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CDRC *Digest*

January 2026 Vol. 10 No. 1

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The CDRC Digest is the Centre's monthly publication, endeavoring to provide an African perspective on political, economic and social developments as well as mechanisms of sustaining peace and security in the Horn of Africa, the African continent and beyond. The publication is based on dialogue, rigorous research and analysis.

A monthly publication of the Centre for Dialogue, Research and Cooperation (CDRC), in partnership with the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Ethiopia

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Intergenerational Dialogue: An Imperative for National Renewal

Introduction

The past is never conclusively settled. It remains a contested terrain where memories are selectively curated, inconvenient truths obscured, and historical narratives reconstructed to serve contemporary political, social, and ideological ends. Past, present, and future are therefore deeply intertwined, as successive generations reinterpret inherited experiences to make sense of their circumstances and imagine alternative futures.

In Ethiopia, this dynamic has generated profound challenges. Long-standing historical grievances, compounded by socioeconomic exclusion, political marginalization, and struggles over state power, have constrained inclusive deliberation about shared national trajectories. Political contestation often takes the form of discursive hegemony, with dominant actors imposing authoritative narratives that marginalize alternatives and foreclose plural engagement with history. As a result, Ethiopia's capacity has declined to renegotiate state-society relations and mobilize history as a resource for reconciliation.

Utopian studies offer a useful lens for understanding this landscape. Ethiopia's state-making projects have repeatedly been driven by expansive visions of national renewal that seek not only to reform policy but to remake society, identity, and memory. Yet these projects have largely relied on top-down engineering of unity and development, producing recurring tensions between aspirational ideals and social plurality. Cycles of reform, rupture, and recentralization follow, as elites advance redemptive narratives that blame predecessors, while excluded groups counter with narratives of victimhood—entrenching polarized interpretations of the national story.

These polarized narratives have embedded

generational trauma, transmitted through memories of exclusion, unresolved violence, and moral injury. The effects are visible in social mistrust, communal fragmentation, recurring conflict, zero-sum elite competition, fragile institutions, and stalled democratic and developmental progress. At the core of this impasse lies the absence of sustained intergenerational dialogue, which deprives society of collective learning from history and coordinated responses to contemporary challenges. This gap is particularly acute in Ethiopia, where more than 70 percent of the population is under 30 and bears the brunt of economic precarity, political polarization, and insecurity.

Addressing these challenges requires grounding generational aspirations in intergenerational responsibility. Youthful ambitions are often marginalized, while elders' perspectives—shaped by revolutions, wars, and regime collapse—continue to dominate. Without institutionalized reciprocity and accountability, aspirations harden into zero-sum competition rather than converging toward shared renewal. This tension is sharpened by the enduring influence of the radical student movements of the 1960s and 1970s, whose ideas continue to shape Ethiopia's political imagination despite the emergence of a post-2000 demographic majority with distinct experiences and priorities.

The failure to institutionalize dialogue has far-reaching consequences: persistent poverty and violence, weakened political culture, eroded institutional continuity, compromised leadership, and distorted state-society relations. While no single mechanism can resolve these challenges, well-facilitated intergenerational dialogue can mitigate cycles of violence, reduce the costs of discontinuity, and foster civic norms for negotiating difference while preserving continuity amid change.

Ethiopia's demographic reality underscores this urgency. Youth immersed in global digital networks confront unemployment, inflation, environmental degradation, and climate stress, while elders draw on revolutionary and federalist legacies. The result is a fractured national narrative in which grievances are inherited rather than resolved. Institutionalizing cross-generational dialogue is therefore not optional but essential for recasting the past as a foundation for renewal rather than conflict.

Against this backdrop, this article examines intergenerational dialogue as a pathway to Ethiopia's national renewal. It analyzes its potential to address deficits in political culture, institutional continuity, leadership, governance, and peacebuilding, while also identifying structural and political obstacles. Acknowledging intragenerational diversity, the focus remains on intergenerational dynamics—assessing both the costs of absence and the transformative possibilities of deliberate, institutionalized engagement.

