as they connect the government and the people. Around the world, civil society organizations (CSOs) are seen as key players in promoting human rights, providing social services, improving responsibility, and encouraging people to get involved (Edwards, 2009). In Africa, the rise of civil society is often tied to moves toward democracy and equitable development. In Ethiopia, the civil society sector started many years ago, but it really took off after the Derg government fell in 1991.

The 1990s were a turning point for civic space in Ethiopia. The change to a federal democratic republic created a good setting for civil society organizations to perform well. This was especially true for those focused on giving aid and helping with development. However,

[1]PhD, Assistant Professor at the Department of Development Management, College of Finance, Management, and Development, Ethiopian Civil Service University, email: readyzi@yahoo.com

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pushing for rights in its complete sense faced more hurdles. Things got harder when the Charities and Societies Proclamation No. 621/2009 was enacted. It put strong limits on CSOs, especially those working on human rights and how the country is run, by limiting their access to foreign funds, which many of them depended on (Broeckhoven et al., 2021).

Even with these challenges, the political changes that came after the change in leadership in 2018 have given new hope to civil societies in Ethiopia. The Civil Society Organizations (CSO) Proclamation No. 1113/2019 replaced the strict law, making civic space better and giving both local and foreign organizations more freedom to work. Because of the change in the legal arena, CSOs rose in number, and a collaborative work environment has been created.

But some problems are still persisting, such as issues with how well they work, what they focus on, how they are run internally, and how well they work with others. Just because there are more CSOs does not mean they are providing services or getting people involved in optimum ways. While the number of organizations grew, especially after 2019, some big issues still remain. First, most CSOs are in cities, mostly Addis Ababa, so rural areas are not getting the attention they need (Sharma, 2018). Second, important issues such as violence against women, children's rights, and bad traditional practices are often not dealt with well. Many of these organizations focus on development and service projects that attract funding organizations and are simpler to promote.

Consortiums that are meant to make civil society stronger by improving teamwork, reducing repetition, and boosting advocacy often do not reach their objectives. Political interference, poor management, competition among members, and ethnic biases hurt how well these consortiums function. In addition, CSOs in such groups often have fewer resources, not enough skills, and weak plans, which lead to separate actions and less impact.

Many studies and policy reviews have looked at the legal and political environment that affect CSOs in Ethiopia, but less attention has been given to their internal setup, structure, and how they work. There is no adequate information on ethnic biases, service area distribution, and employment practices within each civil society. Also, not enough is known about how they act as places for working together and pushing for change, especially with recent political changes.

This study is important because it looked at the changing role of CSOs in Ethiopia due to the prevailing political environment. By looking at trends, structural problems, gaps, and where services are located, this research hopes to better understand how civil society can be made stronger to advance development and democracy. The results are hoped to better inform policymakers, development partners, and CSO workers who want to see equitable management, fair services, and regional connection. Moreover, the research saw how can change from being just for show to being real that make the voices of those who are pushed aside heard and hold leaders accountable for their actions.

This study aimed to look at the history, structure, and location of CSOs and groups in Ethiopia as the political and legal situation changes. More specifically the study aimed to: a) look at how CSOs have grown in Ethiopia since 1991, b) examine the internal workings, strengths,

and weaknesses of groups, c) explore where CSOs are located and what they focus on and find important gaps, and d) suggest ways to make CSOs stronger and more stable.

This study is organized into four sections. The first section introduces the study, presenting its background and context. The second section presents the review of related literature, dwelling in conceptual and theoretical discussions as well as a review of empirical studies. The methodology section, which addresses the strategies and methods used to carry out the study, is presented in section three. Section four presents the results and discussion of the study, where the data collected from different sources are presented, analyzed, and discussed. The final section of the article presents the conclusion and recommendations of the study, in which the researcher concludes based on the findings and analysis of the study and recommends ways forward and directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Civil Society and Its Functions

Civil society is often seen as the "third sector," separate from the government and business. According to Diamond (1999), civil society includes different volunteer groups that allow people to speak their minds, share information, push for rights, and watch over organizations. Salamon and Anheier (1996) say it is a part of organized social life that is voluntary, self-sustaining, and mostly independent from the government.

In terms of development, civil society has some important jobs, such as providing services, calling for policies, getting communities involved, and keeping an eye on democracy. In new democracies like Ethiopia, civil society is expected to address governance problems by promoting human rights, supporting gender equality, and making sure the voices of those who are ignored are heard (Edwards, 2009; UNDP, 2013). But how well these organizations work often depends on the laws, donor support, and their own skills.

