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PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT CENTER

# Building Peace Through Dialogue

TEN YEARS OF  
SUSTAINED  
DIALOGUE  
ACROSS  
UNIVERSITIES  
IN ETHIOPIA

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## Disclaimer

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A young gymnast performs at an LPI organized Peace Action

# Foreword

## SD's legacy is the individual lives it has changed across Ethiopian universities

The Life & Peace Institute (LPI) has been championing peacebuilding and nonviolent approaches to conflict in the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes Region for the past 35 years. The Peace and Development Centre (PDC) is a leading peacebuilding organisation in Ethiopia established in 1991. Our partnership spans 30 years and is based on a mutual commitment to inclusive peacebuilding at the grassroots levels.

The Sustained Dialogue Project is one of the primary and longest running fruits of our collaboration. When we piloted it at Addis Ababa University in 2009, it was based on our analysis that universities in Ethiopia – particularly Addis Ababa University – were confronted with inter-group conflicts. We knew Sustained Dialogue – which uses continuous dialogue among diverse people to bridge differences – is effective at promoting a culture of dialogue and tolerance. We also knew that it's suitable for contexts where interpersonal and intergroup conflicts are along identity lines. We adapted the methodology to the Addis Ababa University setting, but we weren't sure how it will be received or whether it would be effective there. However, we found that the methodology proved effective and useful, so much so that four years later, Addis Ababa University was ready to allocate budget for Sustained Dialogue and implement it as its own activity.

Today, Sustained Dialogue (or 'SD' as it is affectionately known) is implemented in five universities across Ethiopia and more than 15,000 Ethiopian university students have been through the SD process. The universities see its value and are ready to own the project and run it on their own. They have also suggested LPI and PDC to scale up the project inside these universities, to launch SD in the other Ethiopian universities, and to open up SD to the broader university community (lecturers, university administration and communities around the university campuses). LPI, for its part, has used the lessons from implementing SD in Ethiopia to launch SD projects in Sudan, Somalia, Kenya and Sweden.

This booklet is our way of sharing our decade long SD journey with a wider audience. In it, we share the stories and testimonies of students and university administrations who have been transformed by SD or have witnessed the transformation of others. We also share some of the challenges and opportunities we faced in this ten-year journey. The personal stories from former and current SD students, together with the evolution of conflicts in Ethiopia, encourage and challenge us to do more and to do better to improve interpersonal and intergroup relationships in Ethiopia; and make dialogue the primary means for conflict resolution in Ethiopian universities. This is no easy task. But we are confident that we can leverage our long partnership, the experience we have gained from implementing SD, the support of our financial partners, and the skills and talents of SD Alumni, to take SD to another level in the coming years.

The key legacy and successes of the SD Project in Ethiopian universities, are the individual lives who have been changed, and how thousands of young people are making a difference in their communities and across the country, using the experience, knowledge and relationships they have built during their time in SD. These youth are the ones who will shape the future of their country.

*SD Kick Off in Jimma University*

# Chapter 1

## SUSTAINED DIALOGUE - MANY INDIVIDUALS BUILDING PEACE

### Why Sustained Dialogue in Ethiopia?

When we find ourselves in a new space the diversity around us can feel threatening to our identity, and our understanding of the world as we knew it. We can easily be overwhelmed with the novelty of the experience and resort to stereotyping and mistrust to manage our first-time encounters with 'the other'. Familiarity and frequent engagements with the 'other' will eventually disarm our mistrust and help us relate to those we think are different from 'us'. If we dare to go further, we can even build close relationships with those we once considered utterly foreign or type-casted. We can then rely on these relationships to bridge our differences and resolve our conflicts peacefully

Each year, thousands of Ethiopian university students leave their hometowns to join a university. Universities are federal institutions in Ethiopia and each university hosts students from all corners of the country. For all the diversity in Ethiopia, the university is where much of the country's youth is confronted with the full scale of the country's diversity. The ethnic, linguistic, religious, geographic, socio-economic and political diversities in Ethiopia are reflected in universities, exposing students to the diversity of the country they live in and will be serving in their near future.

*"Not only people from Asia, Europe or America don't know Ethiopia and the Ethiopian people. People here in Ethiopia, especially in regions, that are only a four-hour car ride away have very bad perceptions about us and us about them."*

*Desta Mohammed, Jimma University*

But this encounter is not an easy experience for most students. In addition to cultural and linguistic understandings and 'culture shock', previously held stereotypes are used to make sense of a complex experience and one-off incidents give way to new stereotypes and biases. Furthermore, in Ethiopia, it's not only that the 'other' (whether a person or a group) is unfamiliar but also that identity is political; history is contested; and mutually deleterious narratives are plenty and well ingrained. Universities are historical torchbearers of political movements in Ethiopia, at the same time as representing the diversity of the country. This makes universities microcosms of society whereby national historical and contemporary questions and contestations around identity and representation actively play out interpersonal and intergroup relations on university campuses. As a result, inter-personal conflicts can easily take on an ethnic or religious turn, evolve into inter-group conflicts and erupt in violence. The intensity of the conflict can range from confrontations between students that are resolved by students, to intense violence that leads to loss of life and requires government intervention.

Such incidents not only lead to interruption of education for the students but also deepen gaps between the conflicting identity groups. They become a cause for reprisal and retribution. This sustains conflict cycles, which unless transformed, could erupt in violence at the next trigger – which could be an incident at the university, regional or national level.

# What is Sustained Dialogue?

Sustained Dialogue is a dialogue-to-action peacebuilding methodology which aims to transform identity-based conflicts through continuous dialogue and relationship-building. The methodology was originally conceptualised in 1970s by the U.S. diplomat Dr. Harold H. Saunders as a dialogue-based conflict resolution tool and to date, and has been applied to numerous contexts. SD seeks to influence positive attitudinal and behavioural change at the individual and relationship level, within and between diverse individuals and groups, in addition to contributing to a broader change beyond the dialogue participants through an action component. By allowing young people themselves to define their concerns and the difficulties they face, SD increases their ability to ensure youth-specific needs are met.

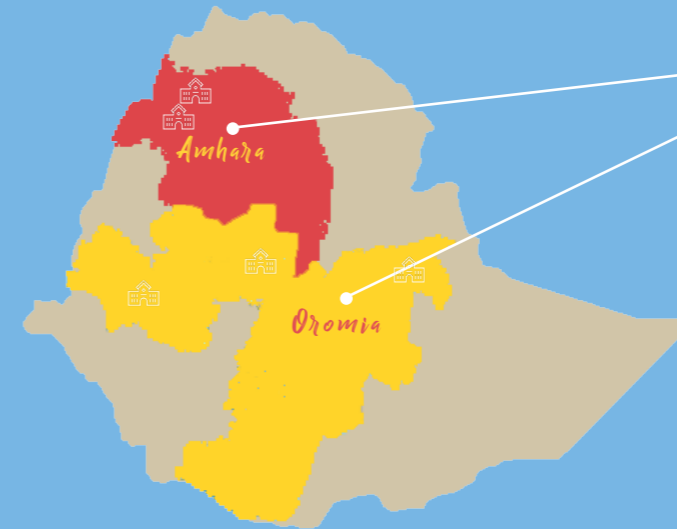
SD is an inclusive and participatory process which allows for diverse youth across identity boundaries to exchange and learn from others' perspectives and experiences, and to reach common ground, in order to design collaborative actions aimed to address the root causes and drivers of conflict in their broader communities. During an SD process, young women and men not only (re)build positive social ties, contribute to deconstructing negative patterns for engagement, and challenge mutual stereotypes, they also strengthen their own confidence in their abilities and unique position to become key actors in peace efforts. SD processes both channel youth's unique potential for positive change and accompany the involved youth in overcoming the structural barriers to their participation in peace processes.

