



## Roundtable:

# Maneuvering changing spaces for civil society organizations in the Horn of Africa

Date/time **Wednesday, 25 September 2019, from 14.00 to 16.45**, followed by an Aperitif

Venue swisspeace, Sonnenbergstrasse 17, 3001 Bern

The [swisspeace Statehood Program](#) and [KOFF \(The Swiss platform for peacebuilding\)](#) have the pleasure of inviting you to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Statehood roundtable of the “working with the state” event series.

### Rationale

Civil society engagement in conflict-affected states is a foreign policy priority for the Swiss FDFA, the European Union, and the United Nations. However, the space for civil society organizations to operate is affected by the modes of governance of the state in which they work. Democratic systems with a functioning rule of law are generally seen as contributing to a well-functioning civil society, and civil society itself is often referred to as contributing to the consolidation of democracy. At the other end of the spectrum, in highly authoritarian states, civic space is often portrayed as ‘limited’, ‘shrinking’, or completely lacking. While donors may aspire to contribute to democratization through civil society engagement in such contexts, it may also risk legitimizing authoritarian regimes. A recurring dilemma for foreign governmental and non-governmental actors is therefore how to respond to, and maneuver within, the space given by the host government within a particular conflict-affected state.

Recent developments in the greater Horn of Africa provide fascinating insights into how national level political changes affect the space and modus operandi of civil society organizations. To illustrate, after a long tradition of authoritarian rule in Ethiopia, the new Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed introduced an ambitious reform agenda in 2018. Journalists and political prisoners were released, and an unexpected peace deal between Ethiopia and Eritrea led UN Secretary-General Guterres to signal a ‘wind of hope blowing in the Horn of Africa’. Shortly thereafter, a revitalized peace deal was brokered in South Sudan, and Sudan is currently undergoing a tumultuous political transition after the 30-year rule of Omar al-Bashir. These developments notwithstanding, insecurity is rising in Ethiopia, the rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea is stalling, the South Sudanese peace accord has faced difficulties in its implementation, and fundamental questions remain about the direction of political change in Sudan. These tensions are further compounded by countervailing geopolitical interests, where actors such as the African Union, IGAD, the European Union, and the United States push national governments in the region to

democratize, while others such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates seek to further their interests through supporting authoritarian modes of rule.

This roundtable aims at bringing together practitioners and experts to discuss both the challenges and opportunities they face in relation to maneuvering within changing spaces for civil society organizations. It seeks to identify the possible causes of an enlarging or shrinking civic space, its diverse manifestations, and strategies to deal with such changing political dynamics. Case studies from the greater Horn of Africa will serve to guide the discussion.

### Objectives

The objective of this roundtable is geared at harnessing insights into the ways in which national level political changes affect the space for civil society engagement. Apart from providing a platform for exchange, this roundtable also seeks to synthesize the wealth of expertise exhibited by participants so as to generate new ideas on how to work more effectively in the future. Bringing together different experts from diverse backgrounds – ranging from scholars to practitioners – the roundtable aims at shedding light on questions such as the following:

- What are the challenges and opportunities that recent political changes in the Horn of Africa brought to civil society organizations? What are the similarities and differences between countries within the region?
- What are the implications for Swiss governmental and non-governmental organizations? What conditions, minimum standards, safeguards, analysis and best practices can help to promote positive developments and minimize harm from working alongside, through or around governments in the Horn of Africa?

### Speakers

- **Pia Hänni**, Deputy Head of Division Africa, Humanitarian Aid and **Dorothee Lötscher**, Programme Manager Horn of Africa/Governance, Swiss Agency for Development and Coordination
- **Noemi Grossen**, Programme Manager Ethiopia, Caritas Switzerland
- **Paulos Asfaha**, PhD candidate, lecturer, Global Studies Institute, University of Geneva

We kindly ask you to register for this roundtable by **18 September 2019** via e-mail to Toon Dirkx ([toon.dirkx@swisspeace.ch](mailto:toon.dirkx@swisspeace.ch)). Thank you very much already in advance.

### Program

- 14.00** Welcome & Introduction
- 14.15** Input by keynote speakers
- 14.45** Break
- 15:00** Q&A & open discussion
- 16.30** Concluding remarks
- 16.45** Aperitif

### Moderator

Toon Dirks, Statehood Program, swisspeace

### Upcoming Roundtable

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Statehood roundtable of the “working with the state” event series on “**the politics of field research in authoritarian settings**” will take place on **3 November 2019** at swisspeace in Basel.

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