2.2 CSO Types and Groups

CSOs can come in different forms, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), faith-based groups, trade unions, community-based organizations, and professional groups. In Ethiopia, Proclamation No. 1113/2019 says CSOs are consortiums, board-led organizations, charitable trusts, gifts, and committees. Also, consortiums serve as important places for forming connections and working together.

Consortiums make it easier for CSOs to work together, avoid doing the same thing, get more influence with donors, and improve advocacy. But they can become less effective if they are too focused on the center, do not have democratic responsibility, or are driven by political goals (Ashman & Sugawara, 2012; VanSant, 2003).

2.3 Civil Society's City-Focused Interventions

One problem that keeps coming up with CSOs in Africa is that they concentrate in and around cities, mostly working in capital cities and big urban centers (Orvis, 2003). This city-focused intervention limits civil society's actions and contributions that help rural areas where development and rights issues are often more serious and in demand. City focused approach of civil society is usually caused by easier logistics, what donors want, and problems with resources in rural areas including infrastructure, utilities, facilities, and lack of peace and security (Sharma, 2018).

2.2 Theoretical Review

Social Capital Theory (Robert Putnam): Robert Putnam's social capital theory (Putnam 1993) helps us understand civil society. Putnam says that a strong network of civic groups creates trust, teamwork, and working together among people, which leads to better democratic management. In Ethiopia, the lack of trust seen among CSOs, especially in consortiums, prevents them from working together and supporting each other.

Habermas' Theory of the Public Sphere: Jurgen Habermas says civil society is a place for clear public talk, or a public sphere, where people can talk about important things without the government or business interference. In authoritarian countries, this public sphere is often limited. Ethiopia's legal limits on civil society from 2009 to 2018 show how government control can reduce civic space and limit public talk.

Neo-Institutional Theory: Neo-institutionalism looks at how formal and informal systems shape the acts and set up of organizations, including CSOs (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). This theory says that CSOs may copy the setups and rules of leading organizations to get support. In Ethiopia, many organizations use similar bureaucratic ways, which can cause problems as their goals are shaped by donors instead of local needs.

Stakeholder Theory: Freeman's stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) says that organizations must think about the needs of everyone involved, not just those who give monetary support but also those who benefit, regulators, and partners. Here, consortiums must balance the different interests of member CSOs, government groups, and international donors. If these things are not handled fairly, it often leads to breaking up and internal conflict, as seen in Ethiopian consortiums led by elite or politically connected individuals.

2.3 Empirical Review

Civil Society in Ethiopia: Research shows that civil society in Ethiopia has changed over time. The opening up in the 1990s caused a rise in CSOs, especially in services. But after the 2005 elections, the government became more careful with rights-based organizations, limiting these groups to getting no more than 10% of their money from foreign sources. This change greatly reduced how they worked (Broeckhoven et al., 2021). Data from the Agency for Civil Society

Organizations shows that the number of CSOs dropped from over 2,500 in 2008 to fewer than 1,800 in 2009, showing how restrictive the law was. After the legal changes in 2019, CSOs started to recover, with numbers rising to nearly 2,900 by 2021(ACSO, 2021). But rights-based CSOs still face bureaucratic hurdles and political doubt.

How Well Consortiums Work and their Problems: Previous studies say that consortiums can be very important in Ethiopia by improving talk, limiting overlaps, and sharing resources. But they also show weaknesses, such as financial dependency, poor partnership, and problems of dealing with how member organizations act. The fall of the Poverty Action Network of Ethiopia shows how internal conflict and competition among members can break a consortium's ability to survive (Aster, 2008; Dessalegn, 2008). Some consortiums are seen as unhelpful or politically affected, with biases based on ethnicity and political interference. These issues show problems faced in almost all parts of Africa, where forming coalitions often opens an invisible door of opportunity for political interference and this eventually reduces members' trust on consortiums (CIVICUS, 2016; Gyimah-Boadi, 1996).

Location and Focus Areas Gaps: Evidence says that civil society in Ethiopia is mostly in Addis Ababa, which has over 70% of all registered CSOs. This agrees with findings from other African countries that point to city concentration (Orvis, 2003). Also, important issues such as female mutilation, child marriage, and solving conflicts are not well represented in CSO programs, especially in areas like Afar, Somali, and Gambella. Local resistance, cultural misunderstandings, and problems with resources often stop CSOs from getting involved in these areas (Cooper, 2018; Bratton, 1994).

