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Original Article

Re-imagining the Role of Higher Education Institutions in Inclusive National Dialogue in Ethiopia: Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract - Ethiopia's quest for a politically sustainable and peaceful order that could harmonize its deep-rooted diversity with a shared national identity is, arguably, the major issue that defines the country in the 21st century. This article *proposes* that an inclusive national dialogue is a necessary step in achieving *the objectives* of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), *which* have the distinct yet overlooked capability to drive such a process. This comprehensive article draws on the components of an integrative literature review to bridge the gap between *the* various historical, political, and educational aspects of the problem. The authors suppose that the evolution of Ethiopian universities and colleges through the stages of imperial elitism, Marxist-Leninist politicization, and ethno-federal massification has, on the one hand, created a heritage of limited autonomy and, on the other hand, a distrust of society; thus, currently, these institutions are unable to realize their civic potential. Nevertheless, *HEIs can overcome these barriers by adopting the "civic university" model*. *This study* singles out four deeply interrelated functions as central: acting as impartial venues for communication, providers of knowledge based on research, instructors of the public's new responsibilities, and the most loyal critics of the whole undertaking. Such a transformation is contingent on the formation of a new social contract, necessitating purposeful *action* by multiple stakeholders. The paper ends with a schematic model of leadership in HEIs, which can guide and prepare them for such a change. The article proposes recommendations *for* the leadership of the university, teaching staff, students, government, and international collaborators. *This* suggests that such an approach is like democratically energizing the very core and nature of Ethiopia.

Keywords - Ethiopia, Higher Education, National Dialogue, Civic University, Academic Autonomy, Peacebuilding.

1. Introduction

The question of what keeps a polity united has been a long-standing concern for both Ethiopian thinkers and everyday citizens. Growing up in a system that both celebrates ethnic diversity and undermines political unity, I've often wondered if our institutions especially our universities are truly prepared to help us navigate this complex situation. Ethiopia's recent history presents a real paradox: while the 1991 Constitution's ethnic federalism was a sincere attempt to address the country's diversity, scholars like Aalen (2011) and Abbink (2011) have pointed out that it never evolved into a genuine social contract. Instead, it fostered competition, normalized displacement, and created a crisis of national identity. When the political opening in 2018 sparked hopes for change, the subsequent civil war and ongoing communal violence revealed just how fragile a political system based on superficial agreement can be. The National Dialogue Commission, emerging from this turmoil, shows a willingness to listen but as Lederach (1997) cautions, dialogues that only involve elite negotiations seldom lead to lasting peace.

In this uncertain landscape, I find the core argument of this article. My main point is that Ethiopian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have been stuck in an unsustainable position for far too long: either acting as critical

opponents of the state or being used as tools for regime stability. This binary situation, born from years of mutual distrust and limited independence (Wagaw, 1990), has left universities ill-prepared to support the country during its most fragmented times. However, I believe this is the perfect opportunity to rethink their role. Instead of viewing universities as threats to be controlled or isolated towers, I suggest we recognize them as vital civic infrastructure spaces where a fragile democracy can learn to engage in dialogue, debate, and healing.

Building on the civic university model proposed by Goddard and Vallance (2013), I delve into how Ethiopian higher education institutions (HEIs) can play a vital role in fostering an inclusive national dialogue in four specific ways: by serving as neutral facilitators for tough conversations; acting as guardians of evidence and thorough research; providing training in the skills necessary for democratic engagement; and functioning as public watchdogs that can hold those in power accountable without being overwhelmed by it. These roles aren't just lofty ideals; they stem from the belief that universities, reflecting the country's diverse demographics (Saint, 2004), are in a unique position to exemplify the pluralism that the dialogue process aims to achieve.

