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# **A Problem of Social Capital and Cultural Norms?**

***By Salaam Yitbarek\****

## **Abstract**

*This paper asserts that in Ethiopian society, there exist certain cultural norms or 'dysfunctional behaviours' that inhibit effective communication, lead to intra-group conflict, and make conflict resolution difficult. This has resulted in a diminished capacity for cooperation and a dearth of social capital and civil society, which does not bode well for development and democracy. It is imperative that research is expanded in the neglected area of cultural norms and social capital in Ethiopian society, and that intervention strategies are designed to increase social capital by addressing cultural norms directly through social marketing, awareness raising, and other mechanisms.*

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I wish to thank Pierre Beaudet, Rahel Kassahun, Donald Levine, Getachew Mequanent, and Mesfin Mirothie for their invaluable advice, and Sisay Asefa for suggesting I do this.

“If men are to remain civilized or to become civilized, the art of association must develop and improve among them at the same speed as equality of conditions spreads.”

Alexis de Toqueville, 1988. *Democracy in America*.

## Introduction

Much of this paper is based on my anecdotal observations of and experiences within Ethiopian collectives of various sorts, mostly in the diaspora, but also in Ethiopia. This is not a formal ethnographic study, but a discussion paper whose aim is to put forth a thesis, raise pertinent questions, and most important of all, encourage much-needed research and practical development work around the area of cultural norms and social capital in Ethiopian society.

Over years of interacting with fellow Ethiopians in group settings, I have found that, in general, Ethiopian collectives tend to be ineffective, inefficient, and short-lived.<sup>1</sup> Some mundane examples: Meetings, formal or informal, are invariably disorganized, unproductive, and never-ending. Group members are often late to meetings and appointments (but if the meeting or appointment involves a non-Ethiopian participant, they are careful to be on time). Communication is opaque and communications skills generally poor. Feuding and infighting are rampant. There is a constant and chronic manifestation of *intra-group conflict*—personal conflict among individuals or sub-groups within the collective—for which it is often difficult to find rational explanations. There is an absence of effective conflict resolution, and so these conflicts escalate and eventually reach a point of no return. Over time, the collective degenerates into a forum for personal conflict, begins losing its members as they feel increasingly alienated, and becomes incapable of fulfilling its mandate, with the final result being group paralysis and then collapse.

This type of caricature of Ethiopian group dynamics is not uncommon among Ethiopians in the diaspora, mainly because we get to participate in and observe non-Ethiopian collectives, especially mainstream (North American or European) collectives, and make the inevitable comparisons.<sup>2</sup> We find that most mainstream groups tend to work relatively well. Members are punctual and meetings functional. Communication is usually seamless and transparent. There is little avoidable conflict, and what conflict occurs is easily resolved with an evidently strong aptitude for conflict resolution. All in all, mainstream groups tend to be quite effective in fulfilling their mandates to the satisfaction of their individual members and the group as a whole.

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<sup>1</sup> Parts of this paper are based on the article, “Time to Declare War on Dysfunctional Behaviors,” that I had published under a pseudonym at [http://www.ethiomeia.com/carepress/dysfunctional\\_behaviors.html](http://www.ethiomeia.com/carepress/dysfunctional_behaviors.html).

<sup>2</sup> Complaints about punctuality, pessimism about the effectiveness of groups, expressing reluctance to ‘get involved’ in collectives of any sort and similar sentiments can be heard in everyday conversations amongst Ethiopians. A lucid example is Weichegud’s (pseudonym) weblog entry, “A Tale of Two Meetings,” at <http://weichegud.blogspot.com/2006/09/tale-of-two-meetings.html>.

Given this experience, I, like many others, have asked myself why Ethiopian collectives are relatively weak and rife with conflict. Is this a problem only with certain types of collectives; say, political interest groups? In my experience, no. Chronic intra-group conflict occurs in all types of Ethiopian collectives—families, extended families, professional associations, churches, local community organizations, traditional associations, charity organizations, as well as political interest groups. Are these conflicts based on real and tangible reasons, such as differences in outlook or interests? No, I have observed virulent conflict within homogenous groups consisting of individuals with seemingly similar needs and wants, interests, perspectives, frames of reference, and ideologies. Most interesting of all, I have found little difference in the propensity and nature of conflicts that occur within collectives in Ethiopia and those in the Ethiopian diaspora. This despite the fact that Ethiopians in the diaspora have relatively higher levels of education than those in Ethiopia, live in relative prosperity, comfort, and freedom, and in their everyday lives get to experience the ample examples of effective collectives found in the mainstream community.<sup>3</sup>

These observations have led me to believe that there are certain underlying cultural norms and behaviours in Ethiopian society that inhibit effective communication, lead to intra-group conflict, and hamper conflict resolution. I call these ‘dysfunctional behaviours’. These behaviours exist in all societies to some degree or another, but I believe their preponderance in Ethiopian society explains the relative weakness of Ethiopian collectives. In this paper, I describe these dysfunctional behaviours and their underlying norms, relating them to findings on Ethiopian society as expressed in mainstream academic literature. This is followed by a discussion of the concept of social capital in the context of this paper. I explain that these behaviours and norms make voluntary cooperation and group work difficult by retarding the development of the ‘art of association’, hence, stifling social capital. Finally, I suggest avenues for research and development work this area, and suggest that intervention strategies designed to increase social capital and civil society should include ways of addressing these cultural norms directly through social marketing, awareness-raising, and other intervention mechanisms.