SD processes support diverse youth in overcoming the traditional barriers to their inclusion in peace processes through the following key principles:

- Involved youth are “given a stake” in their societies by participating in a transformative project.
- Involved youth own the dialogue agenda and define topics for discussion.
- Participating youth transform their understanding of other groups within an alternative safe space for engagement.
- SD embraces the inherent complexity and heterogeneity of youth groups and recognises their divisions, allowing for positive changes within and between youth and the broader society.
- Through ongoing accompaniment, SD supports young women and men in enhancing the capacities, skills and knowledge needed to develop sustainable solutions to violent conflict.

(Ref. “Being and Becoming a Peacebuilder: Insights from 20,000 hours of youth-led dialogues in the Horn of Africa” - <https://life-peace.org/resource/being-and-becoming-a-peacebuilder/>)

# Sustained Dialogue Outreach



2  
regions

5  
universities

 >9000 SD Sessions

 >925 SD Groups


## Peace Ideas Incubated



2016/17: 1 idea

2017/18: 8 ideas

2018/19: 16 ideas

 4,574 female students

 5,014 male students

# Roll out of Sustained Dialogue in Ethiopia

In order to address this dynamic, in 2009 LPI and PDC began the journey of implementing SD methodology as a peacebuilding tool in Ethiopian universities. The journey began at Addis Ababa University where, since 2012, the university has taken full ownership and implementation of the process and LPI and PDC have phased out their support.

Since 2016, with support from USAID and Sida, LPI and PDC took SD to five universities – Ambo, Bahir Dar, Jimma, Gondar, and Haramaya – in two regions of Ethiopia. These universities were strategically selected based on a thorough conflict analysis that takes note of the nature of inter-group conflict they have experienced and their positioning vis-à-vis the local (around the university), regional or national conflict dynamics. As the current cycle of the SD Project came to an end in 2020, the other universities are also willing to take ownership of the project and are taking the necessary steps to implement SD on their own. In over a decade of implementing SD, LPI and PDC have managed to reach more than 15,000 young Ethiopian students directly.

## SD in Ethiopia in a Nutshell

**Theory of change:** If young men and women, including opinion leaders, from conflicting identity groups on campus are engaged to come together on a regular basis and discuss issues of difference that affect them, Then, over time, they will build mutual understanding and trust, Because prolonged interaction with safe and moderated discussion facilitates the possibility of overcoming entrenched barriers (e.g., divisive narratives, distrust, fear, misunderstanding, stereotyping).

**The Dual Agenda of SD:** 1. Build relationships “in the room”, and 2. Address concrete community issues outside of the dialogue space, through Stage 5 of informed peace action(s).

### The Five Stages of SD

#### 1. The ‘who’ stage – diverse students commit to engage in a sustained way.

This involves selecting a diverse group of students to participate in SD in every university. Since the main purpose is resolving ethnic and religious differences, participants in every dialogue should be drawn from every religion and ethnic group. LPI and PDC also pay attention to intersectional diversity. Every year 600, students participate in SD in one university distributed across 50 SD groups, where each group has 12 participants. Two of the twelve are moderators, trained in dialogue facilitation and conflict sensitivity. PDC is responsible for the recruitment of participants from among thousands of applicants.

#### 2. The ‘What’ stage: Storytelling

In this stage, students exchange experiences and start (re)building trust, strengthening their understanding of each other. They touch on the problems each student encountered because of their religious or ethnic identity. This is one of the most important stages and takes the longest time. It helps build trust across identity groups as students realize that others have grievances too.

#### 3. The ‘Why’ Stage – Interrogation

In the third stage, students interrogate where their tensions come from? They identify and analyse the fundamental problems behind negative intergroup relations.

#### 4. The ‘How’ Stage – Brainstorming solutions

They consult with one another on what to do about the tension. They brainstorm and come up with various solutions. There is no right or wrong solution in this process of brainstorming.

#### 5. The ‘Now’ stage – Designing and implementing informed action

In this stage, participants list down their recommendation for actions beyond their scope and collaboratively identify peace actions they can carryout to address problems in their own remit. For example, if they believe that the problem is caused by the federal structure, they can do nothing about it. So, they submit recommendation. But if their peace action is to share their new insight and experiences with other students, the project provides them with funds to implement their peace action. Peace actions complement the effect of dialogue; demonstrate an alternative, positive narrative of collaborating with other groups, and serve as platforms for outreach to the wider campus community.

## The 5 Stages of Sustained Dialogue (SD)





In applying SD in Ethiopia, in addition to developing the culture of peaceful discussion and genuine dialogue, students get to build relationships across ethnic, linguistic, religious and other divides in a setting (universities) where identity-based groupings persist. The fact that the dialogue continues throughout the year fosters deep connection and is different from the regular one-off interactions' students have with each other. Building relationships is a key element of conflict transformation through SD as individuals or groups who have positive relationships can rely on this relationship to manage their differences and resolve conflicts peacefully.

“Before I came to the university, I used to perceive that my ethnic group was the only group that follows true religion, that is Islam. In addition, I perceived that all Oromos are Muslims. After I came to the university, I met Oromo students who were not Muslims. Meanwhile, I joined SD and it transformed my perception towards others and other identity lines.”

SD participant from Jimma University

But in addition to creating space for dialogue, building relationships and transforming conflict requires preparing people to be able to constructively participate. They may need help to improve their listening skills. They may need to develop more confidence to speak up. Or they may need to enhance their leadership and facilitation skills. SD therefore orients and prepares the participants ahead of the dialogues. “I now feel very much comfortable to talk about my experiences about SD in front of a group of my peers, and will take the lead to welcome students from different backgrounds”. Student from Bahir Dar University.

The process brings together a diverse group of 12 students (two of which are trained to moderate) to engage in dialogue on various issues of their own choosing throughout the year. These conversations often touch on contested national histories, narratives and ongoing political developments on ethnicity, religion, and gender. SD creates a safe space where students can listen to each other's stories, lived experiences, political narratives and reflect on their own. The two trained moderators in each dialogue group ensure the dialogue progresses toward positive individual transformation, rather than reinforcing negative divisions and stereotypes. And in this process, students learn to listen to others emphatically; debate differences peacefully; interrogate their own identities; and confront their own assumptions and stereotypes about 'others'.

These behavioural change and personal transformations have a multiplier effect as the students reach their friends and families back home and engage in various on and off campus outreach activities as part of the SD process. Moreover, since 2018, LPI and PDC have complemented SD with an ad-on, off-campus activity called 'Peace Incubation' where students who have participated in the project apply the skills that they accumulated during their participation, to promote peace back in their communities of origin.

