



Western Michigan University  
ScholarWorks at WMU

---

International Conference on African  
Development Archives

Center for African Development Policy  
Research

---

8-2007

## 2 Building Democratic Institutions of Governance & Civil Institutions

Erku Yimer  
*Ethiopian National Congress, Chicago*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/africancenter\\_icad\\_archive](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/africancenter_icad_archive)



Part of the African Studies Commons, and the Economics Commons

---

### WMU ScholarWorks Citation

Yimer, Erku, "2 Building Democratic Institutions of Governance & Civil Institutions" (2007). *International Conference on African Development Archives*. 112.

[https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/africancenter\\_icad\\_archive/112](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/africancenter_icad_archive/112)

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for African Development Policy Research at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Conference on African Development Archives by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



BUILDING DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS OF GOVERNANCE  
AND CIVIL INSTITUTIONS

A PAPER TO BE PRESENTED AT THE 5<sup>TH</sup> INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE  
ON ETHIOPIA AND NORTHEAST AFRICA  
WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY, KALAMAZOO, MICHIGAN  
AUGUST 2-4 2007

BY ERKU YIMER

ETHIOPIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS  
MAY 15,2005

## **Building Democratic Institutions of Governance & Civil Institutions**

### **I. Introduction:**

The purposes of this paper are threefold.

1. To create a basic understanding of the nature of civic organizations and the role they play in democratization of society as practiced in Western societies.
2. To examine the scope and diversity of some traditional organizations like Idir and Shimglena/Mehal Sefari as practiced in various regions of Ethiopia.
3. To develop ways and means of incorporating and integrating some selected and important civic functions particularly into Idir and Shimglena.

Building sustainable and stable democratic governance including its growth and development goes hand in hand with growth and development of civic institutions. Since the enlightenment period of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe, civil society developed with the rise of socio economic relations independent of family, and the feudal state. Since then, civil societies have remained the backbone of democratization, socio-economic development and human rights advocacy.

Civil societies as developed, practiced and maintained in Western cultures, generally seek to attain social power, relational power that will influence public policy. They usually run parallel and separate from the state. They are generally characterized as the “third force” coming between the state and the individual/family and protect the individual from the paramount power of the state. The critical role they play in Western societies is very well recognized and established.

This paper attempts to help clearly understand civic organizations including their purposes, focus and modalities as practiced in Western societies. This may help avoid confusion and misunderstanding that are apparent in the Ethiopian civic movement and contribute toward understanding of the meaning and roles of civic organizations in the democratization process of society in general and in Ethiopia in particular.

When it comes to traditional societies like Ethiopia, civil societies are at a very rudimentary stage in the sense as practiced in Western societies. However, along with the advancement of technology, the world has become closer than ever before. Western ideas and institutions have penetrated almost every corner of the earth. Many believe the disseminations of Western

technology, ideas and institutions have partially or fully arrested the natural growth and development of traditional institutions in many Third World Countries. Ethiopia is no exception. In fact, through the introduction of modernization and urbanization, in less than a century, traditional institutions have been crippled and their growth and development almost arrested. This can be seen in the domination of international Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO,) every aspect of socio-economic life of the people.

Many Ethiopians feel that the socio-economic and political development of the country should be based on existing traditional institutions. Some in fact attempt to explain the underdevelopment of the country due to uncritically adapting western ideas and practices without filtering them through existing and time tested institutions. They mention Idir, Equb, Shimglina/Mehal Sefari, (mediation) Afersata, and Awchahne (consultative), Shengo (advisory), Mehal Sefari (third force or neutral force) and the like. The most persuasive argument comes in terms of building Idir and Shimglina to addressing our participatory, reconciliation and democratization needs. Proponents argue that these institutions are widespread, participatory and are embraced by many Ethiopians in spite of their ethnic, language and geographical affiliations. Idir and Shimgilena promise to be the cultural bases of building a strong civic society that can emerge as an advocacy agent “third force” for human and democratic rights and general wellbeing of society.

This paper also examines the informal/traditional “civic” organizations such as Idir and Mehal Safari/Shmiglena; develop a framework of the role of civic societies based on these Ethio-centered traditional institutions and explore their potentials, if nurtured, can serve the purposes of civil society in the modern sense.