## **Dysfunctional Behaviours**

Most of the behaviours discussed below are identified on the basis of my lived experience. They are inter-related and interdependent, and have in common the property of inhibiting collaboration and cooperation, either through hampering effective communication, promoting conflict, or hindering conflict resolution.

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<sup>3</sup> The education numbers are surprisingly high—according to the 2000 U.S. Census, 30% of Ethiopians in the U.S. have a bachelor’s degree or higher, and over 60% have some post-secondary education.

1. *Personalization of issues*

This is the inability to conceptually distinguish between a person and their ideas or thoughts. Criticism of another's position or ideas, or even endorsement that happens to be lukewarm or not enthusiastic enough, is perceived as a personal slight or attack instead of an objective assessment of the idea at hand. Often, to save face and honour, the 'offended' party must promptly respond in kind. This response occurs usually through the means of a veiled but well-understood insult. Again, for the sake of honour, this insult cannot go unanswered, and a destructive cycle of communication ensues, with what should have been a constructive discussion or debate quickly descending into personal conflict. Once a confrontation has begun, the participants are loath to retreat from their positions, as that would be seen as weakness by colleagues, 'friends' and 'enemies' alike.

People seem especially prone to such behaviour in group settings. Being contradicted in front of others is especially damaging, embarrassing, and is seen as devaluing of one's reputation. "How dare you disagree with me in everyone listening?" or "Why did you not support me in front of all those people?" is a common sentiment. Again, no difference is observed between people and ideas.

Obviously, this leads to dysfunctional group dynamics. Group members become reluctant to discuss ideas openly and in clear terms, knowing that any positions taken are likely to result in confrontation with some parties or other. Ideas are not properly discussed and vetted, and much time is spent avoiding, heading off, or healing personal rifts. Communication deteriorates, severely handicapping the group, often to the point of making it useless, both objectively and from the point of view of the participants.

## 2. *Parochialism*

There is a pronounced tendency to irrationally favour those from one's own kin or 'side' no matter what the cost. For example, continuing with the above theme, say that during a meeting, a disagreement occurs over a particular issue of debate and the disagreement devolves into personal conflict. When parochial instincts kick in, the participants in the meeting quickly begin to take sides in the conflict. They may choose to side with a friend, family member, relative, co-worker, neighbour, member of the same ethnic group, etc. The conflict is extended from personal to sub-group, following the same set of norms that foster traditional blood feuds (*dem*, in Amharic).

What is most interesting is the ease with which these groups form. Damtew et al (2005) remark that "kin groups cooperate much more significantly in this respect (organizing for parochial confrontation) than in economic matters". In the absence of obvious dividing lines—say, all participants are from the same family—dividing lines will be sought and found!<sup>4</sup> The instinct for confrontation and defence overcomes the very *raison d'être* of the greater group. The reason for the meeting, the topic of discussion, and the need to avoid or resolve conflict are all forgotten.

As sub-group conflict is much more difficult to resolve than personal conflict, parochial instincts end up causing enormous damage to collectives. Once rival sub-groups begin to form and solidify, the very existence of the collective is threatened.

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<sup>4</sup> "This parochialism is manifest in diverse ways in the different social strata," writes Levine (1965).

3. *Mutual suspicion and mutual distrust*

While observing or participating in meetings or any other occasion for group dialogue, I have noticed that far too often, even the most innocuous and harmless remarks are interpreted as insults or personal attacks. For example, during a board meeting, a director-at-large makes a statement about having to tighten finances, and various participants around the room automatically assume he is pointing his finger at them. One of them makes a sharp retort, perhaps with some veiled remarks intended to personally attack the initial speaker. A personal conflict begins to brew. For the detached observer, the situation can be confusing. What brought about the conflict? The first speaker was not addressing anyone in particular, so why did the second react in a hostile manner? And why does everyone else seem not so confused?

Such episodes seem the result of Ethiopians' tendency to view each other first and foremost as potential threats. With such a heightened level of suspicion and threat-awareness, any expressed idea or thought, no matter how innocuous, is considered to have ulterior motives behind it. As such, even the most innocent comments by the closest of friends can be misinterpreted as intentionally offensive, resulting in the breakup of previously fruitful relationships.