Why Intergenerational Dialogue is Indispensable

The absence of sustained, reciprocal intergenerational dialogue produces far more than a simple "generation gap." It severs the living transmission of knowledge, values, historical consciousness, and institutional wisdom that societies rely upon to confront present dilemmas and anticipate future challenges. When such dialogue is missing, the sacrifices made by earlier generations—for sovereignty, dignity, freedom, and collective survival—risk being reduced to distant myths or abstract commemorations, stripped of the emotional resonance and ethical force required to inspire responsibility and action. Younger citizens may possess only a fragmented or superficial awareness of how earlier generations struggled to define, defend, and institutionalize concepts such as justice, self-rule, and national identity. Even more critically, they are denied the opportunity to reinterpret and re-appropriate these struggles, translating them into the language, priorities, and lived realities of their own

historical moment. Without this process, collective memory loses its vitality and relevance, becoming either inert nostalgia or a tool of political manipulation rather than a shared foundation for action.

History, however, is never passively inherited. It requires continual reinterpretation, renewal, and critical engagement if it is to remain meaningful. When this interpretive process is blocked—through silence, denial, generational mistrust, or monopolization of historical narratives—society is left with a truncated and distorted understanding of its past. History is then reduced to slogans, selectively remembered grievances, or imposed silences that inhibit honest reckoning. The result is a weakened national consciousness, incapable of drawing confidence from past achievements, extracting lessons from failures, or adapting inherited institutions to changing realities. In contrast, genuine intergenerational dialogue performs irreplaceable functions that no technocratic reform or elite-driven initiative can substitute. It cultivates a lived sense of history by connecting present possibilities—and constraints—to the concrete choices, sacrifices, and mistakes of previous generations. This awareness anchors contemporary action in humility and responsibility, while reducing the likelihood of repeating avoidable errors.

Equally important, intergenerational dialogue enables younger generations to engage critically with the past without being imprisoned by it. It allows them to honor foundational struggles while questioning outdated assumptions, institutional designs, or ideological frameworks that no longer serve society's needs. Rather than inheriting history as an unalterable burden, youth can engage it as a resource—one that can be adapted, refined, or transformed.

At the same time, such dialogue enables elders to witness how the values they fought to uphold—such as justice, unity, dignity, and self-determination—can be meaningfully re-articulated and defended under radically altered social, economic, technological, and global conditions. This reciprocal recognition helps bridge

generational mistrust and affirms that continuity does not require stagnation, nor does change necessitate erasure.

At a deeper level, intergenerational dialogue fundamentally reshapes the nature of power. It challenges zero-sum generational politics, where the advancement of one cohort is perceived as the marginalization of another, and replaces it with a shared ethic of stewardship. Power is reimagined not as possession, but as responsibility—temporarily held and collectively accountable across generations. This reorientation is essential for safeguarding institutional continuity, promoting political stability, and reducing the likelihood of disruptive ruptures that often accompany generational exclusion. Societies that fail to institutionalize such dialogue tend to oscillate between rigid continuity and violent rupture; those that succeed are better equipped to manage transition, reform, and renewal.

Perhaps most profoundly, intergenerational dialogue transforms collective memory itself. It converts memory from a battlefield of competing, weaponized narratives into a shared, healable resource—one that can be critically examined, mourned where necessary, and reconciled through collective understanding. In contexts marked by trauma and conflict, such as in Ethiopia, this function is indispensable. Without dialogue, trauma is transmitted as resentment and mobilized as political capital; with dialogue, it can be processed as shared loss and redirected toward prevention rather than revenge. In this sense, intergenerational dialogue is the primary mechanism through which a society preserves the vitality of its past without stifling emerging futures.

For Ethiopia's predominantly young and digitally connected population, intergenerational dialogue serves as the essential bridge through which a coherent national vision can be forged—or existing ones critically refined. By engaging honestly with inherited triumphs, such as resilience against external domination and the preservation of rich cultural traditions, as well as with failures, including recurring political violence, exclusionary governance, and institutional fragility, younger

generations can situate themselves within a longer historical arc rather than experiencing the present as a disconnected rupture. This responsibility, however, is fundamentally reciprocal. Elders must be willing to demystify the past, openly acknowledging both achievements and mistakes, and resisting the temptation to weaponize historical narratives for present advantage. Youth, in turn, must approach the past not with dismissal or cynicism, but with reflective engagement—deciding consciously which legacies to preserve, which to reform, and which to abandon.

Such reciprocity resonates deeply with Ethiopia's cultural emphasis on communal responsibility and social harmony, even as it adapts these traditions to modern realities. Intergenerational dialogue creates space for re-appropriating valuable indigenous practices—such as conflict resolution mechanisms, moral codes, and communal solidarities—while discarding patterns that perpetuate hierarchy, exclusion, or violence. Ultimately, it enables successive generations to become genuine co-authors of a national narrative that neither mechanically reproduces yesterday's failures nor severs itself entirely from hard-won historical experience. Instead, it fosters a process of creative, legitimate, and collectively owned renewal—one that honors continuity while embracing the necessity of change.