Donor Need and Responsibility: Research reveals that Ethiopian CSOs rely heavily on international donors for monetary support. This need can lead to short-term, project-focused steps instead of long-term plans. Many organizations change their goals to match what donors want instead of the real needs of local communities (VanSant, 2003). Also, how consortiums are held responsible is often weak or does not even exist. While many consortiums have codes of conduct, they are rarely put in place, leading to a loss of trust about how well the codes of conduct work.

3. Study Methods

This study used a constructivist research view, focusing on how people in CSOs see their experiences and the realities they make. This view gave ideas about insights, reasons, and how organizations work (Creswell, 2014). Given that this research is exploratory, a qualitative method was used. Qualitative research shows social processes, relationships, and power in civil society, especially in politically sensitive areas (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Using a case study design allows us to look closely at real situations (Yin, 2018). Ethiopia has been chosen for its rich civil society history, changing political situation, and changing legal contexts. This design well connects different sources of data, including documents, interviews, and group discussions, which make the findings stronger and deeper.

Respondents were chosen using purposive sampling based on their involvement in civil society. The sample embraces leaders and program managers from local and international CSOs, people from consortiums, officials from the Agency for Civil Society Organizations (ACSO), donor workers, and experts. In total, 25 people were chosen for their skills and leadership in civil society.

To ensure that the issues are well understood, the study used different qualitative data collection methods. Key legal and policy documents, such as Proclamation No. 621/2009 and No. 1113/2019, and annual reports were critically examined. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to get deeper ideas about management problems and getting resources, and group discussions to know what workers thought about CSOs actions.

All interviews and discussions were recorded, transcribed, and looked at by theme. A thematic study approach allowed the detection and understanding the patterns and meanings in the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An iterative coding mechanism was employed to connect categories and make key themes like legal limits and resource problems. Atlas.ti software Version 9 helped put data in order, code and manage them well.

Standard ethical rules were closely followed. Consent was signed with everyone who got involved, and all participants were informed about the study's purpose and possible risks. Participants took part voluntarily and their responses were kept confidential. Instead of mentioning the names of respondents, the study used codes (i.e., KII1, KII2 … etc.) to maintain confidentiality. The researcher also kept digital files safe and only available to the research team to protect people's identities. Given how sensitive civil society work is in Ethiopia; special steps were taken to avoid implicating those involved, especially those working on rights.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Past Trends of Civil Society in Ethiopia

Table 1 shows past trends in civil society in the country from 1994 to 2021. It should be noted that data for some years were not available from 1994 to 2000 and 2001 to 2007. As Table 1 depicts, the number of CSOs in the country rose fast from 70 in 1994 to 368 in 2000, then to 600 in 2001, and reached 2,305 in 2007. This is because CSOs were supported by open access to foreign funds after the change from the military regime to the democratic regime in 1991. In 2007, there were 2,305 CSOs, which rose to 2,582 in 2008. This number then fell sharply to 1,805 in 2009. This drop in 2009 was due to the Charities and Societies Proclamation No. 621/2009, which set strict rules for civil society. Broeckhoven et al. (2021:57) wrote that "the 2009 CSP [Charities and Societies Proclamation] likely caused a much smaller civil society sector than there might have been if the Proclamation had not been passed."

Because of this, over 250 CSOs, mostly those working on democracy, human rights, good governance, gender equality, and peace and security, could not continue. Only CSOs working on development and service delivery could re-register after the restrictive proclamation. The number of CSOs went down from 2,582 in 2008 to 1,805 in 2009 and stayed almost the same until 2017,

with small increases. In 2018, a clear decline was seen (see Figure 1) because some government-affiliated CSOs terminated their work following the end of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) dominated government. After 2018, the number of civil society organizations went up because of the new Civil Society Organization Proclamation No. 1113/2019, which created space for all types of civil society organizations to play their roles.

Most of the CSOs actively operating in the country between 2009 and 2017 were those working on development and service delivery. The Charities and Societies Proclamation 621/2009 limited rights-based CSOs' access to foreign funds, intending to stop them from working on rights issues. The number of CSOs started to rise after 2018 because the repressive proclamation was replaced by a more open one that sees CSOs as key players in development and societal transformation. Because of this, the number of CSOs rose from 2,231 in 2018 to 2,581 in 2019, to 2,633 in 2020, and to 2,871 in 2021.