Peace Incubation, when coupled with the SD can create a dynamic environment for outstanding student leaders to develop new ideas about spreading the message of peace and nonviolence beyond their university campuses. With support and direction from LPI staff and outside experts, these young peacebuilders from the SD Project develop ideas for innovative solutions to social problems faced by their home communities. After two weeks of Peace Incubation in Addis Ababa, equipped with a final plan and a small budget, they return home to implement their project during the summer break.

**Peace Incubation Theory of Change:** If SD participants are accompanied to realize their ideas for promoting social cohesion, Then their efforts will increase their confidence as future leaders for peace and may contribute to social cohesion and address negative socialisation patterns, Because they experienced personal transformation that they want to share “back home” and will have a safe space, resources, time and technical accompaniment to develop their own ideas for action to reach off campus communities.

The peace incubation has three basic stages to pass through: Selection, Nurturing and Graduation.

**Selection:** This is a pre-incubation phase in which application forms are distributed, orientation about the application and incubation process is organized and selection of the applicants to the incubation process is made. Entry into the incubation process is competitive and on the basis of a viable Project idea and plan, in a way to guarantee that students entering the incubation process are “ready to be groomed”.

**Nurturing:** This phase is a time for the selected students/incubatees to develop and enrich their project ideas

with direct one to one support of the incubator. LPI as an incubator provides a range of support services to the selected incubatees and their projects. This includes:

- **Training and knowledge building:** Two weeks of highly interactive training on the topics that both LPI and the students identified as needs, such as concept of incubation, peacebuilding & conflict transformation, basics of conflict sensitivity and Do No Harm approaches, dialogue facilitation, life skills, leadership, communication, networking & partnership, planning, teambuilding, and concept note development.
- **Hands-on-mentoring and management support:** giving significant assistance to help the incubatees understand the role that individuals and organizations can play in building peace, including one-on-one sessions focusing on vision, mission, strategy, planning and implementation.
- **Network and Community Building:** providing assistance in facilitating and strengthening connections with relevant stakeholders in civil society and government sectors.

**Graduation:** This is the stage whereby incubatees complete nurturing their idea and prepare a viable peace project with clear implementation plan. They graduate from the peace incubation process as future leaders for peace. In addition to the accompaniment and capacity building support LPI provides to the peace incubatees, small budget to cover basic costs to be incurred while implementing the projects will also be allotted for each project incubated. LPI will arrange a reflection and learning session with the peace incubatees after the projects are implemented to reflect on the change they made on their communities, how the process went, what they learnt out of the process and to document success stories and some data for the refinement of the programme for the next round and for possible scale ups of best performed projects.

“I used to be known for causing trouble around my community before I joined Haramaya University SD. And most of my close friends might think I would end up in jail for I usually get involved in violence and conflict. But today, my fellow friends in my community are surprised about me when they saw me speaking about peace and dialogue. I am grateful for the opportunity given to me to give back to my community. The process taught me different skills, such as communication, confidence to speak in front of many people, liaising with local government bodies and many others. I am astounded by the youth who participated in the dialogue who have lots of zeal to bring these two historically disputing communities to harmony and change the bad narratives that have been told by their forefathers and foremothers.

Peace Incubatee from Haramaya University, implementing youth dialogue in Wondogenet from Sidama and Oromia regions

Sustained Dialogue, in combination with Peace Incubation, is therefore a practical example of youth working together to conduct dialogues and design collaborative actions as a way to contribute to the reduction of mistrust and inter-group tensions that frequently result in violent conflict, with lessons applicable to national-level peace processes. LPI and PDC's experiences with the approach demonstrate that, if supported, youth can transform both themselves and one another, as will be shown in the next chapter.



# CHAPTER 2

## SD AND HOW IT ACTUALLY MATTERED: STORIES AND TESTIMONIES

Sustained Dialogue seeks to effect personal, inter-group and ultimately societal transformation. All students who participate in the SD have their own unique personal experiences of the process. This section features some of these personal stories from current and former SD students. It also presents the observations of university administrators who have seen 600 students enroll and graduate from SD each year, and the reflections of PDC which has been at the forefront of the implementing SD in Ethiopia since 2009.

In interviews conducted in 2020 and previous testimonies collected throughout 2016-2020, SD participants shared how SD helped them overcome their reservations of interacting with students from other ethnic or religious backgrounds, helped them develop their confidence and communication skills, gave them a family away from home, and inspired them to be ambassadors of peace and dream high including becoming a Prime Minister one day.

Reading through the experiences and reflections of the participants, it becomes apparent that while each student has their own unique familial and contextual upbringings, most share a common challenge of learning to navigate diversity in an (often) volatile university context. They share the experience of meaningful interaction with ‘others’ – often for the first time in their lives – and the challenges and rewards that come with that.

## FIRST ENCOUNTERS AND TESTING ONE’S ASSUMPTIONS

### Belaynesh’s Story – Gondar University

Belaynesh Mersha, is a second year MA student of Gender and Development Studies at Gondar University. Before joining the SD Project, her view toward other ethnic groups or religions was shaped by the views and traditions in her own locality. Growing up, she was never confronted with people who practiced a belief system other than her religion. During her first year in the university, she plunged into experiences that were totally strange to her. One of such experiences was sharing a room with students from parts of Ethiopia where she had never been. Like thousands of Ethiopian students who get to experience the “melting pot” that Ethiopia is, she remembers how, her first weeks of university were filled with discovery and encounters that helped her interrogate her assumptions.

She still remembers meeting her roommate from Gambella for the first time and her awe at her roommate’s height. She remembers this moment because at that very moment, she realised how her upbringing in a specific locality has influenced her imagination of other people’s physical appearances as well. This resonates with the experience of hundreds of students in Ethiopian universities whose first real experience outside of their immediate locality is to attend university.

“But once I started attending SD sessions, my view has changed totally. The project was designed to promote the values of peace through dialogue and I think it’s an important tool for enhancing the concept *Unity in Diversity*. SD has also helped me to express myself and develop self-confidence.”

Belaynesh Mersha, Gondar University

## Communion with 'the other' – a Story from Jimma University

A member of the Protestant Fellowship Group at Jimma University shared his experience: “I used to have bad attitude towards Muslim students before joining SD for I had imprinted negative things back in my mind from what I learnt where I come from. I used to feel frustrated when Muslim students, whom I share a dormitory with, pray. I would lock my stuff and do not share any of my belongings (books, excessive books, water tanks and the likes) with them. But after passing through several SD sessions, I began to change and even reached to the extent to have one Muslim best friend whom I share everything with. He now prays on my bed and we do 'Ifter' together during his fasting season. I can now claim that I am a changed person, who believes in diversity. I have now plans to spread the positive things I heard from SD to my fellow friends back in my hometown Dawro during this summer break, so that they embrace people of another religions and groups.”

## LEARNING EMPATHY AND SOLIDARITY BENEATH AND ABOVE DIFFERENCES

### The Story of Anbessa – Jimma university

“SD has changed me so much that I would lay down my life for others.”

Anbessa Biru, Jimma University

In his third year of studies, a riot erupted in Jimma university where Abenassa is a student. The Police that had come in to disperse the crowd, threw teargas which landed in the women's dormitory, crashed through glass windows and landed in girls' rooms. Anbessa ran straight into the building, went to all floors to let the students know of what was happening and led them to the exit of the building. But staying in the building to lead everyone out had exposed into to excess teargas, and he fainted on his way out of the building.