Interestingly, the Amharic language contains many proverbs reflecting suspicion and distrust, e.g. *YalTereTere YemeneTeral* ("He who is not vigilantly suspicious will be displaced from this land"), *Amno Qebro new* ("Trust only the dead and buried"), and *Sew meTTa neger yemeTal* (*Namni dufu dubbin dufa* in Afan Oromo, "A man has come; a quarrel will come").<sup>5</sup> These proverbs serve to indicate the prevalence of mutual suspicion in Ethiopian society.

Needless to say, general distrust weakens collectives. In my experience, it makes group work so difficult and tedious that members end up devaluing their collective and eventually withdrawing participation.

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<sup>5</sup> The last proverb and Afan Oromo translation is from Cerulli (1923).

#### 4. *Paranoia*

Here, what is meant by paranoia is mutual suspicion and distrust taken to the extreme. As everyone is viewed as a threat, individuals tend to develop a disproportionately paranoid outlook in their interactions with others. With the ‘threat’ foremost in mind, sinister plots are imagined to be all around and a ‘conspiracy theory’ mindset is cultivated.

“*Yalsema joro ke gorebet gar yTatal* (He who does not pay attention and listen fights with his neighbour),” goes the Amharic saying, one interpretation being: A person who does not pay careful attention to the talk around him ends up assuming that it is malicious gossip about him, and goes to his neighbour to retaliate. It is the assumption part that is most interesting; that is, how the person errs on the side of assuming conspiracy.

A significant side effect of paranoia is that it hinders self-reflection. One’s own contribution to a given state of affairs and one’s responsibility and ability to change it is ignored.<sup>6</sup> All focus is on external parties that are considered the sole causes of the problem.

#### 5. *Lack of empathy and empathetic understanding*

In my experience, a large part of the deficit in listening and communications skills in Ethiopian collectives is due to the absence of empathy and empathetic understanding. Rarely have I found people in the course of dialogue considering questions such as “what is causing him to behave this way”, “how might his background or perspective be influencing his thoughts”, or “what would I have done were I in his place”. Even rarer is the practice of ‘suspending judgement’ or giving others the benefit of the doubt (whether consciously or sub-consciously).

Instead, judgements are made hastily and with incomplete information, with the ‘judge’ not having taken the time to try to empathize with the speaker or consider all the variables in play. This not only leads to ‘communication gaps’ or misunderstandings, but inevitably leads to conflict, especially when combined with tendencies toward mutual suspicion and distrust.

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<sup>6</sup> This is a partial reflection of the ‘renowned Ethiopian fatalism’ discussed in Messay (1999), starting at p. 173.



6. *Character assassination*

Rather than addressing conflict or even potential conflict directly, I have found in Ethiopian collectives a tendency for members to chronically spread rumours (often fantastic) and innuendo about those with whom they disagree or perceive themselves to be in conflict.

Interestingly, character assassination turns out to be an effective weapon against one's perceived enemies. Mutual suspicion and a lack of empathetic understanding means that people tend not to give each other the benefit of the doubt, but rather believe the worst about each other! With people already suspicious of each other, a defamation campaign simply ends up confirming existing suspicions.

In my experience, there is a strong awareness of how lethal character assassination is, and so people in conflict, or in anticipation of conflict, begin low-level defamation campaigns as a defence mechanism. The conflict intensifies and turns into a character assassination war, which, of course, greatly reduces the chances that any sort of resolution will take place.

When such a conflict occurs in a collective, it is often cancerous. Reputations being at stake, the conflict is bound to escalate and absorb other participants, putting the collective at grave risk. This is an often seen pattern in Ethiopian collectives.

### 7. *Lack of openness*

Rarely does one observe open and frank communication amongst Ethiopians. As Levine (1965, p. 251) writes, the idea is to “Avoid binding commitments; maximize the degrees of freedom left after any utterance.” In general, there is an extreme reluctance to be open and forthcoming, and an expectation of the same guarded approach from others. Indeed, frank expression of one’s thoughts is often derided as somewhat backward, childish, naïve, or even dangerously indiscreet. Dangerous not only to the speaker, but also to the group to which he belongs. It is almost as though if the group’s ‘secrets’ are let out, it will be exposed to dangers from without, dangers that a chronically suspicious mindset imagines to be clear and present.

The general lack of empathy, by making people afraid of being judged hastily and incorrectly if they speak openly and unambiguously, contributes to the hesitation to be open. This fear leads people to be initially vague, unclear, and non-committal, which inevitably leads to communication gaps and breakdowns as others engage in the complicated and error-prone exercise of trying to interpret the hidden meaning of what was said. Again, because of the suspicious mindset, the interpretation often turns out to be negative.

The unholy trinity of mutual suspicion, lack of empathy, and lack of openness renders effective communication very difficult. People are afraid of being incorrectly judged, speak ambiguously, their statements are interpreted negatively, and this in turn legitimizes their initial fear, and so on.