Table 1: Past trends in CSOs in Ethiopia 2007 to 2021

Year	Total No. of CSOs	Change in %
1994	70	--
2000	368	--
2001	600	--
2007	2 305	72.8%
2008	2 582	54.7%
2009	1 805	27.1%
2010	2 220	17.7%
2011	2 205	8.9%
2012	2 100	3.7%
2013	2 250	0.4%
2014	2 161	3.2%
2015	2 222	3.7%
2016	2 302	4.3%
2017	2 400	6.4%
2018	2 231	19.3%
2019	2 581	25.4%
2020	2 633	10.3%
2021	2 871	100.0%

Source: ACSO (2021)

CSOs were not banned completely between 2009 and 2017, even though the proclamation was very strict. CSOs working on development and service delivery had some freedom because the government focused on those involved in political rights issues. The law mostly limited CSOs whose work related to rights, like human and democratic rights, advocacy, peace and security, governance, gender equality, and conflict management. The government considered these CSOs as a threat. The law was not as strict for CSOs working on development and service delivery as

for those working on rights issues. So, development and service delivery-focused CSOs were able to continue in the harsh legal environment. During this time, as explained by KII-1:

> *…the government created civil societies that looked non-biased, neutral, civic, and independent, but were really government-linked and biased. These groups worked as civil society but got all the support from the government. They received special treatment from the government. That is why the number of civil societies during the restrictive period showed a small increase from 2009 and 2017.*

Figure 1 shows that during the early years of the EPRDF regime, the number of civil societies grew fast and stayed steady around the middle years until the political changes in 2018, when the space for civil society re-opened. In 2018, the number of CSOs started to rise slightly.

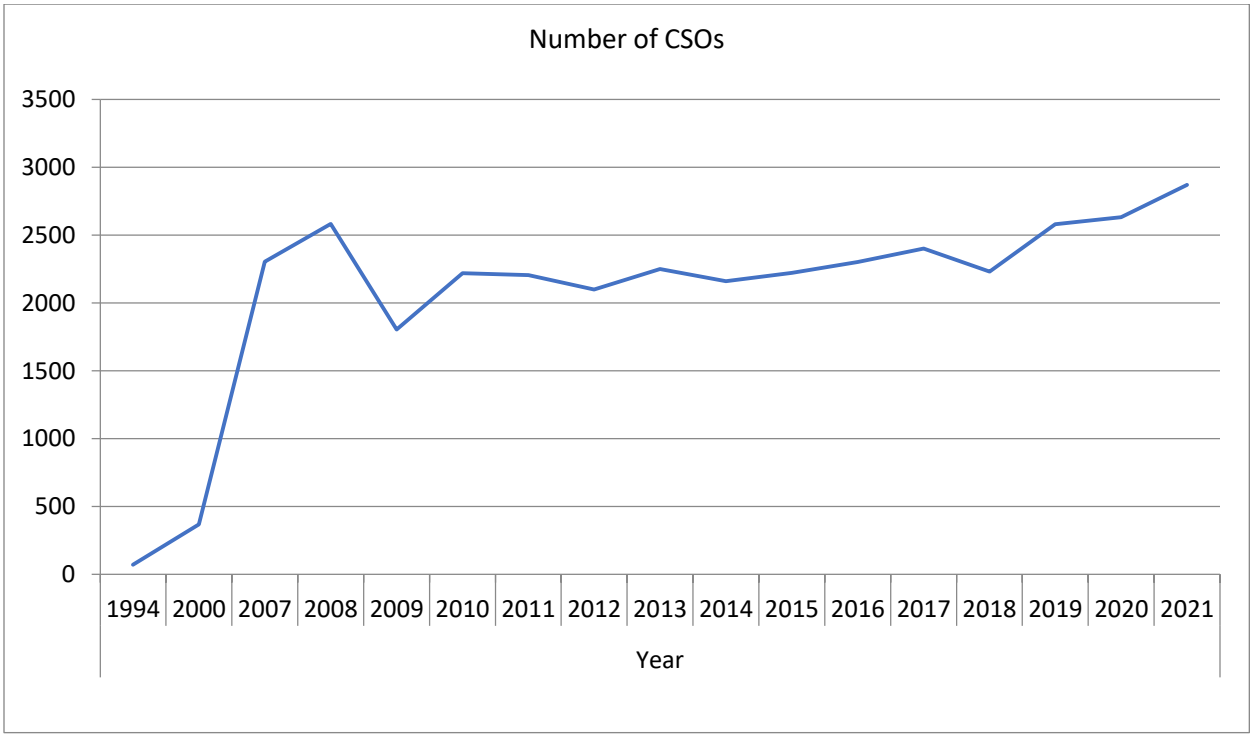

Figure 1: Trends in CSOs over the seventeen years from 1994–2021
Source: Agency for Civil Society Organizations (2021)

4.2 Categories of Civil Society in Ethiopia

CSOs in Ethiopia, based on the new Proclamation No.1113/2019, are divided into two groups: foreign CSOs and local CSOs. The Proclamation says that a "Foreign Organization" is "a non-governmental organization formed under the laws of foreign countries and registered to work in Ethiopia." It defines a "Local Organization" as "a civil society organization formed under the laws of Ethiopia by Ethiopians or foreigners living in Ethiopia, or both." Data from the ACSO

(see Table 2) shows that local CSOs make up most (about 85%) of the total number of CSOs in the country, while foreign civil societies make up only 15%.