To guide this exploration, I've organized the article around four key questions. First, I inquire how the historical and political development of Ethiopian HEIs has influenced and sometimes limited their ability to foster inclusive discussions. Next, I look into the current challenges that hinder this civic shift. Third, I assess the strategic strengths and untapped potential within these institutions that could be harnessed for this purpose. Finally, and perhaps most ambitiously, I ponder what types of multi-stakeholder frameworks could turn this redefined role into practical action, keeping the Sustainable Development Goals in mind as both a perspective and a tool. In the following sections, I'll first place this study within the relevant literature, then describe the integrative review methodology that supports the analysis. The later sections will outline the historical and current dimensions of the issue before exploring future possibilities and reimagined opportunities. I'll wrap up by suggesting a strategic framework not as a rigid plan, but as an invitation to collaboratively envision what Ethiopian universities could evolve into.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Civic University in Divided and Polarized Societies

The university's traditional model focuses mainly on the academic freedom of teachers and students. However, it has evolved to include the "third mission" of societal engagement (Goddard & Vallance, 2013). The "civic university" model suggests that universities are not independent institutions. They are connected to their social, economic, and political contexts and have a responsibility to support society. At the end of any post-conflict society or any highly polarized society, these institutions would play an incredibly vital role as servants to their respective societies. That is to say, "universities can act as 'zones of contact' – as spaces where contacts occur between individuals with different backgrounds." This type of sustainable relationship can help minimize prejudice, as it is related to and aligned with Allport's (1954) Contact Hypothesis. As Davies (2018) indicated, universities can be transformed into analytical hubs, providing solid, well-rounded research to inform public policy directions and turn ideological and hypothetical debates into evidence-based, reasoned discussions. Universities can act as centers of skill incubators; they can equip and produce future leaders and familiarize citizens with critical thinking skills, ethical reasoning, and the ability to engage in decision-making activities (Zembylas, 2018).

2.2. National Dialogue: Theory and Practice

National dialogue is different from peace negotiations led by elite groups, as it encompasses diverse issues of the community of a given country. According to the United Nations (2020), it is an open and inclusive political process driven by the nation. It aims to achieve a consensus on the causes of conflict and the way forward for constitutional, political, and social reforms. The key features of this dialogue include broad participation, ensuring that voices are heard beyond the political elite, addressing fundamental issues such as past grievances and identity-based exclusion, and creating a new social contract for the future (McCandless et al., 2015). Successful examples include post-apartheid talks in South Africa and the post-2011 national dialogue quartet in Tunisia. In these cases, the importance of impartial and credible facilitation and broad civil participation is emphasized (Kumar 2017).

2.3. The Legacy of Politicization of Ethiopian Higher Education: A Scholarly Consensus

A review of Ethiopian higher education institutions by various scholars reveals a recurrent theme of state control. Bahiru Zewde (2001) describes how Haile Selassie used the establishment of the University College in Addis Ababa to create a Western-trained bureaucratic elite insulated from the rest of the population. During the Derg regime (1974-1991), ideological indoctrination intensified in parallel with severe repression, resulting in the curtailment of academic freedom to a drastic degree (Wagaw, 1990). The EPRDF era (1991-2018) included broad access to education under the mass education policy, but it also maintained strict political control over the school system and curriculum, which was in line with its ideology (Ashcroft, 2010). Both Assefa (2022) and Semel (2014) argue that the history of these institutions is such that it is vulnerable to self-censorship and reflects the ethnic divisions existing within society and among students.

2.4. Gap in the Literature

There is substantial research on Ethiopia's political conflicts and the history of its universities. However, few studies have connected local universities to political conflicts or considered their role in national peacebuilding dialogue. This study aims to address this gap by combining these reviews to propose a new, locally relevant action framework.

3. Methodology

This study used the integrative literature review structure described by Torraco (2016). This approach is effective in creating a new model or framework by examining, reviewing, and synthesizing relevant literature on the subject coherently. This is not a meta-analysis but aims to provide a global understanding of a complex issue, in this case, the interface between higher education and national dialogue in Ethiopia, to provide new insights and perspectives.