### 8. *Holding grudges*

Even after declaring forgiveness for some perceived slight, people continue to steadfastly hold on to personal grudges and hope and plot for vengeance. How often I have heard people say something like, “I forgive her, but I don’t want to see her (face) again.” It seems that though forgiveness is a norm to be aspired to, it is in practice too difficult to attain.<sup>7</sup>

Understanding or forgiveness of perceived affronts is seen as a loss of honour and a sign of weakness. In a group context, I have often witnessed an extreme reluctance both to apologize for and to forgive even the smallest incident. This, of course, makes group interaction difficult; mistakes and conflict are bound to arise, and holding on to grudges makes them hard to resolve.

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<sup>7</sup> Levine (1965, pp. 81-83) has more on what I call the conflict between what ‘should be done’ and ‘what is done’ in Ethiopia. That is, the extent to which a society adheres to its own formally established norms.

9. *Envy*

The proverbial totem pole seems to be all-important in Ethiopian society. Relative rank is much more important than absolute. People destroy others' property or reputations, or even each other, with nothing to gain for themselves personally, except the consolation that they are now relatively better off than their victim.

I was once privy to a conversation between an old and wise widower monk and a novice monk, in which the latter was explaining that the bout of ill health he was recovering from was caused by an evil spell. The story was that some time before, a visiting priest asked all the monks for their names so that he could pray for them in his daily prayers. Some gave him their names, he wrote them down, and the next day, left the monastery. Shortly thereafter, this novice monk fell ill, and he suspected that the priest had used the paper he had written the monks' names on to cast an evil spell. The wise monk was sympathetic but firmly admonished the novice. "How could you give him your name?" he asked, "One should only ever divulge one's baptismal name!" (A spell cannot be cast using a baptismal name.) Note that both monks consider it is perfectly normal for people to do harm to others out of the blue and with no benefit to themselves; in fact, while putting themselves at risk. And note the advice of the senior monk: to be always vigilant and chronically suspicious.

Such envy is an outgrowth of an ingrained perception that everything in life is a zero-sum game.<sup>8</sup> If someone is rich, it is because another is poor. If someone is happy, it is because another is sad. It is as if the world has been allotted a fixed amount of wealth, happiness, etc., and it has been ordained that everyone should have more or less the same amount. Failing this, the ones with more must have committed some kind of crime or evil act to improve their lot, and the ones who have less must be cursed.<sup>9</sup> These attitudes are reflected in the Amharic saying: *Ke guadegnochua yebeleTech mashela le wef temechelech* ("A millet stalk grown taller than its 'colleagues' attracts the birds").

Envy complicates social relationships and therefore group dynamics. As the example above illustrates, it goes hand in hand with mutual suspicion, making it difficult to develop a culture of cooperation.

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<sup>8</sup> Foster (1965), in his famous paper, writes that the 'image of the limited good' or zero-sum perception is characteristic of many peasant societies.

<sup>9</sup> Platteau (2001, p. 4) and elsewhere talks about 'egalitarian' or 'other-regarding' norms in societies where resources are or have traditionally been perceived as being scarce. Those who succeed outside of the norm, such as the classic 'dynamic farmer', are sometimes forced into self-exile as they cannot stand the downward pressure on them. These exiles form the 'immigrant entrepreneur' class in their new homes.

### 10. *Stubbornness and lack of compromise*

The zero-sum view of the world leads many to view compromise as weakness. In the context of a win-loss game, compromise is a loss. Anyone who makes the slightest move towards negotiation or concession is perceived by adversaries and onlookers as weak. The response to conciliatory gestures then, instead of being reciprocally conciliatory, is retrenchment, in order to take advantage of the perceived weakness. A win-win scenario, with compromise as a building block for establishing solid relationships that will be mutually beneficial in the future, is scarcely envisioned.

Such thinking is anathema to the very basis of conflict resolution, which is the art of finding win-win situations.

Before proceeding further, a note of clarification; some may claim that many of the norms and behaviours are properly attributed to particular segments of Ethiopian society, notably the ‘Abyssinians’ (normally the Amhara and Tigray ethnic groups or nationalities), given the analysis in much of the literature (Levine 1965, Levine 2000 [1974], Kortén 1971, Crummey 1980, and others). Many of the above norms and behaviours are partially associated with the ‘hierarchical-individualistic with weak horizontal ties’ properties commonly attributed to Amhara and Tigray society. Whereas the Oromo, for example, are commonly characterised as communal (as opposed to individualistic), practicing ‘egalitarian collectivism’, and having somewhat different cultural norms in this regard (Levine, 2000 [1974]).