## **II. What Are Civil Societies?**

The word Civil comes from the Latin word Civicus to mean "citizen". Basically, Civic organizations are voluntary associations with a goal of improving the general well being of a citizenry. Volunteerism, legal and non-political participation in public affairs and interests are the essences of civic organizations. Civil Societies are historical and not universal category of human existence (Andre Betteille, 2003). As John Locke would say that society existed before government and civil society thrives outside the state structure (Alexis de Tocqueville). Civic societies are institutions in which citizens organize voluntarily to participate in activism for improving an aspect/aspects of social life of the community, independently of government

control. Memberships to civic organizations are based on accepting and agreeing to promote the basic principles for which the civic organization stands. They are usually non-profit and politically neutral. In a civic society, members influence policies by lobbying the government, or putting in direct appeals, petitions and demonstrations. They put pressure and persuade politicians that control power, as necessary.

In democratic countries, political organizations tap the organized human resources of civic societies to solicit ideas and support, or even to recruit manpower. Even single political parties use the offices of civic bodies to prevent and/or to resolve conflicts. With the passing of personal rule by tyrants or absolute monarchs, it has become the norm for the expanded base of public activism, namely civic movements, to participate in such an alliance with governments on issues of development and human rights policies (Ethiopian National Congress Website).

Civic participation is seen as a process of setting free the abundant human energy, creative and inexhaustible resources of citizens from restrictive behaviors and forces for purposes of improving the general well being, human and individual rights and creating profound awareness of the rights, responsibilities and duties of a citizenry. Ayn Rand (1905-1982), a liberation novelist and philosopher, was known to say, "civilization is the process of setting man free from man." Likewise, civic activity is civilizing process that can set free the best of what organized people can offer to their citizenry and to themselves.

Civic Organizations are voluntary associations where people have the opportunity to effectively utilize their abundant resources for public good, for social justice, economic, and social development, and for the betterment of their membership. Committed participation that comes out of a free will can achieve miracles, empowers participants and achieve desirable social goals.

It is critically important to understand Civil Societies (CS) as practiced in the Western world in order to selectively determine the adaptability of its functions into traditional systems. In the role a civic movement plays in democratization of a country, it is a process that sets in motion the best of what organized citizens can offer to their citizenry and to themselves. Voluntary participation in public affairs and interests are the essences of civic organizations. CS mediates in vast arenas of social life between the household and the state. Core

“While the ultimate aim of civic societies is inclusion, in principle, the society usually does exclude organizations that operate primarily outside the law”(Carolyn Elliot, 2003). CS is perceived in some circles as anti-state and even anti politics itself. Beteille emphasizes, “A society with individuals at one end or state on the other is difficult to live in but also to imagine.” The history of CS is inseparable from the history of the middle class. Civil Society (CS) is often based on the middle classes. It flourishes and thrives in situations where the middle class is the prominent section of the population and in those groups with less dependent for survival.

Civic society should be independent not only from the state but also from parties, economic blocks, trade unions, members by birth, such as family, clan, ethnic and religious groups. Civil society as advocate for civil rights, egalitarian transformation of society, as opposing repressive regimes; or as defying predatory states. They should be seen as generating influence over the state but not the conquest of state power. CS exists in some cases in opposition to the state (Hegel). CS requires the legal vigilance and regulatory safeguards of an engaged citizenry and a civilized state and must be examined by the three fold relationships between state, citizenship and mediating institutions.

### **III. Civil Society’s Role in Democratization:**

The work of civic organizations can be understood in terms of their engagements and greater activism in civil virtue participation and knowledge. “Generally, the notion of civil society is restricted to those associations which are not closely identified with an effort to win state power that they have little or no autonomy from political movements or parties”(Mamo Tirfe)

Civil Virtue is the moral principle of a civic movement in developing and enhancing the fundamental values of democracy, social justice, individual and human rights, equality and the public good. Involving diverse groups of people for the common good, with the purpose of binding them into an integral democratic polity, is the underlying principle of civil virtue. Civic Organizations help to educate citizens about their rights and

responsibilities and they help combat or change policies that lack these principles of civil virtue.

One cannot bring democracy by mere public declarations and pronouncements. Democracy without active civic participation becomes a hollow idea or empty policy declaration behind which dictators of every color and hue cover themselves to maintain their power. The range of civic participation and involvement is varied and vast. At the minimum it includes educating people about public affairs, political issues, civil rights and duties; increasing citizens' participation; advocating and lobbying governments; preventing conflicts as well as resolving conflicts through facilitation, negotiation and mediation; scrutinizing and challenging the power of the state; developing democratic culture of tolerance, moderation and willingness to compromise.