Data collection: Systematic searches of academic databases such as Scopus, JSTOR, and Google Scholar were conducted, as well as archiving of major policy institutions such as the World Bank and UNESCO. The search terms included combinations of the words Ethiopian higher education, university politicization, civic university, national dialogue, peace education, academic freedom Africa, and ethnic conflicts.

4. Analysis and Findings: Part I: - The Constrained Inheritor

4.1. A Legacy of Instrumentalization

Ethiopian higher education institutions face significant challenges in acting as neutral and credible facilitators of national dialogue, largely because of their historical background. They are viewed as extensions of state projects, which limits their autonomy and creates institutional uncertainties. Universities during the Imperial Era (1950-1974) were not seen as independent centers of knowledge but rather as tools of the central state, designed primarily to educate and indoctrinate a small, influential class that would support the imperial bureaucracy (Zewde, 2001). This model established a tradition that positioned universities as distant from the majority of rural people, framing their role as serving the regime rather than engaging with societal needs.

The Marxist-Leninist Derg regime (1974-1991) further deepened the instrumental role of universities. While the number of institutions and students increased, this expansion came at the cost of academic freedom and intellectual dishonesty. The curriculum was forcibly changed to promote ideological indoctrination through "Marxist-Leninist Formation." Educational spaces became sites of surveillance and oppression, especially during the "Red Terror," which marked the peak of repression (Wagaw, 1990). Dissent was suppressed, and a climate of fear took root, making independent thought dangerous.

The subsequent EPRDF period (1991-2018) introduced a complicated chapter characterized by conflicting policies of massification and increased control. The number of universities grew from two to over 40, significantly increasing student enrollment (Ashcroft 2010). However, the ruling party tightly managed this growth through its youth league and campus security to ensure political conformity. The ethno-federal political system has influenced the location and governance of universities, leading to instruction in regional languages and the promotion of local language education. While this expanded access, Semela (2014) points out that it also threatens national academic discourse, further entrenching existing ethnic divisions among students. During this period, social science and humanities research and

teaching were often expected to support the ruling party's "developmental state" narrative. Consequently, Ethiopian HEIs were "constrained inheritors," bearing the weight of a history marked by elitist detachment, oppressive governance, and politically enforced ethnic fragmentation. This legacy fundamentally undermines their perceived and operational neutrality, casting a long shadow over their ability to facilitate crucial discussions in a divided country.

4.2. Contemporary Multi-Level Challenges

The weight of history does not fade away; instead, it manifests as a complex array of visible challenges that slow the civic potential of Ethiopian higher-education institutions (HEIs). A significant barrier at the political and institutional levels is the loss of autonomy, although some reforms are being carried out at the university level. This loss has far-reaching effects on the country. While autonomy is mentioned in the educational policy, the Ministry of Education controls various aspects of university life, such as budgets, key leadership appointments, and curricular frameworks, in an imbalanced way (World Bank, 2019). Consequently, university leaders are often selected for their political loyalty rather than their academic vision. This leads to governance that is risk-averse and lacks the capacity to support necessary, controversial debates. Consequently, a pervasive culture of self-censorship has emerged in universities. Faculty members, after enduring decades of oppression, have learned to steer clear of sensitive topics as a strategy for professional survival (Assefa 2022). The environment suppresses independent critical thinking, which is crucial for engaging in informed dialogue. Moreover, campuses have often mirrored and intensified social divisions, becoming hotspots for ethnic-based violence, hate speech and polarization. This situation undermines any assertion that universities are "neutral" or safe spaces; they are typically viewed as the origins of the conflicts that dialogue aims to resolve.

Political factors restricting free speech intersect with long-standing cultural traits and resource-related challenges. Chronic underfunding has led to increased student numbers per class, dwindling library resources, and minimal budgets for original research (Saint 2004). This makes organizing dialogues, public forums, and rigorous policy research prohibitively expensive for institutions that struggle to meet their basic operational needs. Educationally, the prevailing method remains a top-down, lecture-focused approach, often labelled the "banking" model of education (Freire, 1970). This model emphasizes memorization over critical thinking, constructive debate, and participatory skills, which are essential for promoting dialogic culture. Furthermore, a serious "brain drain" weakens the institutional capacity. Talented scholars leave to seek better opportunities abroad because of low salaries and political pressures (Gebre, 2017). This has created a gap in critical thinking at local universities and placed additional pressure on the remaining faculty members, who often lack adequate support and access to contemporary global scholarship for nuanced analysis.