Anbessa recalls this moment not necessarily as a heroic act that he did, but as a testament to the transformation he had gone through through SD.

“Had it been not for the changes SD brought about in my attitude, I wouldn't have done any of those things” he says, recounting how SD has helped him realise that empathy, solidarity and comradery cut across the ethnic or political differences which dictate socialisation on campus.

It seems this lesson was reinforced for Anbessa in this very incidence when he adds: “upon regaining consciousness, I found out that two students had carried me out of the building.” He says he was touched by the act of the two fellow students who brought him to safety without inquiring about his ethnic, religious or political affiliations.

Anbessa concludes: “The phrase 'all humans are equal' may sound like a cliché, but the concept it represents should neither be taken for granted nor underestimated.”

## SD IS AN AVENUE TO LEARN NEW CULTURES AND LANGUAGES

### Ahmed's Story – Bahir Dar University

Ahmed Awol is a third year Journalism and Communications student at Bahir Dar University. He is from Wolkite town in SNNPR of Ethiopia. As a communications major, his interest in SD is not only about what is discussed but also how it is discussed. He has deep appreciation for the relational values of dialogue where individuals bond by sharing their personal worldviews, emotions, and aspirations. In practical terms and at the university, he sees how SD allows students to explore the power of language and nonviolent style of communication – a skill he says is important in interpersonal, intrapersonal and intergroup relationships beyond the university. It is for this reason that Ahmed looked into conflict resolution mechanisms from his community:

“Since I am from Guraghe Zone, I shared my knowledge about traditional dispute resolution mechanism implemented in my area called Yejaka. Similarly, an SD participant from Afar Region also shared with us his knowledge about traditional communication method called Dagu..”

Ahmed Awol, Bahir Dar University

Ahmed believes in the power of effective communications and dialogue, in transforming individuals and inter-group relations in communities. In his own words, he says: “I wish SD could be implemented at grassroots community level so that others also get to experience what I have gained from it.”

## BUILDING PEACE IN DIFFERENT LANGUAGES

### Nebyu the Polyglot – Bahir Dar University

Nebyu Haile is from Arbaminch City in SNNPRS and speaks Amharic, Afaan Oromo, English, Wolayta and Gamo languages. He is currently in his third year of study of English Language and Literature at Bahir Dar University. His multilingual ability made him a connector in his SD group. He applied his multilingual skills to help translate across languages.

He notes that from his experience, his support is particularly important for students from Oromia region who may struggle express themselves in Amharic: “Since I speak Afaan Oromo, I help them understand the concept of SD and also help them follow the conversation during the sessions. I also think that this multi-lingual exchange makes other participants of SD pick up other languages and learn about the culture of other students. I think this is one of the benefits of SD.” other students. I think this is one of the benefits of SD.”



Peace March, Dedo, Ethiopia, 2019

# BECOMING AMBASSADORS OF PEACE

## The Story of Getahun Worke – Gondar University

Getahun Worke of Gondar University remembers how he used to take his disagreements with his roommates personally and avoid the company of those he disagrees with. He says SD has helped him develop communication and also conflict resolution skills. He has changed his attitude to differences. He says he accepts that differences can be bridged and that even when they can't be bridged, difference in perspectives should not be a reason to end socialisation with those one disagrees with.

Getahun reflects on how SD has inspired him to give back to the campus community by being an ambassador of peace. He says, "I learned to get along with many people including my teachers. There were ethnic conflicts on campus but we [SD members] were able to resolve them in cooperation with the Dean, teachers, or fellow students".

Like many universities in Ethiopia, Gondor University also faces inter-group conflicts among students. Getahun remembers a particular incident in which conflict flared up between Amhara and Oromo students. The peace ambassadors took the case to the leadership of the university to resolve the matter.

He also remembers how as peace ambassadors, SD participants had to step in to help first year students who are new to these dynamics but were stuck in the middle of a violent ordeal: "One of the dormitory buildings had been burned but many first-year students had not taken out their clothes. We [peace ambassadors] gathered their clothes out of the burning building and guarded them for four days so that no item of clothing

was burnt or stolen," Getahun says.

Getahun's story illustrates how he and his fellow SD participants have built on the personal transformation, relationships and skills they have gained by participating in SD, to be agents of peace during conflicts on campus. He says SD members see themselves as ambassadors of peace in Gondar University. They have done their best to diffuse tensions and call for calm by proactively engaging students across ethnic groups, and reaching out to many more through social media.

## FINDING A FAMILY AWAY FROM HOME

### A Young SD Participant – Bahir Dar University

"I am a third-year student at the Department of English in Bahir Dar University. I was born, raised and completed my primary and high school education in West Wollega Zone, Gimbi Town. For me, SD is like a small university within the big Bahir Dar University. We share our respective cultures, values and life experiences and learn about the values and cultures of various identity groups.

Before joining SD, I had heard that if I were not a follower of Orthodox Christianity the community would kill me. I had also the expectation that the community do not feel comfortable when they see people coming from other regions especially ethnic Oromos. I was withdrawn from university social life and my socialisation was limited to only students who came from my hometown and sometimes with students attending prayer conferences at Protestant churches. However, the reality on the ground is completely different.

My mother tongue is Oromiffa and I didn't speak Amharic well when I joined the university. I have been able to improve my Amharic through SD and I have also helped SD participants learn Oromiffa. In this, SD has also made me proud of my identity, religion and language. Overall, the SD process and members have helped me appreciate others' religion, culture and identity and made me a sociable person. I can now freely interact with students from all batches and departments irrespective of their place of origin, religion as well as ethnic background and ethnic or religious differences do not prevent me from making friends.

As members of SD, we are like a family as well. SD members protect me, care for me, and above all persuaded me to not drop out of university when ethnic-Oromo students left the university because of ethnic-triggered conflicts. Even for my future career and social life, there are many connections SD has helped me create. For example, as SD families come from all corner of the country, I'm sure I can lend my SD network to my younger siblings who will be joining universities in the upcoming years, so that they can be connected with people around whichever university they get assigned to.

"I would love to see projects like SD implemented in all Ethiopian universities as well as in major cities of the country at community level. Rolling out SD at a large scale will help create a very cohesive and informed society. It will enhance the culture of peace, and help us imagine and create an inclusive Ethiopia."

A Young SD Participant

# DREAMING TO BECOME A PRIME MINISTER

## Liqe's Dream – Ambo University

Even though Ambo is not that far from Addis Ababa, Liqe Serawit was anxious about going to Ambo University to study Political Science and International Relations. But once he joined SD, he saw how each student in the group was eager to participate, share their skills and thoughts.

“As a participant in the SD Project, I have broadened my horizons. SD has allowed me to understand different life contexts; that peace cannot be taken for granted and that in many places, and people make great sacrifices for peace. My participation in SD has exposed me to different social contexts in the country and I now dream of becoming a Prime Minister and serve my country.”

Liqe Serawit, Ambo University

# SUSTAINING SUSTAINED DIALOGUE

## Abenezer's Story – President of the Peace Forum of Gondar University

Abenezer Teferi, President of the Peace Forum of Gondar University, says accepting the complexity of one's own feelings, thoughts and behaviors and the capacity to view everyday problems or conflicts in a positive, empathic and creative way is the best lesson he took from the SD Project. He also recalls how SD gave him the opportunity to enhance his own leadership skills: “Following up different activities of 600 participant students under the auspices of SD provided us with opportunity to exercise leadership.”