Abraham Lincoln, in his Gettysburg address, 1863 defined Democracy as “government of the people, by the people, and for the people”. He added, “Democracy is not designed for efficiency but for accountability” (Melvin Urofsky, 2000). Urofsky states that in societies where there is genuine democratic governance, the following core principles guide the democratic process. For civic organizations to be effective and influence policies, the rights of individuals must be respected and codified in the constitution; there has to be periodic democratic elections; there has to be genuine separation of power between the executive, legislative and judiciary; minority rights must be respected and protected by law; and there has to be freedom of the media.

The idea of CS has become inseparable from democracy. Building democracy is about the promotion of local and civil institutions. The more dense and vibrant civil society and social capital, the better the democracy and democratization. Civil society has been a new magic bullet for development and democracy. The relationship between civil society and democracy is inherently political, inseparable from the nature of the state and the political forces arising from society. For democracy to work there must be free and fair election, accountable government and civil and political rights. Participation and empowerment deepens with civil society and social capital.

Civic Organizations also help educate the citizens about their rights and responsibilities and help combat or change restrictive policies and forces. For democracy to work and democratic institutions to flourish, the existence of civic organizations is a pre-requisite. Civic groups can defend their interests from oppressive and unjust policies and resist the illegal practices of a government or a group and act as a check to balance the law with the practice.

#### **IV. Ethiopian Traditional Civil Societies:**

Some of the traditional civil societies that people speak of as potentially useful for purposes of building democratic institutions and socio economic development are Shimglena/Mehal Sefari Equb and Idir. Many others that are thought to be useful in this regard have become defunct or replaced by peasant and urban associations. Those decent are Gobeze Aleqa, Afersata, and Shengo. For all practical purposes, these institutions, have been destroyed by Derge and replaced by cadre led and party controlled institutions such as Urban and Peasant Associations. The destruction of these traditional institutions has robbed the Ethiopian society its locally grown means of managing their lives. The same kinds of structures are being used by the current regime for purposes of control, taxation and resource distribution. Here, it might be helpful to offer brief definitions and explanations of the nature of these so much talked about traditional institutions, Shimglena/Mehal Sefari and Idir.

**a). Mehal Sefari/Shimglena:** What does Mehal Sefari mean? The literal meaning of it is “the one that camps at the center.” The word is loaded with militaristic conceptions of camping. The one that camps at the center is usually the leader. But its other meaning is some one who takes centrist or neutral positions on issues was closely associated with Mehal safari roles and functions.

The idea of Mehal Sefari is often mentioned as a traditional institution that could have played the role of civil society had it been allowed to continue by the powers that were. The Mehal Sefari version of Shimglena was not really that much known and practiced in



the cultural life of the people. It is idealized and mentioned these days because of its neutrality and political content closely relating to modern CS advocacy groups for fairness and social justice.

In history, Mehal Safari has played two important roles in the political life of Ethiopia. One was in the pre Zemene Mesafint, when Empress Mentwab wanted to rule as Empress long after her husband Emperor Bakafa died and would not let her daughter in law have the title of Empress. She even wanted to continue retaining the title of Empress during her grandson era as well. It was during this time that the Gonder clergy and gentry interfered and negotiated the relinquishing of power that she had hold for over 25 years. Another event in which Mehal Safari has influenced political decisions was at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when Mehal Safari demanded that the ministers be discharged from their responsibilities due to their corruption and in competency. It was reported that Mehal Sefari's demand were met swiftly. Those incidents and many others that Mehal Sefari stood up for what is right and remained neutral in mediating the issues at hand are idealized as a force for justice equated to what we call now civic force. Many people talk about bringing back that kind of force for solving the complex problems we are facing.

However, in the days of left politics, Mehalsefarinet was the most despised and shameful behavior primarily assigned to opportunistic individuals. It was portrayed like someone standing/sitting on the fence ready to fall on the side of victory. But the centrist or neutral idea of its meaning is lost in the rhetoric of political contenders. Because of that “either here or there” conception of political positions that many political players take has totally destroyed the sense of neutrality and resettling political differences in a civil manner. In an effort to positively change the negative meanings that the left has assigned to Mehal Sefari, there is some consideration to revitalize the role of Mehal Sefari in the political life of Ethiopia. With the growth and development of the third force, such “black and white” positioning of parties may dissipate from the political scene of Ethiopia.