Significant societal and cultural issues lie within these institutional and structural obstacles. One example is the erosion of the culture of democratic dialogue after centuries of authoritarian rule. Consequently, disagreements tend to be perceived as personal conflicts or ethnic attacks ratherthan opportunities for respectful debate. A notable example is the widespread public distrust in HEIs, which are often seen as tools of state propaganda or unstable platforms for political maneuvering rather than trustworthy institutions serving the public good (Assefa, 2022). Most fundamentally, HEIs face epistemological challenges due to deeply contested historical narratives. The task is not merely to provide a "neutral" history but to create spaces where conflicting and often painful narratives can emerge, be heard, and be critically examined. This facilitation demands significant skill and commitment to epistemological diversity while avoiding triggers for conflict or official censorship. Thus, HEIs navigate a threefold siege: political control limits their freedom, structural poverty restricts their capacity, and a fractured social culture fosters distrust, complicating their mission.

5. Analysis and Findings: Part II – Prospects and Reimagined Roles

Despite these significant challenges, HEIs have unique strengths that can position them as vital players if they strategically reorient themselves. This reorientation involves four interconnected roles:

5.1. As Neutral Platforms and Conveners

The concept of a university as a "house of knowledge" carries deep symbolic weight. It goes beyond educational issues and grants higher-education institutions (HEIs) a degree of legitimacy and respect that can be strategically utilized. They provide physical resources, such as lecture halls and libraries. More importantly, they foster an atmosphere that is perceived as relatively neutral and safe. This places them in a prime position to become the preferred venues for Track II diplomacy, facilitating informal yet impactful communication.

Unlike formal political forums, where tensions run high and attitudes can be rigid, academic environments allow individuals to engage without fear of being attacked. This encourages openness and experimentation in the field. For instance, inter-university discussions on sensitive topics, such as land policy or language rights, can offer local scholars, community leaders, and government officials the chance to meet in a less politicized setting, fostering a more relaxed atmosphere. These encounters promote mutual understanding and create pathways for various solutions through dialogue, free from official pressure.

Student-led initiatives are also crucial to this process. National debate tournaments on constitutional issues and inter-ethnic cultural festivals not only stimulate grassroots conversations but also demonstrate positive engagement from the ground up. Through these activities, universities can maintain their roles as centers of learning and become key players in promoting social cohesion and dialogue, utilizing their symbolic influence to bridge divides and encourage democratic deliberation in complex and often fragmented societies. Issues such as land policy and language rights can gather regional scholars, community leaders, and mid-level officials in a more relaxed environment. Student-led events, such as nationwide debate competitions and cultural festivals, nurture dialogue from the grassroots level and model constructive engagement.

5.2. As Generators and Curators of Knowledge

In the often-disputable arena of national conversation, which is typically led by misinformation and narratives of elites, Higher Education Institutions are holding a critical recognition: their ability to create and spread rigorous, evidence-based analysis. However, to put this role into effect requires a complete change from the resort of isolated, individual scholarship to the coordinated power of structured interdisciplinary consortia. Such consortia, by their nature, would remove the academic silos that separate one another and thus struggle with the complex aspects of social conflict. For example, a consortium devoted to “Dialogue and Social Cohesion” could hold together historians, political scientists, sociologists, economists, legal scholars, and conflict resolution experts, not only in theory but also in practice.

Thus, this collaborative framework can become a source of targeted, actionable knowledge in diverse key forms. At the outset, it might create short policy briefs explaining politically sensitive but technically challenging issues with ease, such as negotiable plans of federal revenue sharing, models for transitional justice, or comparative analyses for electoral system design, thus providing negotiators and the public with clear, research-backed alternatives rather than ideological standpoints.