At the university level, Abenezer says, “SD serves as a platform for students to build relationships with students from every corner of Ethiopia.” He appreciates how SD participants take active roles in university life: “When a project called “one parent for one student” which matched students with host parents, was launched in Gondar University, SD participants played a key role in connecting students with volunteer host parents in the city.

Abenezer is convinced that SD is beneficial to the university and that it should be implemented on a continuous basis. The executive leadership of the Peace Forum is discussing with the top management of the university on possible ways of continuing the SD Project once LPI and PDC's current project ends. The response they received is promising, and Abenezer says:

“Since we are planning to double the number of participants, we are also looking for other sources of funds, both for the continuation and expansion of the project.”

Abenezer Teferi, Gondar University



Competing teams pause for a family photo at an LPI organized Peace Action

# TAKING THE SD EXPERIENCE HOME

## Desta's Story - Jimma University

Desta Mohammed is from Shashemene in Western Arsi Zone of Oromia and a student at Jimma University. Even though his hometown is home for more than 45 ethnic groups and Rastafarians he says: “Prior to participating in SD, I believed my ethnic group is superior to others. I also used to think ‘my religion or no religion’. SD encourages love, peace, unity, trust and tolerance. I learned that all humans are equal, regardless of their ethnic or religious background, and there is no greater or lesser ethnic or religious group.”

Desta took these lessons to heart and also to his hometown Shashemene, which has seen a number of ethnic-based conflicts in the past years. He considers himself an agent of peace: “It means I have accepted the challenge to make a better Ethiopia through my attitude, actions and initiatives; to make living together easier by sharing what I learned and helping others to engage in dialogue. Sometimes this feels like you are doing nothing or that it's impossible to achieve, but when you have convictions, you still continue because you have made a commitment. And as a peace ambassador, I think we can't give up on Ethiopia whatever the situation might be.”

Through financial and technical support provided by LPI, Desta started a campaign “promoting peace!” where he organised a street art show, sports activities, and trainings to promote peace back in Shashemene. His motivation is clear: “Not only people from Asia, Europe or America don't know Ethiopia and the Ethiopian people. People here in Ethiopia, especially in regions that are only a four-hour car ride away, have very bad perceptions about us and us about them. That's why I am convinced that dialogue, especially intercultural dialogue is very important.” Through his campaign “Promoting Peace”, he was able to reach to 40 to 45 thousand residents of the city, an achievement that was recognised by the city administration which awarded him the title of “peace agent” and “peace ambassador”. Desta says he's particularly passionate about reaching out to young people as he believes youth are agents of change:

“As you grow old, it is difficult and sometimes even impossible to change, but young people are open-minded and easier to shape. Besides, some young people are doing amazing things in the community. If you don't share your knowledge with them, it's difficult to have real impact.”

Desta Mohammed, Jimma University

# LOOKING FOR PEACE FROM WITHIN

Tigist explores indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms – Gondar University



Tigist Mulugeta is a law student at Gondar University and she had taken part in the peace incubation. She speaks of how participation in SD has helped her develop communication skills. “I was not a good communicator before joining the SD. Even holding a conversation with an individual was a daunting task for me. However, once I passed through the different stages of SD, my communication skills have changed.”

For Tigist, SD is all about humanity first, which means treating everyone equally without any bias. By taking the principles of humanity from the SD, she is now sharing those ideas with her community in Mizan. Based on the skills she acquired from participation in the SD Project, she designed a project titled, “Indigenous Conflict Resolution Mechanisms for Sustainable Peace in Mizan Town”, which brought together 460 elders, youth and mothers.

Her thesis was inspired by the issues and questions raised during the panel discussion. Tigist’s idea on the

role of indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms beyond the regular courts, was selected and recognised by USAID from among 26 other projects from different African countries.

Tigist says that her future plan is to support conflict resolution at the community level: “I am particularly interested in promoting the role of women in promoting peace and stability in their respective communities,” says Tigist who is passionate about gender issues. “Apart from this,” she adds, “I am also determined to promote gender equality at the community level and work on community capacity building in gender mainstreaming.”

# OWNING SUSTAINED DIALOGUE

Metages’ Story – Chairman of Peace Forum of Bahir Dar University

Metages Tsega is Chairman of Peace Forum of Bahir Dar University, and Secretary of Ethiopian Higher Institutions Peace Forum. The University Peace Forum helps coordinate the SD activities with the university leadership and they help in training and coaching of SD participants and moderators together with PDC. Metages says members of the Peace Forum who have taken part in SD have used skills they developed from their participation in SD to carry out their other responsibilities as Peace Forum members: “Our role as trainers of trainees helped us in different ways to boost our confidence, communication and leadership skills which are the skills we solely obtained from our participation in the implementation of the SD project. For me personally, participating in the SD Project has helped me in different ways to boost my confidence.” He says, adding that he used to be shy and reserved.

Metages appreciates the impact SD has on campus life as SD participants take proactive roles to resolve conflict and prevent violence. During the times where intimidating pamphlets were circulated in the university and students feel threatened and avoid attending classes, SD participants organised themselves to calm things down and ensure classes continue uninterrupted. Metages also adds that SD participants “lookout for each other whenever conflict erupts in the university,” an observation that resonates with what several other SD participants shared.

Though conflicts have caused interruption of students’ education, Metages notes that none of these have led to physical injury or loss of life in Bahir Dar University. He attributes part of this to the positive impact SD has had on participating students and those in their immediate circles.

Metages is committed to ensuring SD continues in Bahir Dar University and is eager for the University administration to own the project completely. He is confident that the Peace Forum is able to accompany the implementation of SD:

“We, as the leaders of the Peace Forum, are determined to lead and organise the students and continue the project based on the skills and knowledge we have acquired from the SD. On our part we are designing different proposals which demonstrate the impact of SD in the university, to request the assistance of other stakeholders in continuing the project.”

Metages Tsega, Bahir Dar University

Metages also shares his vision that perhaps SD would be open to other stakeholders in the university apart from the students, including the Peace & Security Department of the university, the police deployed in the university area, and administrative staff of the university.

“If we apply it in our daily life, we will have a multiplier effect”

Amanuel Abdi, 24, was a student of Law in Gondar University and earned LLB in Law in June 2019. When he returned to Dodola after he participated in the dialogue process in 2018, he shared all his new knowledge and discoveries with his parents. The conversation was an eye opener for his father, just as it had been for himself.

“I knew about dialogue as exchange of ideas between two persons, but I did not know the proper meaning of having dialogue. After meeting PDC and LPI and joining SD I know it is something that goes beyond that.”

Amanuel Abdi, Gondar University

He believes young people apply and share any other valuable lessons they learn, which to him justifies investing in youth and offering them dialogue trainings. “If we apply it in our daily life, we will have a multiplier effect,” he said. He added that “we young people are very open minded and passionate, which makes us invaluable multipliers when we are convinced about the importance of something, dialogue in this case.” Amanuel, an active peace incubatee, thinks that if people knew more about dialogue, conflicts in Ethiopia and beyond could be mitigated, both at work and family level. “Daily situations would not escalate. Dialogue is something we all need. Even coming from the same culture, we have different ways of perceiving things, but we have to try to understand the other, see the two different sides, and come to a common ground”.