Shimglena, widely practiced even today is still functional and handles or interferes on any issues of contention from husband and wife problems to complex issues of resettling

political differences. Its difference with Mehal Sefari is a matter of focus. Mehal Sefari dwells on political conflicts. Otherwise, both are neutral and advocate for a peaceful and fair resolution of conflicts. Shimglena is a process of managing differences. Differences are unavoidable in social life and happen between individuals, groups and organizations. The incorrect handling of differences has always led to serious division of groups and organizations resulting in crisis. Many of the problems Ethiopia is facing now are results of incorrect handling of differences. One can say that incorrect handling of differences has marred the fabric of Ethiopian society. The way to crisis is paved in most cases by incorrect handling of differences. When differences are managed correctly, facts are not misrepresented or distorted, labeling and defamatory remarks are minimized and the sadistic or vengeance impulse of the group or individual contained. Shimglena provides an opportunity for correct handling of differences.

**b). Idir:** Idir is still functional and serves a useful purpose in the life of the Ethiopian people. Mamo Tirfe calls it a life insurance. He states that these traditional associations (Idir and Equib) are based on participatory principles as a result they tend to “promote accountability, transparency, tolerance and dialogue.” In addition they tend to foster friendship among members. Survival and mutual security and ceremonial associations number about 200,000. (Costantinos 1996b).

'Equub' and 'Idir' can be used as a basis for doing business and mutual aid and caring purposes, in that order. The commitment of people to these traditional organizations should indeed be extended in ways that could include more people depending; of course, on the work people like to do. But our valuable traditional systems of caring for one another in the context of 'Idir', for instance, not only be sustained, but also reinforced

Although Idir can be considered as a third force – between government and family- to address emergency needs such as death and can be considered also as a civic institution, it is essentially local and membership driven. Examining this traditional institution in its totality and upgrading its roles and incorporating aspects of contemporary civic practices and ideas including actions such as advocacy to influence public policy outcomes,

creating public awareness of rights and responsibilities, increasing public participation in the affairs of the country and enhancing the democratization of the country could be important considerations.

### **c). Status of Civic Organizations in Ethiopia and Diaspora:**

Unfortunately, civic institutions in Ethiopia are not only undeveloped but also in disarray. There is little agreement on what their rolls and functions in the socio-economic and political life of Ethiopia. “There is little agreement as to where civil society includes a public realm between family and government excluding private sector, or whether individuals representing others can be considered a civil society” (Lishan Adam 2006). Adam adds that “There is a general consensus on the fact that civil society stands as a key force of development and it includes myriads of public voice advocates and actors.” “A very close examination of traditional associations shows that Ethiopia’s civil society are built around poverty and crisis facing the country.”

Desalegn Rahmato, in his writing of Civil Society & Democratization in Ethiopia argues that “Civic bodies have a public function beyond their specific objectives but this is not the case with informal institutions. The more civil society organizations emerge the more social capital is formed. Civic tradition is such more than capital formation. It involves social awareness and civic responsibility.” However, many vigorously argue that for civic institutions to be effective and fully serve the needs and interests of the Ethiopian population, must be based on traditional organizations, such as Idir or Mehal Safari by upgrading and nurturing them and building their organizational capacities.

Nonetheless, of late, we are observing encouraging emergence of civic movements that have started to actively address their mission. Civic Organizations such as Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO), that exposes human rights violation and the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA), for instance, engage primarily in women rights;

number of professional associations, like Ethiopian Teachers Association and Ethiopian Economists Associations are persisting and emerging.

We have seen how the Ethiopian Human Rights Council have been challenging the current government of Ethiopia to respect its own laws. It has been one of the most critical voices of the prevailing undemocratic practices of the current government. Can we imagine if there were many other civic organizations such as EHRCO and each advocated for its interests with some vigor and determination, the situation in Ethiopia would have been much different and better. The multitude of civic organizations in America are cases in point where people freely exercise their rights and initiate policies that they think are beneficial to the people.

**d). Problems and Challenges Facing Civil Societies in Ethiopia:**

Apparently, Derge's rule thoroughly destroyed many of the traditional systems that could have been the seed for growth and development of civil society. Derge not only suppressed many of the traditional civic societies, but also replaced them with party organizations of its own creation. It also removed and curtailed any opportunity for civil organization to grow and develop. The few that have survived and continue to engage in participatory activities face many challenges. Sisay Gebre-Egziabher lists many of the challenges civil society face in Ethiopia today.