Table 2: Classification of CSOs

No	Category	Re-registered	Newly Registered	Total
1	**Foreign Organisation**	324	96	420
2	**Local Organisations**			
2.1	An Association	1 295	296	1 591
2.2	A Board-led Organisation	151	656	807
2.3	A Charitable Endowment	16	30	46
2.4	A Charitable Trust	1	6	7
2.5	A Charitable committee	0	0	0
	Total	**1 787**	**1 084**	**2 871**

Source: ACSO (June 2021) and CSP (2019)

The presence of both foreign and local CSOs in Ethiopia is very important. Local CSOs often lack the experience, knowledge, technology, and funding needed for success. Foreign CSOs are usually much better with these areas. But, local CSOs understand the needs and context of the local community better than foreign CSOs. Instead of working together to fill these gaps, these two types of organizations often work independently in Ethiopia, and there is no clear way for them to share what they have. For such partnerships to work, both a policy platform and a cooperative way of thinking are needed.

According to the new Civil Societies Proclamation No.1113/2019, local organizations are grouped into five types: an association, a board-led organization, a charitable endowment, a charitable trust, and a charitable committee (See Table 2). While the new proclamation has created chances for civil society, the changes to the CSO classifications have also created problems. One big issue is that it has forced many CSOs to change their goals because these classifications directly affect what the CSOs do.

4.3 Consortiums

Consortiums are groups of CSOs that come together under one lead organization. In this setup, different CSOs agree to work together on important issues while keeping their independence (Aster 2008:136). Under Proclamation No.1113/2019, a consortium in Ethiopia is “a grouping created by two or more CSOs.” Consortiums can be in any of the categories listed in Table 2. Data from the Agency for Civil Society Organizations shows that there are over 74 consortiums working in Ethiopia (ACSO, 2021). While their work varies, most (85%) are set up as consortiums of charitable associations, while the remaining 15% work in other areas. This shows that consortiums in Ethiopia are mostly made up of charitable organizations that aim to benefit the public. Charitable organizations focus on improving people’s social wellbeing and quality of life in all areas.

Consortiums usually organize and guide the work of their member CSOs to avoid duplication of efforts; i.e. doing the same things or covering the same areas. They also help their members get money from local and foreign donors. They are expected to create a place for member organizations to share information, resources, and experiences. Consortiums are especially helpful in empowering small civil societies with less reach and fewer resources (Desalegn 2008:101; Aster 2008:136). However, consortiums in Ethiopia do not always meet this standard. Although there are over 74 consortiums in the country, KII-2 said:

> *Most consortiums are officially set up and registered by the Agency but do not have a noticeable impact compared to their goals. For example, many civil societies lack funds and other resources even when they are part of consortiums. Also, even though consortiums should prevent overlap, they are not stopping member civil societies from doing the same things in the same areas. Many civil societies are crowded in one area, while communities in other areas need the same services.*

Consortiums can also control the actions of member organizations. They do this by creating rules and building a group identity without affecting the independence of each organization. These rules are created by member organizations working together. However, some FGD respondents said that:

> *Some member civil societies act against the rules. Even though consortiums should take action, they often don't. Some consortiums lack resources and expertise, while others are too big and hard to manage (e.g., CCRDA with 400 plus member organizations).*

The financial resource available for consortiums is limited because they do not raise funds on their own. They often raise funds based on project plans created by member organizations. Consortiums then negotiate with member CSOs to keep some of the funds to cover costs. This is their main source of finance, which limits their ability to operate. Other sources of finance, like contributions from member organizations, are small.