Moreover, it would be in a position to launch historical clarification projects, a cumbersome yet vital scholarly task that aims not at authoring a single, unified narrative but at thoroughly documenting and presenting multi-perspective accounts of historical events that have the nature of being keys for the future. This work recognizes the simultaneous existence of contested memories and thus offers a more honest and complex base for discussion, as opposed to histories supported by the state or party myths.

Third, local ethnographies should receive the support they need, and the focus of the analysis should shift from the national capital to the community level to empirically map both the specific, real-life drivers of conflict and the equally specific, often overlooked local peace infrastructures. Such a detailed understanding is of primary importance for ensuring that a national dialogue is based on lived realities and not on abstract political theory.

In order for this carefully chosen knowledge to have a far-reaching effect, HEIs, at the same time, should adjust their libraries to be not only inward-looking archives but also vibrant public knowledge repositories. By combining

open-access digital platforms that host original documents, recorded oral histories, declassified materials, and all consortium research, universities can provide access to information for everyone.

This opens up an essential common resource for journalists, civil society actors, community leaders, and citizens who can be empowered to take part in the dialogue from a verified fact basis and not from rumors, which in turn, serves as a check on the manipulative narratives and thus, elevates the entire discourse.

Therefore, through the two-fold approach of joint knowledge generation and radical information democratization, HEIs may position themselves as the essential guardians of intellectual integrity in the dialogue process.

5.3. As Capacity Builders and Skill Incubators

A national dialogue that is continuously successful at its core requires a population of citizens and leaders with the right competencies for democratic participation. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are in a distinct position to fill this gap through their transformation into systematic capacity builders and skill incubators. However, educational institutions cannot assume such a role without a well-thought-out tripartite strategy for the HE system. The first step is to implement profound curricular reform by going beyond the idea of specialized majors and creating a shared intellectual framework for all graduate students equipped with skills such as critical thinking, ethical reasoning, conflict resolution, and multicultural citizenship. Thus, any graduate would be able to utilize the knowledge gained in engineering, medicine, or economics to participate in a democratic society in educated and ethical ways. Second, universities can no longer confine their missions to offering degree programs; instead, they must implement targeted professional training with an emphasis on a wide range of short courses and certificate programs designed for key figures in the public sphere. The ethical reporting of journalists in a polarized environment, negotiation and mediation for civil servants, emotional management for community leaders through direct upskilling of professionals, and the quality of the dialogue process and public discourse will be shaped. Finally, educational and professional training will fall short if not supported by a significant pedagogical classroom shift. The current mode, which is mostly passive, should give way to an active one, where students engage with the material via dialogic approaches and activities. Students should be given controversial domestic issues to resolve or play roles based on these now-common methods of study to sharpen the skills of democratic dialogue, such as listening, arguing, and seeing from someone else's view. HEIs therefore become human capital incubators through the tuition of reformed content, training, and a pedagogical participatory process; they produce skilled facilitators, ethical journalists, informed officials, and discerning citizens necessary for democratic dialogues to be legitimate and resilient.

5.4. As Community Engagers and Critical Consciences

To tear down the "ivory tower" misconception, which is very much alive, and to accomplish their civic mission, Higher Education Institutions need to carry out a deliberate and multifaceted public engagement strategy. Such a strategy will see them not only as isolated places of knowledge but also as embedded, accountable actors within the societal fabric. This strategic shift can be realized through three interrelated mechanisms: deepening trust, upholding integrity, and reflecting democratic ethos.

First, this calls for a dramatic change in the research paradigm through Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), a collaboration model in which both academics and community members share the roles of co-investigators. CBPR is not a method through which data is taken from communities; rather, it is a method built with them and focuses on issues that are identified locally. Such issues could be resource disputes, intergenerational trauma, or failure of governance. This method not only serves the purpose of data collection but also recognizes lived experience as a form of knowledge. Moreover, it guarantees that many-layered concerns and solutions originating from the grassroots are not just formally integrated into the national agenda but also give traditional political processes a very important dimension of authenticity and rooted legitimacy.