- Government considers them as political involving in political agitation.
- Bureaucratic registration processes. Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO) formed in 1991 but got its license seven years later. Ethiopian Free Press Journalist Association (EFPJA) formed 1993 but got registered eight years after.
- Government interference on the activities of the civic organizations.
- Lack of awareness on the issues of human rights on the part of the general public.
- Absence of independent and effective judiciary.
- No longitudinal cooperation and solidarity among civic organizations. For instance Christian Relief and Development Association (CRDA) an umbrella

organization for NGOs operating in Ethiopia does not accept civic organizations that advocate for human rights.

- Traditional ones tend to be geographical and their services limited only to their memberships.

Very few that involve and advocate for democratization – Sahre (Society for the Advancement of Human Rights), EWLA, EHRCO – the pioneer and only organization in the country that monitors and reports on human rights violations. According to Sisay, civil society that criticizes the government for its policies is regarded as political.

#### **e). Non Governmental Organizations And Advocacy Groups.**

The development of civil societies in Ethiopia in the modern sense came at the result of the 1972-1973 and other major famine crisis. The Non-Governmental Organizations were predominantly foreign and internationally based. They came to save lives and advocate for famine relief on behalf of the famine victims to individual governments, international humanitarian organizations and United Nations Organizations. Gradually, NGOs started to emerge domestically. Now there are tens of domestic NGOs and many have formed an umbrella organization known as Christian Relief and Development Association (CRDA). There are 200-250 NGOs under CRDA now.

Although the name sounds Christian, the membership includes Muslims and other faith based organizations. The NGOs operating in Ethiopia, foreign or domestic, their primary focus is relief and development. They do not accommodate in their membership those NGOs that are Rights based organizations such as Ethiopian Human Rights Organizations due to the fact such organizations criticize government policies and practices pertaining human rights. They boldly have come out against the policies and practices of the government. They are branded as political and abhorred relating or associating with them. Many of the NGOs are timid and awfully afraid to utter a word against government policies. They even don't see any value for right-based organizations.

The trend is such that the irresistible notion of civil society is limited only to relief and development work. This conception make it difficult for right based organizations such as Society for the Advancement of Human Rights (SHARE), Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO), Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWL), Ethiopian Free Press Journalist Association (EFPJA), Ethiopian National Congress (ENC) and many others to fully address their mission. Right-based organizations are branded as political. The difficulties of understanding about civic movements can be best explained in terms of the formation of the Ethiopian National Congress (ENC) in 1997. ENC's was no doubt a milestone in the history of Ethiopian civic movements. Its formation as a civil organization heralded the coming of age of the public in the political life of the country. ENC strongly embraces the idea of advocacy on important issues that affect the country and its people. In 1997 it came out declaring policies that challenge the undemocratic policies of the government. While advocating for human and individual rights of people, ENC fully embraced the idea of uniting the political opposition for national unity and establishing democratic governance. However, many people have misunderstood its work with the opposition political parties, and remain so even to this day. They perceive the activism of the ENC for social justice, national unity and the unity of the political opposition as an activism of a political organization. That is, challenging government policies, once considered only the purview of political organizations, is seen to be beyond what the ENC should be doing.

It should be clear from the outset that such political activism does not by any means change the character of ENC as a civic organization. It should be clear that the ENC has no political program. Nor does it aspire for political office. It seeks to attain social power and relational power with which to influence public policy. Ultimately, that is the strategic interest and goal of ENC as a civic organization. That is exactly what ENC would like to do and is doing.

**f). Factors Affecting Development Of Civic Societies In the Diaspora:**

The development of civic organizations in the Ethiopian Diaspora has been dependent on three important factors. One is the feelings and attitudes of people toward resettlement;

the other is the size of the Ethiopian population in the Diaspora; and the third one is the organizing experiences, values and traditions that people bring from Ethiopia.

1. In earlier times the majority of people felt that their lives here is transitory. The tendency was not to be enthusiastic about building civic organizations here. They preferred not to involve themselves in civic activities in their host country. Instead some opted for activities that will help facilitate their return home to Ethiopia. In many ways this involves political activities. This was particularly true with the students prior to 1980. Now, if people accept permanent resettlement in their host country, the tendency is to organize around their interest areas such as churches, businesses, mutual assistance associations or other educational and charitable activities like Ethiopian American Foundation (EAF). Many people directly relate the proliferation of MAAs after 1984 to this acceptance of permanent residency.