Amanuel was trained by LPI as a peace incubatee in August 2019 in Addis Ababa. He praises LPI’s engagement with the youth and he refers to the peace incubation program as one that, “is really practical for our ages, not just theory but including practice to explain and take the dialogue off campus”. In his peace incubation project, he engaged in a very enriching dialogue with different youth participants in Dodola town, hard hit by the most ethnically tinged conflict that caused the killings of 86 peoples from 23 to 25 October 2019 in Oromia region. “Sustained Dialogue means a lot to me personally because of the ways it allowed me to connect with other students on campus and gave me a platform where I could make meaningful change in my life. The peace work is something I will continue to take part throughout my life,” he says.

“It is better to get the dialogue skills while you are young”

Temesgen Yihunie, 24, was a student in Bahir Dar University actively participating in SD Project since he joined the university in 2017. He graduated in Economics in June 2019. As an SD graduate, he understands conflict as a day to day happening. “I can now easily identify its stages and how to deal with it,” he explains. He can also see now how to apply dialogue to real life situations as he already experienced it in implementing his peace projects in hometown. When serving as SD moderator in Bahir Dar University, it was motivating for him to see the faces of surprise of SD participants when they understand how easily they can avoid conflict escalations through the use of dialogue. “It feels really good to see that when I facilitate dialogue sessions. Also, some participants approach me saying they know how they can help to manage some problems. I can

already see in some of them the seeds of a dialogical person,” he says.

Temesgen believes many current conflicts occurred here and there in the country could have been avoided through dialogue at an initial stage. And at the same time, he believes dialogue ambassadors are created at an early stage in life. For him, it is particularly important to train young people in dialogue for peace. “When you are young, your problem in reality is not so big. And if you learn to handle conflict from the very beginning, it will go with you through the years. When you become an adult, conflicts will not come to the stage of violence or be left unresolved. Later you become less flexible, less open. Afterwards, it is difficult to change behaviours and minds. If you want a dialogical person, it is better to get the skills while you are a younger”, he adds. He mentions that some students become involved in politics or have influential positions later in life. By providing them with dialogue skills, he argues, they are being prepared to take a place on higher stages of national and international significance.



Panel Discussion at Jimma University

# LEADERSHIP AND ADMINISTRATION

## Perspectives from Jimma, Ambo and Gondar Universities

For the university administration, SD is a positive contribution to not only maintaining the peace of the university atmosphere but also in ensuring that universities – where many of the young leaders of Ethiopia are shaped – stay as places of academic as well as personal transformation.

**Kenenisa Lemi, Vice President of Administration and Student Service of Jimma University,** notes how the 2019/20 academic year was one of the most turbulent for universities in Ethiopia. Ethnic and religious clashes broke out among students in many universities. Lives were lost and properties were destroyed. He notes that the problems faced by Jimma University were minimal compared to other universities: “Even though there were some hiccups, no student was killed in our university.” He believes SD has contributed to this and would like for Jimma University to fully own SD, allocate budget and scale it up to include students in other campuses of the university and also postgraduate, evening and weekend students in SD.

**Solomon Alemu, who is a Student Service Director at Ambo University and Focal Person for SD,** concurs. He says that ethnic or religious conflicts which are mainly caused by lack of understanding and tolerance, are common in the university. He appreciates SD’s indispensable role in getting students to get to know each other: “SD participants were recruited from all ethnic and religious groups, including students with disabilities. The fact that they can discuss various issues that matter to them, has helped address misunderstandings and encourage students to deal with their differences through dialogue.” Further, in his observation: “SD participants are less susceptible to politically charged messaging and campaigns of politicians or activists outside the university who want to instrumentalise the students and mobilise them for their own agenda.” With Ambo University being the latest addition to LPI and PDC’s selection of universities, Solomon is only sorry that the university itself hadn’t thought of SD before it was introduced by LPI and PDC.

Like Jimma University, the management of the Ambo University is willing to expand it to other campuses besides the main campus and take ownership of the project.

The message is similar from the Gondar University leadership. **Getachew Meskeleqal, Head of the President’s Office at Gondar University** affirms that even though it is not easy to transform students and introduce them to a new way of life, there is substantial evidence that participants of SD show signs of behavioral changes and prioritise dialogue. Participants of SD and members of the Peace Forum have stayed away from conflicts which arose in the university. Instead, they engage in mediating between students who had taken sides in conflicts. They also extended help to students who sustained injuries during the conflicts. From his point of view, the SD project has played a crucial role in making the teaching-learning process peaceful.

The observations of university administrators that SD participants tend to resist pressure and positively influence those around them is one that SD participants themselves have shared with LPI and PDC. In one interview, an active opinion leader and SD participant in Gondar University shared this story:

“This year, there was one instance that one of the students who had the same ethnic background with me was suspended from campus for beating another student who belongs to a different ethnic group. Students in my group thought and some even asked me that I should challenge the university administration to revert its decision since I am working as a Head of Campus Student Police. However, my answer was clear to them that I would not cooperate with such things just because he belongs to my group and told them my firm stand that anyone who commits unlawful acts should be punished for what he did as per the rule of the university, and we should rather denounce ethnic-based conflict and promote a culture of dialogue for peaceful co-existence. Following my firm rational stand, many of the students in my group now believe in having dialogue and I want to continue some of the best practices I acquired from SD to influence more people in my circle of life.”



# THE RIPPLE EFFECT OF SUSTAINED DIALOGUE

Belayneh Mazengiaw is the SD Coordinator for LPI's Ethiopia Programme, and has seen the SD process grow over time, particularly with the innovation of the peace incubation implemented in communities.

“Sustained Dialogue has been important for me because it brings together groups of diverse students for honest, open dialogues about issues that matter.”

Belayneh Mazengiaw, SD Coordinator, LPI Ethiopia Programme

“Group members determine their own agenda, and each meeting builds on the previous one, with the purpose of improving strained relationships. I can also see the importance of SD by the significant results it achieved. It succeeded in creating spaces the students (with diversity of interests and backgrounds) did not have, for talking and thinking together about their challenges, campus, local and national issues. It also produced other incremental benefits at the individual and inter-personal levels such as defusing of tension, reducing violence, allowing them to meet people they wouldn't usually spend time with, hearing different perspectives and learn about others' experiences, cultures and beliefs as well as building skills in dialogue and conflict management. SD can also be used as a learning aid to inculcate the values of democracy amongst students and youth, helping them relate positively to those who are ethnically and religiously different than themselves.

Another key and exciting activity of the Sustained Dialogue Project was Peace Incubation, with the aim of providing space for innovation of young peacebuilding leader. After the SD, they were supported to spread the message of dialogue off campus by addressing pertinent social issues and promote social cohesion in their home communities. In this process, young people were supported with resources, time, and technical accompaniment to develop their own ideas for action and to see how their personal change as a result of participating in dialogue can have a positive influence on tensions and conflict dynamics in their communities. The number of students participating in Peace Incubation projects has increased over the past few years, with diverse project ideas ranging from addressing revenge killing practices through community dialogue to promotion of unity, peace, and reconciliation among different ethnic groups through conferences, panel discussions and using arts and sports. The number of promising practices witnessed from the small, but successful, Peace Incubation projects suggests the importance of enhancing the peacebuilding knowledge and skills of young people and actively engaging them to build a momentum for peace and nonviolence in their communities. Peace Incubation as an activity has reinforced what is already well known – that when young people are allowed to create and run their own initiatives, they grow as leaders in their communities.