Next, to support the integrity of the dialogue itself, HEIs could form independent monitoring and evaluation units. These units, composed of an interdisciplinary group of scholars from the fields of law, political science, and ethics, would serve as a critical friend to the official dialogue process. They would be involved in constantly evaluating the procedures

against the standards of inclusiveness, openness, and fairness that are established and publicly declared. These impartial reports on participant diversity, access to information, and adherence to agreed-upon rules are submitted by university-based watchdogs, who perform an essential accountability role. This gives academic credibility the power to hold authority accountable, thus empowering university-based watchdogs to become an important safeguard against manipulation or elite capture of the dialogue, thereby retaining public trust in the whole undertaking.

Finally, HEIs need to influence the general public discussion culture by intentionally arranging strong public lecture series and forums that, among other things, provide equal opportunity for a range of different, even contradictory, opinions on contentious national issues to be heard. Despite being conducted locally, these activities are broadly shared through broadcasting. These are not only informative but also representational; in fact, they showcase the behavior of respectful engagement, evidence-based argumentation, and civil disagreement that a healthy democracy requires publicly. By providing well-educated, logically solid, and at the same time, socially structured counter-narratives to the acutely polarized and most of the time, toxic debates prevailing on different social media and partisan outlets, universities demonstrate in practice how a society can argue constructively about its future, hence educating the public not only on what to think about, but more importantly, how to think and disagree with one another.

When combined, HEIs through the co-creative praxis of CBPR, the vigilant oversight of independent monitoring, and the normative modelling of public debate can systematically close the gap between themselves and society; thus, they will no longer be seen as enclaves of privilege but rather as trusted and indispensable pillars of a participatory and accountable democratic process.

6. Discussion

The central analysis uncovers a constitutive paradox at the heart of the Ethiopian higher education landscape: these institutions exist in a state of being profoundly hamstrung by a legacy of political instrumentalization, while simultaneously possessing a unique concentration of the very assets' intellectual capital, demographic diversity, and civic mandate required to shepherd a national dialogue. This inherent duality means that their transformation into effective facilitators cannot be a passive or evolutionary process; it is, instead, an endeavor that demands conscious strategic intervention and foundational institutional reform.

This reality carries significant theoretical weight, suggesting that the conventional "civic university" model requires radical contextual recalibration. In settings of active or recent conflict like Ethiopia, the university's third mission of engagement transcends contributing to regional economic innovation or development. It becomes an imperative of existential social stewardship, where engagement is directly tied to the survival of the polity itself. The analysis further surfaces a critical operational tension regarding the concept of neutrality. Within a polarized society where institutions are inherently viewed through a prism of historical bias and political alignment, the pursuit of perceived political neutrality is a critical issue. A more viable and robust objective is the cultivation and unwavering defense of intellectual integrity. This entails a demonstrable commitment to rigorous, transparent research methodologies; an epistemological openness that acknowledges multiple, contested ways of knowing; and a scrupulous adherence to procedural fairness in all activities. It is this bedrock integrity, not an impossible neutrality, that can gradually earn HEIs the credibility to act as accepted honest brokers.

Moreover, the proposed four roles for HEIs are not discrete tasks but function as a synergistic ecosystem. The credibility and authority accrued from generating respected, evidence-based knowledge (Role as Knowledge Generator) directly fuels their legitimacy to convene disparate groups (Role as Neutral Convener). Concurrently, the participatory skills and critical consciousness nurtured in students (Role as Capacity Builder) provide the essential human resource capable of driving genuine Community-Based Participatory Research and outreach (Role as Community Engager). Attempting to implement any single role in isolation would lead to failure, as each role derives strength and purpose from the others. For instance, convening a dialogue without a foundation of credible research (Role 2) would lack substance, while producing research without a pedagogy to cultivate critical consumers (Role 3) would limit its impact.