2. The size of the Ethiopian population has a direct bearing on the range and scope of civic organizations that are developed. The Ethiopian population in the USA including Eritreans is estimated to be about 500,000. What we know for sure about Ethiopian population in the USA is that there were about 3,000 students and illegal immigrants before 1980 and there have been more than 75,000 Ethiopian refugees including some Eritreans resettled since 1980. The rest are political asylees and immigrants. The number and nature of civic organizations could therefore be influenced by the size and demographic characteristics of the population. There has not been a critical mass of people to form civic organizations in many cities in the USA.

3. For good or bad, people bring their traditions and values to wherever they go. Not only do they bring their traditions and values, they are invariably affected by what is happening in their homeland as well. Civic organizations, by their very nature are voluntary organizations. Voluntary work and voluntary organizations in Ethiopia are not that developed. So, there is very little experience that people can bring from their culture to develop civic organizations. Further more, because of the negative experiences people have gone through in the past thirty or more years as regards to organized activity, many

have developed mistrust, cynicism and apathy. It is not surprising to find slow development of civic organizations considering the fact that the size of the population is relatively small and new, and that skepticism and cynicism are rampant among the Ethiopian population in the Diaspora.

**g). Types of Civic Organizations in the Diaspora:**

The kind of civic organizations that have been developing among Ethiopian Americans and that have measurable impact on the Ethiopian Diaspora are Mutual Assistance Associations (MAAs). Many of them came into being after 1984 in many cities where Ethiopian population numbered 200 or more. About 17 of them have been in existence at one time or another. But, presently there are about 14 MAAs in existence of which only 10-11 are functional. The formation of these MAAs is related to the 1980 Refugee Act and the resettlement of Ethiopian refugees in the United States. Since 1992, the resettlement of Ethiopian refugees has significantly diminished. That is why many MAAs became defunct and the surviving MAAs are facing serious challenges.

The MAAs in most cases are engaged in providing necessary, basic and developmental services to their constituencies. The services they provide include cultural adjustment counseling, employment, children and youth development, housing, immigration, health outreach, English as a Second Language (ESL), entrepreneurial training, micro-loan and advocacy for a variety of needs and interests for their constituency both nationally and internationally. Essentially, service and advocacy are the major focus of this group of civic organizations.

The second group of civic organizations that are developing slowly but surely can be referred to as special interest civic organizations. The Ethiopian American Foundation, Relief Organization for Ethiopia, Ethiopian Arts and Cultural Center, and the like can be classified in this group of civic organizations. Although national in scope, this group of organizations has certain defined missions based on interest and profession. They want to address specific areas of needs that are manageable and limited in scope.



This group of organizations is in their formative stages and most of them came into being after 1991. They are relatively new and there is limited information on their status, their impact both in the Diaspora and in Ethiopia.

The third groups of civic organizations that are developing at a faster rate are Advocacy organizations. They advocate against certain policies and for human rights, democratic rights, for national unity, against ethnic federation etc. Their social activism and public pronouncements seemingly put them in the category of political organizations. Peace and Democracy for Ethiopia, Mahidere Andnet, Ethiopian National Congress, Shengo, Amde Hibret, SOCEPP, Ethiopian American Council (EAC), Ande Ethiopia, International Action Committee, Ethiopian American for Democracy (EAD) etc. can be categorized to this group of organizations.

Their advocacy work has successfully exposed the gross human rights abuses and illegal activities of the regime in Ethiopia. Challenging government policies, which was once considered the purview of political organizations, is also taken up by civic organizations. However, these organizations have no political program and are not aspiring for political power. They want to amass social power, relational power that will influence public policy. Ultimately, that should be the strategic goal of civic organizations in Ethiopia.

Recognizing and realizing the importance of civic organizations and the tremendous contribution that they can make for a society is important. At this difficult time in Ethiopian history, forming civic organizations and addressing the grave problems facing the Ethiopian people is greatly expected from Ethiopians throughout the Diaspora. Here, I would like to quote Martin Luther King. "The ultimate measure of a person is not where he/she stands in moments of comfort and convenience but where he /she stands at times of challenge and controversy." Ethiopia needs our help and we can best deliver that help by organizing and advocating for changes toward the best interest of our people. The chart below might help to detangle the maze or the confusion about our understanding of civic organizations.