Though inter-ethnic differences are certainly relevant, there are two points to be made in this regard. First, it is probably safe to say that what is called Amhara/Tigray culture forms a significant part the greater Ethiopian society, either because of the ‘domination’ thesis, or because of intrinsic cultural commonalities and interplay among the various ethnic groups and nationalities, or both, depending on one’s perspective.<sup>10</sup>

Second, these dysfunctional behaviours are not all necessarily tied to hierarchical-individualistic societal structure. Though this paper does not speak on all traditions—there are over eighty ethnic groups or nationalities in Ethiopia—it is fair to say that these behaviours and norms do apply to some degree to other ethnicities with different structures. For example, the first behaviour, ‘personalization of issues’, mainly concerns the art of communication and may be common throughout Ethiopia. Consider the following scenario: a meeting of elders under a shady tree which, among various ethnic groups, is a classic setting in which conflict resolution is practiced. Consensus is a requirement and voting an alien concept. The issues on the agenda are often impossibly delicately broached, with everyone, as much as possible, choosing their words carefully. Disagreements are to be addressed indirectly and no one is to be directly contradicted. Antagonism, or even hints of antagonism, is to be avoided at all costs. All this because there is an underlying problem—a tendency for disagreements to become personal and

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<sup>10</sup> According to the last (1994) population census in Ethiopia, out of the eighty or so ethnicities or nationalities in Ethiopia, the Amhara (30%) and Tigray (6%) together form a little more than a third of the population. The Oromo (32%) form the simple majority.

quickly escalate into unsolvable conflict! Add to this parochialism and the holding of grudges, and the ultra-sensitive approach becomes quite understandable. In this context, the idea of a vote, which in some cases may render the most efficient solution, would be unthinkable.

So though inter-ethnic differences certainly exist, it is perhaps the similarities that are more relevant. Most importantly, in the context of this paper, the idea is that throughout Ethiopia, though perhaps in different shades and at different levels, some subset of the above dysfunctional behaviours exist and ought to be addressed.

## **Social Capital**

The concept of social capital has gained marked popularity in social science literature over the past fifteen years or so. Partly because it is a newly popular term, and partly for other reasons discussed below, it has several definitions, many of which have several topologies and dimensions, and it used in different ways by various parties in various contexts. Indeed, there are probably as many papers about the definition of social capital, its scope, and even its usefulness as a concept, than there are on social capital research per se!<sup>11</sup> So, a good place to start is with a brief primer on social capital, including the various interpretations of it. Then we will be in a position to put social capital in its place within the context of this paper; that is, to illustrate how it is how it is related to culture, specifically values, norms, and behaviour, and civil society, development, and democracy.

We begin with Putnam et al, since their work, the most oft-cited piece in social capital literature, is often credited for starting the recent social capital trend. They define social capital as:

*“... (the) features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions.”* (Putnam et al, 1993, p. 167)

This definition was developed based on discoveries they made while studying the efficiency of regional governments in Italy. In the course of their research, they found “dramatic differences in institutional performance” between the regional governments in Northern Italy and those in Southern Italy, with those in the North functioning much better than those in the South. Putnam et al explain these differences by the gap in civic tradition between the two areas. In the North, there were more social networks, voluntary associations, greater participation in civic and political associations, less free-riding on public goods, etc. At the same time, Putnam et al found values and norms such as trust, reciprocity, honesty, reliability, and collaboration were much stronger in the North than the South. In other words, they found more social capital in Northern Italy than Southern Italy. They conclude then that the relatively low level of social capital in the South

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<sup>11</sup> Much of this section is based on Woolcock (1998), Woolcock and Narayan (2000), Adam and Roncevic (2003), Durlauf and Fafchamps (2004), and Dasgupta (2005), who give a good summary of the evolution of social capital over the past decade.

accounts for its inefficient regional governments, generally poor institutional performance, and democratic deficit. Their broader conclusion is that social capital has an important positive role in strengthening democracy.

While Putnam et al's definition of social capital gives a reasonable encapsulation of the concept, it also leaves plenty of room for interpretation. Trust, norms, and networks are complex ideas, and one can imagine many other features of social organization that facilitate coordinated actions. There are indeed "different types, levels, or dimensions of social capital, different performance outcomes associated with different combinations of these dimensions, and different sets of conditions that support or weaken favorable combinations" (Woolcock, 1998, p. 159). Below is a condensed explanation of the commonly discussed dimensions of social capital:

1. *Micro- and macro-*  
An individual can have social capital—high levels of interpersonal or social trust, norms such as reciprocity, a wide network of friends, acquaintances, colleagues in various collectives, strong ties, etc. A group can have social capital, for example, a strong internal network of ties. And by the same token, whole societies and nations can have social capital; Northern Italy vs. Southern Italy in Putnam et al's example. Micro-level social capital often applies to individuals or groups, whereas macro-level applies to social capital at the national or sub-national level.
2. *Bonding and bridging (also known as strong and weak ties).*<sup>12</sup>  
Bonding refers to social capital within collectives, or *inter-group* social capital. For example, the strength of network ties within an ethnic entrepreneurship class, say Chinese-American small businesses. Bridging refers to social capital between collectives, or *intra-group* social capital, say between the Chinese-American small business community and mainstream businesses or markets.
3. *Externalities and 'good' and 'bad' social capital*  
A farmers' labour support group (the Ethiopian *wenfel*, for example) increases the agricultural returns of its members and is likely a net benefit for its members. A criminal gang like the Mafia also gives some benefit to its members. However, the *wenfel* probably has positive externalities—effects on non-members or society at large—whereas the Mafia certainly has negative externalities. This is what is commonly meant by good and bad social capital. Note, however, that the *wenfel* or any other example of seemingly good social capital can also have negative externalities, if, for example, it has characteristics of being strongly exclusionary or parochial.<sup>13</sup>
4. *Civil society and social capital*  
Civil society is the arena in which people come together to pursue the interests they hold in common—not for profit or exercise of political power.<sup>14</sup> Social

<sup>12</sup> The terms 'bonding' and 'bridging' are used extensively in the literature; Woolcock and Narayan (1998, p. 320) give a good introductory summary.

<sup>13</sup> Durlauf and Fafchamps (2004, p. 15) give a general explanation and list some studies that illustrate potential negative externalities to strongly parochial manifestations of social capital.

<sup>14</sup> This is what the World Bank considers its simplest definition, as found in Edwards (2000).

capital is a broader and more fine-grained concept. By definition, norms and networks are present in all realms where collectives of any nature, informal or formal, large or small, exist. So, social capital, for instance, trust and friendship networks, can create or enhance civil society, for example, a grassroots neighbourhood association. At the same time, one would expect that the existence of vibrant civil society, all things being equal, to increase social capital by giving people practice at collective action.

5. *Cognitive (e.g. trust, norms, shared values) and structural (e.g. networks)*  
Trust, norms, shared values, attitudes, beliefs, and the like are conceptually different from networks. The former, cognitive social capital, are derived from mental processes and reinforced by culture and ideology (Uphoff, 2000). The latter, structural social capital, describes the composition of social interactions themselves. Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between the two categories of social capital. Cognitive and structural social capital are interdependent—for example, trust increases an individual’s propensity to link with others or join a network, and the practice of being in a network or group helps individuals become more trusting.<sup>15</sup>

**Figure 1. Complementary categories of social capital**

	<i>Structural</i>	<i>Cognitive</i>
Sources and manifestations	Roles and rules Networks and other interpersonal relationships Procedures and precedents	Norms Values Attitudes Beliefs
Domains	Social organization	Civic culture
Dynamic factors	Horizontal linkages Vertical linkages	Trust, solidarity, cooperation, generosity
Common elements	Expectations that lead to cooperative behavior, which produces mutual benefits	

Source: Uphoff (2000)

This brief outline of the various dimensions of social capital shows that it can be considered to be, more than a concept, a *praxis*, “a code word used to federate disparate but interrelated research interests and to facilitate the cross-fertilization of ideas across disciplinary boundaries” (Durlauf and Fafchamps, 2004, p. 3). It is often said that the best feature of social capital is that it has enabled the various disciplines interested in development issues, primarily sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists on one

<sup>15</sup> There has been a long-standing concern about social capital’s heterogeneity. Many lament the confusion resulting from one term having so many meanings, as well as methodological problems such as difficulties in isolating and measuring cognitive social capital and ambiguous causality between the two categories. There are also concerns about the reliability of macro studies for various reasons, among which is the strength of the surveys they are based on. For these reasons, there is a trend to try and limit the definition of social capital to, for example, just micro networks. For more on this, see van Deth (2003), Dasgupta (2005) and Durlauf and Fafchamps (2004).

side, and economists on the other, some common language. The sociologists et al get to inject more ‘social’ into development discourse, while submitting more of their ideas to the type of quantitative rigour appreciated by economists. At the same time, economists gain more appreciation for the ‘social’ and get to be able to measure it via social capital.<sup>16</sup>

In the same vein, the popularity of social capital has also helped boost the role of ‘culture’ in development, culture defined simply as “... the common world of experiences, values, and knowledge that a certain social group constitutes and reproduces in their daily life” (Löfgren, 1981, p. 30, quoted in H. Vermeulen, 2001, p. 3). Cognitive social capital—norms, values, and attitudes such as trust, honesty, cooperation, and reciprocity—is part of culture. Those who believe that ‘culture matters’ to some extent or another to economic growth, development, and democracy now have a way of injecting their ideas in more quantitative terms into the development realm by using the concept of social capital. In other words, “Social capital... (becomes) a utilitarian way of looking at culture” (Fukuyama, 2002).