Some CSOs with good fundraising skills and opportunities avoid joining consortiums to avoid having to give up some of the money they raise. These actions hurt the existence of consortiums because in order for consortiums to financially survive and sustain their activities, they need portions of the funds raised by member organizations. In this regard, KII-3 stated: "*One of the strongest consortiums in Ethiopia, known as 'Poverty Action Network of Ethiopia (PANE)', no longer exists partly because of these problems."*

In addition to collective action, consortiums are a way for member organizations to get donor funds. Often, donors need to approach consortiums to give funds to CSOs, which is one of the major incentives for CSOs to join consortiums. In connection to this KII-4 said:

> *Donors prefer to work with consortiums because it makes things easier for them, reducing the time and effort required. For them, working with a few consortiums is more efficient than dealing with many individual civil society organizations. Thus, in order to give funds, donors require civil societies to join consortiums.*

But, this approach has drawbacks, especially for local and small civil society organizations that have less resources and reputation. In most cases, only those with better resources and experience join and form consortiums. These practices exclude less skilled and incapable local CSOs.

In some cases, consortiums become arenas of conflict because of the types of member organizations. Not all CSOs in Ethiopia share the same civic identity. According to KII-5,

> *Some civil societies in Ethiopia are not only biased but also unable to govern themselves with high standards. Others do not have civic norms because of their nature, showing bias, misuse of resources, and corruption. While these issues are taking place due to weak oversight by ACSO, it has become a challenge for smooth functioning of umbrella civil society organizations.*

The lack of trust among member CSOs not only turns the consortiums into places of conflict but also affects their existence. Even when consortiums do good jobs that help society through cooperation (Ashman & Sugawara 2012:1-2), there is unfavorable competition among them. This is due to unnecessary government action in civil society. After losing the 2005 election, the government blamed consortiums like the CCRDA for supporting opposition parties and considered them as threats. In connection to this, KII-6 said:

> *The government created a rival organization known as the Forum for CSOs to weaken consortiums like CCRDA. The Forum, created in the name of civil society, was promoting the government's interests and working against the pressure from independent civil society organizations. The government tried to tempt CCRDA for support, but CCRDA refused. As a result, the government created the Forum that can do what CCRDA refused to do. So, most civil societies blame the Forum for having two roles, one political and the other civic.*

This made the relationship between the Forum and other consortiums one of suspicion and competition, not cooperation. However, according to KII-7, after the political changes in 2018, the Forum is becoming more independent. The Forum's current effort to create a new CSO strategy and accountability framework to improve civil society situation shows this possibility.

In some cases, consortiums in Ethiopia reflect ethnic interests. Cooper (2018:9) and Orvis (2003:248) wrote that religious and ethnic ties are the basis for most civil societies in Africa. In this regard, focus group discussants indicted,

The structure and leadership of some consortiums are made up mostly of members of certain ethnic groups. In one way or another, they support the interests of these groups. Ethnic politics, which is a problem in Ethiopia, has become the guiding idea in some consortiums. One sign of this is that key leadership roles are given based on ethnic identity. Even though the name is civil society, bias and uncivil actions exist in these organizations.

Furthermore, some consortiums fail to balance diversity or multi-ethnic views in their management system. The focus on either unity or diversity has created problems. Those who favor unity do not talk about multi-ethnic views, and the same is true for those who favor diversity~~,~~ ; they don't share views of unity. In response to pro-unity CSOs, pro-diversity CSOs have grown in various regions of the country. Supporting this, KII-7 said "Ethnic CSOs have appeared in Oromia, one of the most populated regions in Ethiopia."

4.4 Regional Distribution of CSOs in Ethiopia

Table 3 shows both the lack of CSOs and their uneven distribution across the country. The number of CSOs is not in line with Ethiopia's population of about 115 million, with a ratio of about 1:40,000. This shows that the services of CSOs are not easily available. In addition, the regional distribution of CSOs in Ethiopia is highly uneven.

According to Table 6.3, about 72% of all CSOs are crowded in Addis Ababa, although some of these civil societies may work in areas outside of Addis Ababa. After Addis Ababa, Oromia has 9%, followed by Amhara and SNNPR, each with 4%.

The goal of any civil society is to reach the poor at the local level. To do this, CSOs need to be close to their target groups. But, as Table 6.3 shows, most CSOs in Ethiopia are in the capital city, which is far from most of the people who need help. Being in the capital city benefits the CSOs more than the people they are supposed to serve. This lack of proximity can limit their access to local communities.

The uneven distribution of CSOs in the country is related to the areas they cover and the population. CSOs in Ethiopia tend to gather in small areas and do not reach wider areas with more people. The Oromia region, for example, is the most populated and geographically largest of all regions. Likewise, Amhara is the next most populated region. Although these regions are wide and highly populated, they have fewer CSOs compared to Addis Ababa.