**Types of Civic Organizations in Both Ethiopia and Diaspora**

<b><i>ORGANIZATION TYPES</i></b>	<b><i>SCOPE</i></b>	<b><i>MAJOR ISSUES</i></b>	<b><i>PURPOSE</i></b>	<b><i>EXAMPLES</i></b>
<i>Traditional Associations (Mahbers).</i>	<i>Geographical &amp; Membership Limited</i>	<i>Address needs as defined by their rules</i>	<i>Self help</i>	<i>Idir, Iqub, Mahber etc...</i>
<i>Trade Associations</i>	<i>Membership &amp; Issues related to the Trade</i>	<i>Better treatment for Members</i>	<i>Professional + Advocacy</i>	<i>ETA, CELU, EWLA ETC....</i>
<i>Relief, Service/Development</i>	<i>Diverse Population &amp; Diverse Needs</i>	<i>Myriad of Issues ranging from health, hunger, economic Development</i>	<i>Service, Relief &amp; Development for a Target Population + Advocacy</i>	<i>CRDA, Orphanage, P2P NGOs. MAAs</i>
<i>Community Organizations (CBOs,)</i>	<i>Geographical</i>	<i>Basic Service &amp; Development</i>	<i>Service &amp; Advocacy for the Community</i>	<i>Gurage Self Help Assoc., MAAs etc...</i>
<i>Rights Organizations</i>	<i>Political and Democratic Rights for All</i>	<i>Political, democratic and Human</i>	<i>Educate, Protect, Advance &amp;</i>	<i>EHRCO, EWLA, ENC, EAC</i>

		<i>Rights</i>	<i>Advocate for Rights</i>	
--	--	---------------	--------------------------------	--

Democratization of a society without civic institutions is expecting what was never before and that will never be in the future. However, the problem faced by civic movements in the country rests not only on their limited development but also on the lack of understanding what their roles and functions are and should be. The public understanding of civic movements, including of some proponents of civic movements, is scanty. It lends itself to confusion and different expectations.

**(h). Some Suggestions to Upgrading Traditional Associations.**

The first thing to do before upgrading traditional civil institutions would be to bring together modern civic organizations and traditional institutions for purposes of reaching an understanding how traditional civic organizations function. The lack of understanding of civil societies’ roles and areas of engagement and absence of a new strategic alliance between the various civic bodies in Ethiopia is a draw back to the growth and development of civil organizations. To develop a conceptual framework of forming an umbrella organization or a coalition of civic organizations in Ethiopia and in the Ethiopian Diaspora should be a priority.

Organizing and organizations are universal human experiences. The idea of organizing is to govern, strengthen, guide and codify human relationships and build **POWER**. No matter the size, level, sophistication, goal, form or structure, organization is one of the most basic elements of human existence and survival. It is really hard to think of human growth and development, and civilization in general, without people coming together to work in unison and solidarity. Coming together and establishing a defined relationship for mutual benefit is what is organization is all about. The need for organizing arises from the need to solve problems by pooling in human resources. It is extremely important to realize, or be aware of, the need to organize for the purpose of national survival and solve the chronic or emerging problems, open opportunities and struggle for our rights to

provide good education to our children or to influence policies affecting Ethiopia as a whole.

Organizing and coalition formation requires knowledge and skill. Throughout history we have seen the development of huge and sophisticated organizations and institutions. The family, the first and smallest institution is credited for the continuity of human life through a form of organization (relationship) called marriage. This is just to indicate or affirm the importance of organization in human life, for growth and development, for survival and for enjoyment and continuity. Organization is therefore not only a human invention for assuring human survival; it is also a human condition or nature that evolves from the human existence.

Of course, forming coalitions is building relationships among various civic organizations for more influence and power that can be put to bear on governments. That relationship if handled carefully and appropriately transforms itself to Power. As it is established and very well known today, Power is the ability to do what one wants to do.

So far, the role of civil organizations in the socio-economic and political life of Ethiopia has not only been negligible but also limited in scope. There have been few independent civil organizations with defined and articulated political interests. Advocacy for political interests, democratic and human rights, policy changes and national unity in the manner ENC is actively working now has not been popular. Such missions and activities were once assumed to be the purview of political organizations. So, most civic organizations created independently spell out their mission as non-political, and pursue policies that separate their mission from political parties.