And this is the role of social capital in this paper—to buttress the idea that norms, values, and attitudes affect development. In the theoretical realm, there is a good argument that social capital produces benefits for individuals, households, and societies, with ‘benefits’ meaning anything from greater household income to a higher Human Development Index to better governance (Fukuyama, 2002, presents a succinct explanation). In a society where norms of mutual trust and reciprocity are strong, voluntary groupings of people, from basic two-person associations to civil society organizations (CSO’s) tend to be easily formed, are effective, and enduring. These norms also strengthen social, economic, and political institutions, which are keys to development. Finally, they enable people to effectively articulate and assert their interests, which is the essence of democracy.<sup>17</sup>

In the empirical realm, research on social capital, including cognitive social capital, is in its infancy and still in the process of achieving methodological soundness, but what there is of it does give significant support for the above conclusions. Some examples: Putnam et al (1993) (notwithstanding criticisms) conclude that greater social capital, including cognitive social capital such as trust, results in better governance and democracy. Knack and Keefer (1997) and Zak and Knack (2001) show that at a national level, trust has positive impact on economic growth. Paxton (2002) shows that social capital (with trust as one component of social capital) is a determinant of the level of democracy in nations. On the micro level, Krishna (2001) shows that participation, trust, solidarity, and reciprocity result in, among other things, less poverty and more employment prospects. Uphoff (2000) explains how an increase in cognitive social capital, brought about by an educational campaign, resulted in Pareto-optimal use of a shared irrigation system that had hitherto been inefficiently utilized. Mogue (2005) finds that bonding and bridging social capital among households in rural north-eastern Ethiopia has a positive effect on asset holdings and mitigates the impact of income shocks on livestock capital. Again, it is

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<sup>16</sup> Bebbington et al (2004) and Edwards (2000) provide a thorough analysis of the ‘social capital effect’ among development specialists in general and especially at the World Bank.

<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, the absence of these norms results in social atomization, which permits authoritarianism, or generally, democratic deficit.



worth noting that empirical research on social capital is still at an early stage, though promising links have already been made between social capital and development and democracy.

## Discussion

Recall that the dysfunctional behaviours attributed to Ethiopian society—personalization of issues, parochialism, mutual distrust, paranoia, lack of empathy, character assassination, lack of openness, holding grudges, envy, and stubbornness—have negative effects on communication, conflict, and conflict resolution. These behaviours are obviously antithetic to the norms that promote social cooperation, such as trust, reciprocity, collaboration, openness, and the like. A society in which these dysfunctional behaviours are the norm has, by definition, relatively little social capital.

Given this, the next question is: Are these dysfunctional behaviours and their underlying cultural norms, values, and attitudes really significant characteristics of Ethiopian society? There is much in the anthropological and sociological literature on Ethiopian society that supports this thesis. Many of these dysfunctional behaviours were noted over forty years ago in Levine's (1965) seminal work. He found that these behaviours were part of a society characterized by rugged individualism, suspicion, fatalism, ambiguity, etc., a society with norms not conducive to collective effort. Concerned about how such a society would respond to modernity, he wrote, "...modernization is unthinkable without a significant increase in solidaristic sentiments and rationalized organization" (Levine, 1965, p. 283). Many of Levine's conclusions regarding 'hierarchical-individualistic structure' and 'weak horizontal ties' (Levine, 2000 [1974]) being properties of Amhara society are echoed by other Ethiopianist researchers. Messay (1999, p. 250), adding to Levine's above statement, writes, "In effect, the Ethiopians are ill equipped for organizing strikes with the view of defending or obtaining collective rights."<sup>18</sup> Crummey (1980, pp. 123-124) talks about hierarchical patron-client ties overriding any horizontal ties (among the peasantry). Habtamu (1994), in a psychological study of university students in Addis Ababa, finds mutual distrust one among several negative characteristics in Ethiopian society. Korten (1971) finds that Ethiopian folktales reflect a view of life as a zero-sum game and writes, "Perceived opportunities for initiative and cooperation in service to the community are limited."

There are criticisms of the above characterizations of Ethiopian society which, for the purposes of this paper, are grouped into two broad categories. The first is based on ideological/theoretical grounds—mainly that Levine's approach in particular is outdated structural-functionalism and that talking about culture in this way smacks of cultural determinism or essentialism (Tesfaye, 2004, and Harrison, 2002, give brief criticisms).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Messay continues, "The movement quickly decomposes, mostly by the influence of vertical calculations on the part of leaders and influential participants. Above all, the Ethiopians do not feel ashamed or dishonored by the failure, as communal obligations have little value for them."

<sup>19</sup> Tesfaye does point out that there is still no 'full-scale and systematic' critique of *Wax and Gold* in the literature, though the book is over forty years old and has been a major influence on many works. Harrison expresses legitimate concern about what might be a perception of a homogenous 'Abyssinian culture'; this is addressed in the 'Dysfunctional Behaviours' section above.