In terms of activities, many CSOs gather in some areas like service delivery, while ignoring other important areas. Table 3 shows that the actions of CSOs were small in areas where human rights violations are high. For example, in the northern part of the country where early marriage is common, there are few CSOs working in these areas. In the southern part of the country where child kidnapping and early marriage are common, again the number of CSOs is small. In remote areas of Affar and Somali regions, female genital mutilation is still widely practiced. In Gambella, extraction of lower incisor teeth and slitting foreheads are common practices. Also,

removing milk teeth and some organs of the mouth are still common harmful practices in many remote areas, which need CSOs' help.

Table 3: Regional Distribution of Civil Society in Ethiopia

Region	Re-registered	New	Total	Percent
Addis Ababa	1 251	833	2 084	72.55
Oromia	156	105	261	9.09
Amhara	99	30	129	4.49
SNNPR	109	38	147	5.13
Tigray	64	29	93	3.24
Somali	35	35	70	2.44
Afar	24	3	27	0.95
Benishangul-Gumuz	17	1	18	0.63
Gambella	13	1	14	0.49
Dire Dawa	13	6	19	0.67
Harari	6	3	9	0.32
Total	**1 787**	**1 084**	**2 871**	**100**

Source: ACSO (2021)

While these issues are not being addressed, few CSOs work in these areas. Instead, CSOs gather in other areas where these problems are not common. Besides, many CSOs tend to provide similar services in one area while absent in others. This shows that CSOs base their work on their own convenience, not the areas and people who need the most help. So, they seem to be concentrate in few areas and compete against each other instead of working in different areas where there are demands. This problem occurs for different reasons. First, CSOs that work on rights issues tend to focus on political issues and ignore the rights of women, children, and girls. Second, lack of teamwork and collaboration among CSOs is another cause. The third reason could be community resistance. In some cases, CSOs that work in remote areas face resistance from the community. This is because some communities do not allow new practices and life experience to enter into their culture. So, when CSOs go to teach and support such communities, they usually face resistance. In this regard, CSOs have not been creative in finding ways to help. The final reason is the weaknesses of consortiums and ACSO in making sure CSOs are evenly distributed across areas.

CSOs in Africa tend to focus on urban areas (Orvis 2003:248), and Ethiopia is not different. Table 3 reveals that most CSOs in the country tend to concentrate in urban areas, mainly Addis Ababa, in their work. Supporting this, focus group discussants said, "*There is a big urban focus. Most CSOs are crowded in urban areas. Urban people seem to get more benefits than rural people because of this."*

This may be due to lack of infrastructure and the challenges of rural areas in terms of technology, transportation, and utilities. However, according to Sharma (2018:40; 2003:4-6),

development needs to connect urban and rural areas to cause positive change. So, for CSOs to make a positive contribution to societal transformation and development, a balanced approach and intervention in both urban and rural areas is important.

4.5 Discussion and Theoretical Synthesis

This study explored the development, challenges, and regional disparities of civil society organizations and consortiums in Ethiopia. Using qualitative data within a detailed historical context reveals complex interactions among legal systems, political climates, organizational strengths, and regional inequalities that influence the effectiveness of CSOs in the country.

Ethiopia's civil society sector has changed considerably over the past thirty years. Following the democratic transition in 1991, the sector grew rapidly, especially in humanitarian and development initiatives. However, the Charities and Societies Proclamation No. 621/2009 severely limited rights-based organizations, blocking their efforts and curtailing their impact. Although Proclamation No. 1113/2019 has reopened civic space, lingering effects from previous oppression, ongoing political divisions, and resource limitations prevent the sector from fully realizing its potential.

Consortiums aim to enhance collaboration and advocacy among CSOs but have not met expectations. Many consortiums lack funding, struggle with coordination, or are subject to political interference. In some instances, they replicate the hierarchies and exclusionary practices they are meant to challenge. These findings highlight not only institutional weaknesses but also a deficiency in trust and mutual accountability among CSOs. Trust is essential for creating solidarity, effective teamwork, and cooperation.

There are significant concerns regarding the geographic and thematic distribution of CSOs. Over 70% operate from Addis Ababa, with few functioning in marginalized areas like Afar, Somali, and Gambella. This urban concentration constrains the impact of civil society, particularly in regions grappling with social injustices and harmful traditions. Additionally, many CSOs focus on "safe" topics, such as education and health, while avoiding more contentious issues like governance, rights advocacy, or ethnic reconciliation. As a result, civil society becomes fragmented and misaligned with national development needs.

