



HIRAAD INSTITUTE
for Public Policy Studies



RESEARCH PAPER

Ethiopia's National Dialogue Commission: Prospects for the Somali Region

An assessment of awareness, historical grievances, and pathways to a more inclusive and effective national dialogue process.



Abstract

Ethiopia's National Dialogue Commission (ENDC) was established in December 2021, at the height of the war between the federal government and Tigrayan forces, with a three-year mandate to forge national consensus on the country's most divisive issues. As the Commission enters its participant- and agenda-selection phase, this paper examines its prospects for the Somali Region — a region shaped by distinct socio-political dynamics, historical grievances, and inter-ethnic relations. Using a mixed-methods design combining a 316-respondent survey, key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and policy document analysis, the study assesses (1) the Commission's prospects in the Somali Region, (2) its capacity to address the region's historical grievances, and (3) what would be needed for the dialogue to produce fruitful results.

Findings show strong regional ownership of the dialogue in principle, but low awareness, weak trust, and significant doubt that Somali priorities will be meaningfully addressed — concerns rooted in the region's experience with prior unresolved grievances. The paper concludes with recommendations to strengthen communication, representation, transparency, and implementation, arguing that the Commission's legitimacy in the Somali Region will be determined by its execution rather than its mandate alone.

Keywords: National dialogue; Ethiopia; Somali Region; peacebuilding; historical grievances; political transition

1. Introduction

National dialogues provide an inclusive, broad, and participatory official negotiation format that can help resolve political crises and guide countries through political transitions. Unlike traditional elite negotiations, national dialogues seek to broaden participation by incorporating political actors, civil society, and historically excluded groups into processes of consensus-building and institutional reform.

In December 2021, at the height of the war between Ethiopia's federal government and Tigrayan forces, authorities established a National Dialogue Commission to resolve differences of opinion on fundamental issues and forge a "national consensus." The Federal Parliament appointed eleven commissioners in February 2022, and a National Advisory Council was established in May 2023. The Somali Region's distinct socio-political history raises open questions about how well the Commission is positioned to engage the region on its own terms.

1.4 Research Objectives

- To examine the prospects of the National Dialogue Commission for the Somali Region.
- To assess its position in addressing the historical grievances of the region.
- To analyse what can be done to make the dialogue bear fruitful results for the region.

2. Methodology

This paper employed a mixed-methods research design to examine the prospects of Ethiopia's National Dialogue for the Somali Region. Primary data were collected through qualitative interviews and focus group discussions with elites, traditional leaders, government employees, and civil society representatives, alongside a quantitative survey (n = 316) assessing public perceptions of the dialogue process. Secondary data were obtained through a review of relevant policy documents, legal frameworks, Commission reports, and existing literature. Data were analysed using thematic analysis for qualitative findings, descriptive statistical analysis for the quantitative data, and document and policy analysis to assess the institutional context.

3. Findings

3.1 Prospects of the Commission for the Somali Region

Based on 316 respondents, the findings show a generally varied level of awareness and limited clarity, related partly to a coordination team perceived as unfamiliar with the Somali context and operating largely through translation, and partly to an information gap between urban elites and woreda-level residents. Perceptions of importance were very high — nearly all respondents viewed the dialogue as highly relevant to the Somali Region, suggesting strong regional ownership.

"It's for the first time in the history of Ethiopia that we are experiencing a nationwide dialogue to address past mistakes and grievances. If handled properly, the Somali region can benefit from it, given the political repression and the long-overdue historical grievances we have." — Key Informant Interview

Expectations of positive outcomes were more limited, with most respondents uncertain or skeptical. Implementation confidence was also weak, as most respondents doubted that outcomes would be effectively put into practice.

3.2 The Commission's Position on Historical Grievances

Historical grievances are broadly understood as interconnected issues, primarily involving social justice, economic development, and political representation, and further encompassing human rights, inclusion, service delivery, security, federal arrangements, and identity. A majority of respondents (63.64%) doubt that Somali core agendas will receive adequate attention in the dialogue, while a smaller minority (34.01%) considered the Commission's activities irrelevant to the needs of the Somali community.

"Our expectations are mostly linked to whether the Somali region's agendas will be seriously addressed or not. Considering past experiences like the land and border referendums, where we were unfairly treated, we are afraid of experiencing a similar trend." — Key Informant Interview

3.3 Pathways to Fruitful Results

Nearly half of respondents (49.6%) are uncomfortable with the Commission's current procedures, and the overwhelming majority (94.58%) express concern about risks to the dialogue's success — chiefly low trust, political interference, weak inclusiveness, and poor communication. Respondents' priorities for strengthening the process are clear: stronger implementation mechanisms, inclusive participation, and transparency and accountability.

Survey Indicator (n = 316)	Result
Express concern about risks to the dialogue's success	94.58%
Prioritize stronger implementation mechanisms	88.77%
Doubt Somali agendas will be seriously addressed	63.64%
Report trust in the process	54.86%
Perceive the process as transparent	52.87%

4. Recommendations

1 · Strengthen Awareness & Communication

Clear, consistent, accessible messaging through local media, community leaders, and public platforms.

3 · Enhance Relevance to Local Needs

Integrate Somali regional priorities into the dialogue agenda.

5 · Strengthen Implementation

Clear institutional frameworks with defined responsibilities and timelines.

2 · Ensure Inclusive Participation

Meaningfully include elders, women, youth, and marginalized communities.

4 · Build Trust & Transparency

Transparent selection and decision-making, backed by public reporting and monitoring.

6 · Strengthen Political Support

A stable political environment that reduces interference and preserves credibility.

7 · Engage External Support Strategically

International technical support and monitoring, kept neutral and secondary to local ownership.

5. Conclusion

Ethiopia's National Dialogue Commission arrives in the Somali Region carrying genuine goodwill and high expectations, but also inherited skepticism from past unresolved grievances. Whether it becomes a turning point or another missed opportunity will depend less on its mandate than on its execution — on whether the Commission communicates clearly, represents the region fairly, and follows through on what it agrees.