Political Culture and Institutional Continuity

The indispensable role of intergenerational dialogue becomes particularly evident in the domain of political culture and institutional continuity, where Ethiopia presents a striking and often misunderstood paradox. On the one hand, Ethiopia has among the world's oldest continuous state traditions, a deeply rooted historical consciousness anchored in the defense of sovereignty and political independence. This legacy—especially the successful resistance to external domination—continues to serve as a powerful source of national pride and collective identity. On the other hand, the modern Ethiopian state has been consistently characterized by institutional fragility, weak continuity, and recurring political instability. This contradiction

cannot be explained solely by external pressures or contemporary political failures; it is deeply embedded in the historical formation of political culture, patterns of power acquisition and exercise, and the evolving—but often distorted—relationship between the state and society.

The development of Ethiopia's modern political institutions has been profoundly shaped by formative experiences of war, revolution, armed struggle, and coercive state-building. These experiences have influenced how power has been seized, legitimized, and maintained, as well as how institutions have been conceived—not as neutral mechanisms serving the public good, but as instruments of control closely tied to regime survival. As a result, the emergence of a political culture grounded in civility, tolerance, accommodation, and institutional restraint has been repeatedly constrained. Rather than nurturing habits of dialogue, compromise, and peaceful dissent, political authority has historically been asserted through force, hierarchy, and exclusion, leaving little space for participatory governance or institutional autonomy.

A closer examination of key historical conjunctures underscores this trajectory. Under Emperor Haile Selassie, early and increasingly articulate demands for economic reform, expanded civil and political rights, and institutional modernization were often met with repression or delay. While the imperial state successfully symbolized national unity and sovereignty, it proved far less capable of responding adaptively to mounting societal pressures. The suppression of reformist currents, rather than their incorporation into evolving institutional frameworks, contributed significantly to political alienation and ultimately to the emperor's downfall. This pattern—where delayed reform and coercive response deepen legitimacy crises—would recur in subsequent regimes, reinforcing a political culture that privileges control over consent.

Political culture, at its core, is not an abstract set of values but the cumulative product of lived historical experience. It is shaped over time through socialization, civic engagement, identity

formation, levels of trust in leaders and institutions, and prevailing perceptions of legitimacy and authority. In Ethiopia's case, one of the most enduring and consequential features of this political culture has been the normalization of violence within state structures, collective memory, and social norms—not as an inherent characteristic of society, but as a historically reproduced mode of interaction. Across successive political eras, coercion gradually became the dominant language of state-society relations. Its reach extended well beyond formal politics into class relations, communal interactions, and even family structures, shaping how authority was exercised, challenged, and understood.

This coercive orientation produced a self-reinforcing dynamic between state and society. As the state relied on force to manage dissent and govern diversity, individuals and communities increasingly turned to identity-based mobilization as a means of protection, resistance, and political leverage. As Daren Acemoglu says, humans are tribal. Ethnicity, as a natural and enduring form of social organization, therefore expanded as a central axis of political contestation. In response, successive governments came to view ethnic, regional, and ideological identities not as legitimate expressions of pluralism, but as existential threats to state authority. This mutual suspicion triggered cycles of communal resistance and repression, reinforcing the instrumentalization of identity by political actors on all sides. Over time, identity-based armed movements emerged as the primary vehicles of opposition, eventually toppling regimes and contributing to the fragmentation of state authority. These outcomes remain deeply contested: while some view such movements as necessary correctives to centralized coercion, others argue that once in power, they reproduced similar patterns of domination, exclusion, and abuse—prompting further resistance through the very mechanisms they had once employed. The cumulative effect has been a progressive weakening of the state and the erosion of shared political purpose.

Within this historical trajectory, violence increasingly became the default mechanism for

resolving political and social conflicts. Because power was repeatedly acquired, exercised, and defended through force, practices of open dialogue, persuasion, peaceful dissent, compromise, and tolerance remained weakly institutionalized. Political authority was rarely legitimized through consent or performance alone; instead, its durability was measured by its capacity to coerce. In such a context, the relaxation of coercive control was often interpreted not as a sign of confidence in one's legitimacy, but as vulnerability and impending collapse. Symbolic instruments of force—such as the sword or the cane—thus came to embody order, hierarchy, and authority, reinforcing a political culture in which domination eclipsed deliberation and fear substituted for trust. This legacy continues to shape Ethiopia's contemporary political challenges, underscoring how deeply historical patterns of coercion have constrained the development of a civic culture grounded in dialogue, mutual recognition, and institutional continuity.