These findings both support and challenge several theories of civil society. From the perspective of social capital theory, the observed weaknesses within Ethiopian consortiums and the widespread mistrust among CSOs highlight the lack of supportive networks and shared responsibilities needed for a vibrant civic culture. Many CSOs operate in isolation, competing for limited donor resources, which weaken the overall potential for democratic engagement and collaborative governance.

Habermas's concept of the public sphere also applies. He characterizes civil society as a realm for rational discussion, free from external pressures. Yet, in Ethiopia, civic space is heavily shaped by governmental control, ethnic politics, and donor interests, limiting CSOs' ability to serve as independent platforms for public engagement. Even instances of discussion often occur under the influence of power imbalances, self-censorship, or political pressures.

Neo-institutional theory provides insight into how Ethiopian CSOs react to external pressures by conforming to practices and structures that may not align with their core missions. Many organizations mimic bureaucratic models or shift their objectives to satisfy donor expectations. While this may aid their survival, it risks diminishing their responsiveness to grassroots concerns and long-term sustainability.

Finally, stakeholder theory emphasizes the challenges many consortiums encounter when trying to balance the competing interests of their members, government interests, and community needs. A lack of participatory governance and feedback mechanisms tends to marginalize some stakeholders, especially smaller or rural organizations, which contribute to exclusion and inefficiency.

Ethiopia's legal reforms have opened doors for civil societies, but structural, political, and cultural challenges continue to hold them back. The ability of civil societies to achieve their full potential hinges on addressing these fundamental issues: urban focus, weak coordination, mistrust, and donor dependence are key areas to improve. Strengthening consortiums, decentralizing CSO activities, and fostering collaborative environments based on trust are essential forward steps.

This study contributes to the broader discussion around civil societies, illustrating how civic space—despite legal reforms—continues to be shaped by historical legacies, institutional cultures, and the dynamics among stakeholders that require strategic addressing.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the growth, challenges, and geographic disparities among civil society organizations (CSOs) and consortiums in Ethiopia, focusing on the impact of legal frameworks, institutional issues, and the political landscape. Legal reforms, particularly Proclamation No. 1113/2019, have created more opportunities for civic action, yet several challenges remain, including urban concentration and weak collaboration.

The findings indicate that while the number of CSOs has increased, their impacts are uneven. Consortiums strive to foster cooperation and reduce overlap but often falter due to coordination issues, lack of trust, and political interference. The continued focus of most CSOs on urban areas leaves critical service gaps in rural regions where social injustices and harmful traditional practices prevail. Rights-based CSOs face significant hurdles tied to funding, legitimacy, and community pushback.

The results advocate for the relevance of several civil society theories. Social capital theory supports the idea that the existing mistrust and weak networking among CSOs hinder effective collaboration. Habermas's public sphere theory faces challenges in contexts like Ethiopia, where political influence and dependence on donors limit independent civic discussions. Neo-institutional theory sheds light on how CSOs may replicate bureaucratic or donor-driven models, often at the expense of grassroots relevance. Stakeholder theory clarifies the difficulties consortiums experience when trying to balance the broader interests of their members, donors, and the communities they serve.

Generally, civil societies in Ethiopia have substantial potential but continue to be encumbered by structural, political, and operational limitations. To fully realize this potential, reforms in governance, decentralization of operations, and efforts to build trust-based networks are needed. Aligning CSO agendas more closely with community priorities is also crucial.

6. Recommendations

To improve the effectiveness of civil societis in Ethiopia, stakeholders should consider the following actions: The government, particularly the Agency for Civil Society Organizations (ACSO), should promote regional equity by providing incentives for rural-based CSOs while ensuring transparency and reducing political interference. Consortium leaders should focus on strengthening governance structures and enhancing member engagement. Donors should prioritize capacity-building grants for rural and emerging CSOs and support consortiums demonstrating impact and inclusivity. Civil society organizations must encourage collaboration rather than competition, sharing best practices and resources.

Future research should investigate internal governance practices within consortiums, including power imbalances between large and small CSOs and how these dynamics affect collaboration. Additional studies should explore how Ethiopia's ethnic federalism shapes the agendas and structures of CSOs, especially those organized along ethnic lines. It's essential to understand how donor funding influences CSO priorities, strategies, and independence; clear understanding can assist in developing more sustainable funding models. Researches should also consider how communities view CSOs—whether they perceive them as legitimate agents of change or outsiders driven by donor interests. Furthermore, exploring how technology can improve outreach, coordination, and service delivery among CSOs is vital for the future sustainability of civil societies in Ethiopia.

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