The strength of Sustained Dialogue lies in its flexibility and simplicity – dialogue and peacebuilding action that is led by the youth themselves. The personal transformation I have witnessed among the individuals taking part and within the dialogue groups, creates ripples which expand into the broader university campuses and communities.”



## PUTTING SD IN PERSPECTIVE

### Ayten Birhanie's Story of Implementing SD for 10 Years

Ayten Birhanie is the Executive Director of PDC. He remembers how the SD Project started in Addis Ababa University 2009, why it was scaled to the other universities and what SD has meant for thousands of students that participated in it.

“When I joined PDC, I was appointed to administer the SD Project. Considering the peace condition of the universities at the time, we knew universities needed strategic peacebuilding engagement. At the time, conflicts would start at Addis Ababa University and then spread to the other universities. We started with 120 students at Addis Ababa and we saw some changes – but of course we are not the only ones that contributed to the change. We phased out of Addis Ababa University in 2012.

We then realised that other universities like Ambo, Haramaya, Gondar, and Jimma are becoming conflict hotspots. We identified those universities for the SD intervention and hoped to effect the same positive change we saw at Addis Ababa University. Considering there are 40 universities in Ethiopia, this is still a modest beginning, we do see the need to engage with other universities besides the ones we have been working with.

Our main goal with SD is to see students from different ethnic and religious backgrounds sit together for dialogue, to resolve tensions. According to our research findings, we have succeeded in striking conversations and fostering understanding among students who show mistrust towards each other. We do not underestimate the fact that, because of SD, students from different religious and ethnic identities now sit together, at least twice a month, to resolve their differences through dialogue. Considering the context, this is a remarkable success for us.

We have about over ten thousand SD graduates from Addis Ababa, Ambo, Haramaya, Jimma, Gondar, and Bahir Dar universities. They have learned to use dialogue through SD – which I'm confident they are applying in their jobs. That is a great achievement for us.”While these stories shed light on how SD has helped shift attitudes and relationships of participating students and how this has a promising trickle-down effect on broader inter-group relations on campus – one wonders what those that have participated in SD took with them to the next chapters of their lives.

# SUSTAINING THE DIALOGUE AFTER UNIVERSITY

## The story of Yibeltal Assefa: From SD Participant to SD Coordinator and now the President of the SD Alumni Association

Yibeltal used to participate in SD when he was a student at AAU. The SD Project has significantly impacted his life:

“To begin with, it has helped me let go of my assumptions about various ethnic and religious groups and find out the truth. It has helped me see that they too had the same biases about me as I had about them.”

Yibeltal Assefa, President, SD Alumni Association

Yibeltal says SD has also helped him make friends with people from all over Ethiopia, and to travel outside of Ethiopia to participate in experience sharing programmes.

Though trained in law, Yibeltal’s SD journey has led him to peacebuilding. He currently works as a Project Manager at PDC. Yibeltal feels that Ethiopia needs SD now more so than ever before. So many others who have gone through SD thought the same, but didn’t really quite know how to act on their SD spirit.

Between 2018 to 2019, Yibeltal, together with former SD participants, formed an SD Alumni Association. The alumni have members drawn from various disciplines and professions who are enhancing their participation in peacebuilding and Sustained Dialogue. The main objective of the association is to take SD beyond the universities and into communities at large: “The youth ought to sensitise other concerned bodies and influence the community to believe in dialogue; to prevent conflicts before they arise; to bring about a speedy resolution if they do arise,” Yibeltal says.

Considering over 15,000 people have participated in SD in the past decade, the Alumni Association has the potential to mobilise thousands of former SD participants, now professionals from different sectors. Yibeltal believes that they will be able to contribute to early conflict resolution and peacebuilding in the country.

# CHAPTER 3

## Challenges

While SD is widely and positively received by students and the university leadership across the five universities, the project has had its own ups and downs. As part of their peacebuilding practice and to ensure effective project implementation, PDC and LPI closely followed the implementation of the SD across universities. They engaged in regular reflections to troubleshoot problems, identify cross-cutting challenges, and address persistent problems to ensure SD remains relevant and adaptive to the peacebuilding needs of the universities.

This section covers some of those challenges and lessons learnt across 10 years of implementing SD in Ethiopian universities.

## Getting Buy-in, Launching and Adapting SD

Although SD is quite popular with the university leadership now, getting buy in from universities back in 2013 where the project expanded to reach universities outside of Addis Ababa wasn’t easy. Given the sensitivity of ‘identity’ some universities resisted the idea of a project that brought together students from different backgrounds for dialogue on contested issues. This required continuous consultation and engagement between LPI and PDC and the leadership of universities to convince them of the effectiveness of SD. Luckily, the success of SD in Addis Ababa University helped open doors as it gave universities confidence in the SD methodology.

But the challenge didn’t end there. Ayten Birhanie of PDC, who has been overseeing the implementation of SD since 2009, remembers the process fairly well. He says “... once we gained access into the universities, some politically motivated students were trying to keep others from coming to the dialogue. We tackled this particular challenge by identifying and involving the politically motivated students to become part of SD. This is because we understood that influencing such young leaders would have a multiplier effect as those leaders have influence, and if transformed themselves, can then positively influence their followers.”

Another key challenge has been interruption of SD due to instability and intense violence at the universities which led to university closures or suspension of SD for security reasons. There were many conflicts in the universities, and there were instances where students died, which made it difficult to continue the project. PDC and LPI had to carefully navigate during such difficult times, to ensure that the project continued to do no harm and build peace in changing contexts.

## Negotiating the Neutrality and Ownership of the SD Project

Considering SD is implemented in the universities as a peacebuilding tool, maintaining impartiality and inclusiveness of the process is of utmost importance for LPI and PDC. Once SD took root in the universities and demonstrated its effectiveness, questions around ownership and leadership of the project started to emerge. One particular challenge was the contestation for ownership between the Peace Forum and Student Unions in Ambo, Jimma and Haramaya universities. The Peace Forums are recently established by the government, tasked with peace promotion in each university. They are students-led and are directly accountable to the university leadership. This makes Peace Forums strategic peace actors in Ethiopian universities. However, because these forums were set up by the government and were previously run by students with affiliation to the governing party there are concerns around the inclusivity of the Peace Forums .

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In 2018, contestation for ownership of SD between the Student Union and the Peace Forum grew so intense in Jimma University, that PDC had to cancel a SD kick-off event. Throughout 2018, PDC and LPI engaged with the university administration to reach a compromise. The Peace Forums would take on coordinating roles – set as a precondition for engagement by the universities – while the leadership of the Student Union are included in the trainings offered alongside SD, to ensure a wider student buy-in for the project. This remains an evolving and delicate matter for PDC and LPI as balancing the relationship between the Peace Forum and the Student Union as well as ensuring the support Peace Forums provide to SD is conducted in impartially and with a conflict sensitive lens.