This coercive orientation has permeated Ethiopian political life both vertically, in relations between the state and citizens, and horizontally, within society itself. Dissent has frequently been suppressed through social norms, legal frameworks, and institutional mechanisms, inhibiting the development of a political culture rooted in mutual recognition and coexistence. Instead, marginalization, repression, exclusion, and, at times, elimination have shaped political interaction. Institutions that emerged within this environment were seldom designed to mediate societal interests or manage diversity constructively. Rather, they became deeply aligned with ruling elites, dependent on regime survival, and oriented toward neutralizing perceived threats. Responding to popular demands for inclusion, fairness, and accountable governance was often secondary to preserving power.

Within such an authoritarian political culture, particularly one centered on personalized rule—it would be logically inconsistent to expect institutions to function as vehicles of tolerance, accommodation, or justice. These principles

presuppose a social contract in which power and legitimacy flow from the consent of the governed and are constrained by the rule of law. Where authority is instead derived from coercion, institutions tend to erode collective decision-making, weaken accountability, and suppress emerging societal demands, especially when those demands challenge existing hierarchies. The objective of governance, under these conditions, shifts from societal transformation to regime preservation. Institutional continuity becomes fragile as institutions are reconfigured, dismantled, or repurposed with each political transition.

A political system founded on such assumptions inevitably reproduces institutions that rely on fear, manipulation, and division as core governing tools. Politics ceases to function as a forum for negotiating shared values and collective goals and becomes a struggle for survival. In Ethiopia, this authoritarian inheritance has reinforced an image of the state as a distant and coercive entity standing above society, where effective governance is equated with control rather than responsiveness. This goes far beyond the state's legitimate monopoly on violence; it embeds coercion as a routine mode of governance. Given the deep historical roots of this political culture—formed over centuries of conflict and hierarchical rule—its transformation cannot be abrupt or superficial.

Nevertheless, inclusive intergenerational dialogue offers a critical pathway for interrogating why Ethiopia has struggled to transition toward a political culture grounded in equitable justice, tolerance, accommodation, and peaceful coexistence. Such dialogue creates space to collectively examine how recurring cycles of violence have devastated lives, eroded trust, and weakened institutions across generations. Drawing on Aristotelian insight, it is natural for each generation to envision its own ideal society and seek to realize it politically. The enduring challenge, however, lies in whether these aspirations can be pursued without resorting to levels of violence that ultimately undermine their own objectives. When radical and disruptive methods fail to deliver their promised outcomes, history repeatedly

demonstrates—intergenerational dialogue becomes essential for reassessing strategies, learning from past failures, and imagining alternative pathways.

When structured around mutual listening, critical reflection, and respect—rather than blame or generational dismissal—intergenerational dialogue enables selective learning from history. It allows societies to retain valuable lessons while discarding patterns that perpetuate violence, exclusion, and stagnation. Over time, such learning can help break entrenched cycles of violence and create conditions for a political culture that embraces diversity, tolerance, and coexistence. This cultural shift is a prerequisite for sustainable institution-building, as institutions draw their legitimacy not only from legal frameworks but also from deeply embedded social norms.

Ethiopia's repeated political transitions and leadership changes vividly illustrate a persistent vulnerability: the absence of trusted, habitual, and institutionalized spaces where elders and youth can engage as equal stakeholders in shaping political life. Successive governments' reliance on repression to manage societal demands has narrowed political space and obstructed the evolution of a political culture resilient to violence. In turn, the chronic absence of genuine intergenerational dialogue has fueled political mobilizations that increasingly question the state's legitimacy itself. Addressing this deficit is therefore not merely a matter of reconciliation between generations; it is central to rebuilding political culture, strengthening institutional continuity, and laying the foundations for a more stable and inclusive Ethiopian state.

Addressing these structural and cultural challenges through open and sustained conversation is essential for mitigating the internal vulnerabilities that continue to entrench societal divisions, exacerbate political tensions, and undermine effective governance in Ethiopia. In the absence of inclusive dialogue, unresolved grievances harden into identity-based rivalries and zero-sum political competition, weakening the foundations of state

legitimacy. By contrast, fostering a genuinely intergenerational dialogue offers a pathway toward rebuilding social trust, reducing generational antagonism, and strengthening national cohesion. Such engagement has the potential to provide critical inputs into Ethiopia's stalled nation-building project by broadening ownership of political processes and grounding reform efforts in shared understanding rather than elite consensus alone.