Therefore, an integrated, holistic approach is not merely beneficial but essential for HEIs to overcome their historical constraints and activate their latent potential as cornerstones of a renewed national compact.

7. Conclusion and Strategic Framework for Action

I don't take this conclusion lightly, and I'm not pretending that the journey I've outlined is an easy one. After years of observing Ethiopian universities swing between defiance and submission, between boldly speaking truth to power and being silenced, I've become cautious of solutions that view institutional change as merely a matter of will. Still, I can't shake the belief that these institutions are important not as isolated ivory towers or mere tools of the state, but as something we have yet to fully realize. Throughout this article, I've tried to convey that Ethiopian Higher Education Institutions can play a crucial role in fostering democratic renewal, but only if we're ready to rethink their purpose and, in turn, our connection to them.

This reimagining, I believe, starts with a new social agreement not just a concept written in policy papers, but a real partnership between the state, the academy, and the society they are meant to serve. For university leaders, this means seeking institutional independence not as a privilege to protect from outside interference, but as a necessary foundation for genuine national service. It involves incorporating a clear and well-supported commitment to facilitating tough discussions, generating accessible knowledge, and exemplifying democratic participation into strategic plans. Additionally, it requires investing in the quieter, more gradual efforts to enhance faculty skills for conflict-sensitive research and participatory teaching, as well as establishing community engagement offices and public scholarship units that endure beyond any single leader's time in office.

For faculty, the challenge is just as intense. I'm urging us to step, even if it feels a bit uncomfortable, into the public arena. This doesn't mean we should compromise on rigor; rather, it's about making it accessible. It involves creating interdisciplinary research groups focused on the pressing issues that shape Ethiopian public life like constitutionalism, historical memory, and the language of rights and recognition and then turning those discussions into policy briefs, opinion pieces, and radio programs that everyday citizens can actually engage with. It's about updating our curricula not just to meet standards, but to foster in our students the very habits of critical dialogue we hope will flourish in society at large. And it's about demonstrating, through our own institutional practices, the pluralism and intellectual humility we often advocate for.

As for students, they have never been mere passive recipients of this education. In my experience, they've been its most passionate advocates. What I'm suggesting is that we genuinely recognize their potential as ambassadors of dialogue not just in a rhetorical way, but by investing in cross-cultural student initiatives, community projects that build trust across differences, and reimagining student unions as hubs for policy advocacy and informed engagement with national processes like the Dialogue Commission. These aren't just extracurricular activities; they are essential to the very essence of citizenship.

None of this can happen without a government that's willing to give up some control and a policymaking system that sees autonomy not as a favor, but as essential for effective institutions. What universities really need isn't just kind oversight, but supportive laws, reliable funding, and the freedom to pursue their own academic paths. I've suggested a practical starting point: establishing a dedicated National Dialogue Research and Engagement Fund that offers flexible, ongoing resources, free from the ups and downs of political changes. Additionally, I've proposed a formal partnership between the National Dialogue Commission and Ethiopian higher education institutions not just as a token of consultation, but as a recognition that universities are crucial to achieving the kind of deliberative democracy that Ethiopia has yet to fully realize.

If the international community wants to be genuinely helpful, it should pay attention to what Ethiopian scholars and administrators have been saying for a long time: they don't need short-term project grants with burdensome reporting requirements, but rather long-term, trust-based partnerships that respect the generational nature of this work. Investing in academic exchanges, open-access digital infrastructure, and ongoing support for public scholarship platforms would be far more valuable than yet another series of workshops on conflict resolution.

The political landscape in Ethiopia is always changing, and the gaps in trust between universities, the state, and the public are tough to close. However, I truly believe that a nation that fosters the ability to engage in thoughtful, compassionate, and evidence-based discussions within its educational institutions is one that can piece together a shared future from the remnants of a divided past. Ultimately, that's the purpose of Ethiopian universities. They shouldn't just serve those in power or distance themselves from it; instead, they should nurture the challenging skill of coexisting, especially at a time when this skill is more crucial than ever.

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