## Challenges of Inclusion

One of the key peacebuilding principles employed in SD is inclusion of diverse voices and experiences. LPI and PDC carry out the selection of SD participants carefully to ensure intersectional diversity. Since 2013, the SD project has intentionally engaged female students to ensure there is gender balance in every SD group and at least one of the two group moderators per group is a young woman. Key informant interviews with female moderators confirmed that they felt the role ‘empowered’ them to develop their interpersonal, communication and leadership capabilities. In a focus group discussion among young women, participants confirmed that the presence of female moderators in their dialogue group helped them to feel safer to speak freely.

However, when taking an intersectional look at gender inclusion, the SD has not been able to reach Muslim women as much as it would have liked to. Further, when it comes to add-on activities such as the competitive Peace Incubation process launched in 2018, women participated in the early phases of the competition, but

none of their projects made it to the final stages of selection . This was later addressed in the 2019 peace incubation.

## Language as a Barrier and Bridge for Communication

Students predominantly rely on the Amharic language to conduct SD session. While Amharic is widely spoken in Ethiopia and it is a working language of federal institutions in the country, it is not spoken equally well by all participants. This presents both a challenge and an opportunity. On the one hand, lack of proficiency in Amharic can be a barrier from active participation for those who don’t speak it well. Yet, in cases where this is a challenge, multilingual SD participants step in to translate between languages. This in itself leads to collaboration among students as they try to help each other follow the discussion. On the other hand, the fact that there is a difference in language proficiency incentivises students to adapt their communication and focus on being understood, rather than on being heard.

## Misconceptions About the SD: Religious or Political Mission

SD not only brings together participants from a diversity of backgrounds, including religious backgrounds, but it also creates safe spaces for conversations on sensitive issues if brought up by participants. At times, these conversations are about religion and also political orientation. Religious identity is of utmost importance in Ethiopia and people are often uncomfortable discussing politics . Moreover, due to shifting civil society space in Ethiopia , open dialogue and discussion – particularly on sensitive issues is uncommon – even at universities which are known to be spaces for intellectual inquiry. The openness in the Sustained

Dialogue process to discuss political and religious differences in such a setting has at times created a misconception among the wider student population that it promotes an anti-religious agenda or that it also is politically motivated. The latter perception has significantly improved over the years due to awareness raising and peace actions which reach out the wider university community. The transitional political context in Ethiopia could have contributed to this improvement. However, PDC and LPI continue to explore ways of dispelling misconceptions through effective communication and transparent processes.



## WHERE TO GO FROM HERE?

The latest round of the SD Project implemented by LPI and PDC, with the financial support of USAID and Sida, came to an end in 2020. But this doesn't mean the end of SD. Both the leadership of the respective universities and also the lead project implementers PDC and LPI are committed to continuing the SD beyond 2020.

“We started with 120 students in Addis Ababa University. That was a very small number, but the result was very positive. When we phased out of AAU in 2012, the project continued and was taken over by the Peace Club. We struck a deal with the leadership of the university to ensure budget would be allocated to the project and that this budget would be completely managed by the students. And the students have been managing it since then. I think it's a great achievement for us that we managed to systematically ensure the sustainability of the project.

Now we have 600 students who sit together for dialogue twice a month, in five universities, and we see how that has had an impact. But there are forty universities in Ethiopia and we still have a lot of work to do to have impact at the national level. The project must grow in both scope and coverage. For example, so far, SD is only open to students. We are planning to involve teachers, the administrative staff, and the community near the campuses. We are also thinking of setting up systems in every university for conflict early warning and rapid response. We also hope to set up a peer-to-peer mediation system in which trained students can, for example, mediate conflicts between students and resolve tensions before such interpersonal conflicts evolve into inter-group conflict.

With regards to coverage, at the moment we are working with just five universities which have expressed keen interest to allocate budget on their own and take over the project. Therefore, we are discussing plans with LPI to take the project to other universities.” Ayten Birhanie, Executive Director, PDC.

The universities have shown great enthusiasm for owning the project and have shared their willingness to allocate budget to it and run it on their own. LPI and PDC welcome this and are ready to accompany the process from a distance, for methodological backstopping and to ensure that the essence of SD as a participatory peacebuilding tool is kept intact. This section presents the vision and future plans the universities, PDC and LPI have for SD in Ethiopia.

The universities have expressed their willingness to allocate budget to SD and ensure its implementation when LPI and PDC end their engagement. They are also interested in taking it to their other campuses as they have pledged their support to both SD and also peace education more generally in various other ways. In 2018, for example, Haramaya and Jimma universities dedicated plots of land to be identified as ‘Peace Parks’ where students can conduct their SD sessions and where the wider university community can sit and discuss societal issues. Bahir Dar and Gondar university administrations publicly pledged to “own” the SD Project after its phase-out. Gondar University also plans to launch a curriculum on peace education. This shows that the universities are committed and have strong sense of ownership to the project, but pledges remain to be turned in practical support.

**Kenenisa Lemi, Vice President of Administration and Student Service of Jimma University** says Jimma University's commitment to take over the SD is evident. He says, “the university had already decided to carry out the project on its own, we had allocated the necessary budgets and had plans to scale it up and implement it in other campuses of Jimma University. We had also wanted to open it up for postgraduate, evening and weekend students to participate in SD. Our plans were interrupted due to instability in the country and also COVID-19.”

Like Jimma University, the leadership of Ambo University is ready to not only take over the project, but to also expand it to other campuses besides the main campus. **Tadesse Kenea, President of Ambo University**, says, “SD was instrumental in developing the culture of tolerance and empathy towards others in Ambo University. Therefore, we are ready to ensure the continuity of the project under the leadership of the Peace Forum of Ambo University. We have plans to take SD to the other campuses and even to the community outside campuses.”

In Gondar University, **Abay Gelanew Dean of Students**, says the university sees the potential of SD in promoting peace through dialogue. Inspired by this and to complement the value add of SD, he says Gondar University is planning to launch a curriculum on peace.

**In conclusion**, all of these testimonies from the universities are testaments to the tangible impact Sustained Dialogue has had on students and also Ethiopian campuses writ large. Sustained Dialogue becomes ever more relevant in Ethiopian universities where identity-based conflicts persist, yet ten years of Sustained Dialogue implementation demonstrates time and again, the transformative power of dialogue.

While Sustained Dialogue is implemented in universities and addresses relational conflicts therein, several identity-based inter-group violent incidents have been recorded across the country in the past few years. Inter-group tensions are growing and increasingly mediating social, economic and political interactions among individuals and peoples in Ethiopia at all levels. If there is one conclusion to be drawn from the evolution of the social and political environment in Ethiopia in the recent past, it is that dialogue is needed across the country and at different levels.

Therefore, LPI and PDC welcome the universities' plans to scale and expand Sustained Dialogue as a peacebuilding model. LPI and PDC have also taken note of the increasing linkages between conflict dynamics

within the universities and those in the immediate environs of the universities. In order to amplify the transformational power of Sustained Dialogue beyond the university, LPI and PDC are considering a 'whole of university' approach in which they hope to engage the university 'ecosystem' as a whole: the students, administration, and communities outside of the universities and across the country as a whole.



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