What is not talked about and very well understood is the spill over effects of coalition formation process. In the processes of forming unity, there is communication and understanding of each other. However, the critical benefit is the democratic values and traditions that are being developed in the processes. Unity can be forged by means of force; that may not last long; it may create compounded problems; but unity based on

democratic processes last longer and addresses the democratic needs of various groups involved. The formation of a coalition of civic organizations involves negotiation; mediation and consensus building based on democratic principles.

After the coalition is formed, it is absolutely necessary to commission a study group composed of anthropologists, sociologists, economists and other disciplines to study and recommend the ways and means these traditional associations can be upgraded to become full fledged civic organizations. The task assignments could be for example how to structure and institute Shimglena system become a mediating and conflict resolution body in the country. The study should use and focus the active participation and input of traditional institutions as forums for learning and defining and redefining problems. Encourage groups to view the problems that engulf them and connect and network with others to strengthen their responses to the hurdles they encounter each day.

In the case of Idir, the structure is there. What it may need is perhaps expanding its scope and areas of interest. It could be to add and expand its functions so as to include advocacy and development functions. Some Idirs in Addis are already involved advocating for improved supply of water, electricity and better schools for their members and neighborhoods in addition to supporting member during the time of sorrow and happiness.

## **V. Conclusion**

It must have been clear by now that democratic governance can neither triumph nor come about without active and committed participation of civic organizations. The status of civic organizations both in Ethiopia and Diaspora is at an embryonic stage requiring earnest efforts particularly on the part of new and emerging civic organizations to form and work together with home grown traditional institutions. These emerging civic organizations, first, have to form alliance with traditional ones, learn from them as well as teach for developing workable and realistic goals of democratizing the Ethiopian society.

## References

Adam, Lishan, “*Fostering the Capacities of the Ethiopian Civil Society to Influence Information and Communication Technologies (ICTS) Policies*”, the Association of Progressive Communications papers: African Country Research Papers.

Bratton, Michael (1989), *Beyond the State: Civil society and Associational Life in Africa*, World Politics, XLI, 3:407-30.

Betellie, Andre (2003), ‘*Civil Society and its institutions*’, in Carolyn, M. Elliot (ed), in Civil Society and Democracy, New Delhi: Oxford University press.

Constantions, B.T. (1996b). “*Mechanisms for Relating to and Mapping Local Institutions: A Pilot Study on NGOS – community based and civic society organizations in Ethiopia: Findings and recommendations*” Addis Ababa: Center for Human Environment and Development Studies.

Constantinos, B.T., J.J. Von Gennip, et al. (1996d). “*A Feasibility Study to Establish the Ethiopian Institute of Democracy.*” Addis Ababa: Royal Netherlands Embassy and the commission of the European union.

de Tocquville, Alexis (1969), Democracy in America 2, New York: Harper and Row.

EHRCO (1995), Democracy, Rule of Law and Human Rights in Ethiopia, Ethiopian Human Right Council, Addis Ababa: Commercial Printing Enterprise.

Elliot, Carolyn M., (ed) (2003), ‘*Civil Society and Democracy: A Comparative Review Essay*’, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Gebre-Egziabher, Sisay (2002) “The Role of Civil Society Organizations in Ethiopia”, a paper Presented at the 5<sup>th</sup> International Conference, Cape Town: SA University.

Haggard, S. and R. Koufman (1995), The Political Economy of Democratic Transitions, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Hefner, Robert (2003), ‘*Civil Society: Cultural possibility of a Modern Ideal*’, in Carolyn M Elliot (ed), Civil Society: and Democracy, New York: Oxford University press

Rohmato, Desalegn, (2002) “*Civil society and Memorization in Ethiopia: The Challenge of Democracy from Below*”, in Bahru Zewde on S. Passewang (eds.), Uppsala, Nordieta Afuka Institute and Addis Ababa, Forum for Social Studies

Rahmato, Desalegn (1991), “*Investing in Tradition peasants and rural institutions in Post Revolution Ethiopia*”, Socologia Ruralis.

Taylor, Charles (2003), ‘*Models of Civil society*’, in Carolyn M. Elliot (ed), Civil Society and Democracy, New Delhi Oxford University.

Tester, K. (1992), Civil Society, London: Rutledge.

Urofsky, Melvin I. “The Root Principles of Democracy”, US Department of State: International Information Programs, Democracy papers.