Most of these concerns revolve around the eternal culture vs. structure debate: the question of culture being a determinant, dependent, or in between. There seems to be a fear of ‘culturalism’—that to think about culture in development at all will lead to it being abused, conflated, treated as homogenous, unchanging, and all-determining. Indeed, the past decade or so has seen works such as *Culture Matters* (Harrison and Huntington, 2000) and *The Central Liberal Truth* (Harrison, 2006) that argue the thesis that culture may be the greatest determinant in a society’s development. The latter goes so far as to list universal cultural traits common to all underdeveloped societies (some, incidentally are similar to our dysfunctional behaviours). However, the existence of such perhaps excessive arguments should not deter us from giving culture its due in development discourse—it is here to stay.<sup>20</sup> There is a reasonable position to take on the culture debate, which is that culture matters to some extent or another. As Sen (2004) writes, “The real issue...is how—not whether—culture matters.”

The second criticism is on practical grounds—that Ethiopian society does not display the above characteristics, or at least not to any greater extent than other societies. Tesfaye (2004) holds up the *wenfel* as a robust example of solidaristic association among the Amhara peasantry in the area he studied. Tesfaye contends that the *wenfel* is more than just a farmers’ labour support group: it is a generalized form of institutional social reciprocity, similar in its pervasiveness to the Chinese *guanxi*. *Wenfel* permeates all aspects of peasant life, including agricultural and non-agricultural work, social events, and other contexts in which social relationships are manifested. Other well-known forms of traditional social capital in Ethiopia are rotating savings and credit associations (ROSCAs - *equb*), religious social support groups (*mehaber*), various farmers’ labour sharing arrangements (*debait, jige, debo*), and burial societies (*iddir*).

But of course, the mere existence of these voluntary associations does not imply that the assertion that Ethiopian society is hierarchical-individualistic with weak horizontal ties is false. After all, Putnam et al’s Southern Italy does contain some voluntary associations. ROSCAs (e.g. *djangi* in Cameroon), labour-sharing arrangements (e.g. *kombi* in Sierra Leone), burial societies (e.g. *diswaeti* in Botswana), and similar associations exist in most parts of Africa and the developing world, and in many traditions. In 1950’s Japan, rural communities typically had an average of fifteen to twenty-five voluntary associations (Norbeck, 1972)! Social capital and voluntary associations exist to some extent everywhere—the question is about their *relative* quality and quantity.

## Conclusion

The thesis of this paper is that there are certain cultural norms, ‘dysfunctional behaviours’, in Ethiopian society, both in the diaspora and in the homeland, that hamper effective communication, lead to intra-group conflict, and inhibit conflict resolution. These behaviours make cooperation difficult, and so, by definition, inhibit social capital and the growth of civil society, and by extension, democracy.

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<sup>20</sup> Apthorpe (2005) and Vermeulen (2001), both hardly cultural determinists, provide good explanations as to why culture can no longer be ignored and about the real and imagined dangers of culturalism.

This being a discussion paper, the purpose behind its perhaps provocative thesis is to raise questions and encourage further research. I suggest the following lines of inquiry:

1. Are these dysfunctional behaviours really characteristics of Ethiopian society? What is their impact? Forty years after *Wax and Gold*, there is certainly room for a re-evaluation, affirming or critical.
2. What is the state of social capital in Ethiopia? How does it compare with elsewhere? New, robust tools, such as better surveys, are being developed that might make cross-country studies of social capital more reliable than they are now.
3. What is the state of social capital among Ethiopian immigrants in developed countries? How do Ethiopian immigrants compare with other immigrant groups in their host countries, in terms of social capital and other variables? The diaspora is an excellent laboratory for research, both from the point of view of logistics, and because it so beautifully constrains many variables. It also has the potential to allow certain inferences to be made of the culture of immigrants in their native countries.<sup>21</sup>
4. Assuming the dysfunctional behaviours thesis is true, can these behaviours be addressed and how? What sort of intervention strategies would be effective in bringing about change? Unlike advocacy for other types of cultural change, such as changing customs or practices, few would overtly resist the teaching of basic habits to help promote effective communication, conflict prevention, and improved conflict resolution practices. How can we use this to our advantage? How can social marketing be effectively used for these purposes? What is the role of development practitioners and native Ethiopian institutions such as religious organizations and governments? I think that the role of native Ethiopian institutions in this regard is absolutely crucial. As Levine (1965, p.51) writes, “The vitality of a people springs from feeling at home in its culture and from a sense of kinship with its past. The negation of all those sentiments acquired in childhood leaves man adrift, a prey to random images and destructive impulses... The most productive and liberating sort of social change is that built on continuity with the past.”

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<sup>21</sup> H. Vermeulen (2001) and F. Vermeulen (2005) present thorough discussions of culture in the context of immigrant studies.

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