Historically, many of Ethiopia's major societal challenges have been addressed through elitist and exclusionary interactions that lacked both social depth and generational breadth. Political change has often been introduced through abrupt ruptures—revolutions, armed struggles, or elite alliances—rather than through gradual, deliberative adaptation. In this environment, revolutions became the primary mechanism through which new political discourses were institutionalized, reinforcing the belief that transformation is only achievable through disruption. The absence of an inclusive intergenerational synthesis—capable of integrating continuity with change—has left a vacuum in which successive generations seek to assert dominance rather than cultivate mutual accommodation.

This vacuum has, in turn, fostered a form of generational hegemony, wherein dominant cohorts attempt to advance their political visions through coercive or non-civil means, often marginalizing alternative perspectives. Yet it is precisely this historical scarcity of dialogue that highlights its lack of transformative potential. Bringing together Ethiopians who experienced imperial rule, the Derg's terror, prolonged armed struggle, and those who came of age under the current federalism, digital globalization, and recent reform initiatives would create a rare space for collective reckoning. Such encounters could begin to dismantle deeply embedded habits of mistrust, suspicion, and exclusion that have long defined Ethiopia's political culture.

The broader objective of this engagement is to establish an inclusive equilibrium—one that

acknowledges grievances without entrenching them, facilitates healing without erasing responsibility, and renews collective hope without resorting to mythmaking. Achieving this requires structured and sustained exchange rather than symbolic gestures. Older generations must be willing to transmit both successes and failures, enabling younger cohorts to situate historical outcomes within their complex political, economic, and ideological contexts. At the same time, younger generations must be empowered to interrogate inherited legacies critically, assessing which elements can be adapted and which must be abandoned. Given the complexity of social systems, meaningful engagement with diverse and often competing narratives is essential for extracting insights capable of strengthening state–society relations and aligning political, economic, and social aspirations.

Intergenerational dialogue is uniquely positioned to instill a sense of shared responsibility, particularly in responding to the needs and aspirations of Ethiopia’s predominantly young population. Constructive confrontation with history—when undertaken in an environment of respect and reciprocity—can expand contemporary horizons by illuminating viable alternatives to entrenched patterns of misrecognition, marginalization, and violence. Ethiopia’s history of political violence starkly illustrates the costs of failing to reassess foundational assumptions. The repression of peasant uprisings and student movements under Haile Selassie, the atrocities and Red and White Terrors of the Derg, the protracted civil war between the TPLF and the military regime, and the recent northern conflict all demonstrate the long-term consequences of political cultures that prioritize coercion over dialogue. These episodes underscore the necessity of continuously revisiting core political values, norms, and principles, and of weighing any perceived gains against the profound human and institutional costs incurred.

Intergenerational dialogue can serve as a structured venue for this national reckoning. It provides a space in which long-held assumptions can be questioned across generational lines and

futures reimagined in ways that integrate historical legacies with present realities while remaining accountable to generations yet unborn. While the construction of shared meaning is possible, the pursuit of understanding—rather than the imposition of “consensus”—must remain the primary objective. Approached in this spirit, dialogue can help revive neglected Ethiopian traditions of reconciliation, ethical leadership, patriotism, and unity, reinterpreting them for contemporary relevance. Treated not as an exercise in judgment but as a resource for national renewal, intergenerational engagement enables deeper inquiry into enduring challenges: building durable institutions, embedding civil norms, transcending resentment, and interrupting cycles of transgenerational violence.

Inclusive representation significantly enhances the credibility and effectiveness of such deliberation. Without substantive exchange grounded in reciprocal understanding, future generations risk reproducing the very patterns that have repeatedly undermined Ethiopia’s political evolution—cycles of violence, institutional discontinuity, vengeance, and unresolved trauma. The absence of deliberate intergenerational dialogue would carry devastating consequences: deepening mistrust, accelerating fragmentation, obstructing reconciliation, and leaving future generations to inherit weakened institutions, stagnant economic prospects, and perpetual vulnerability to upheaval.

This reality underscores the urgent need for deliberate commitments to rethinking power relations, state–society configurations, and institutional principles. Such commitments may require attitudinal shifts, honest engagement with socioeconomic inequalities, acknowledgment of historical fault lines, and the articulation of forward-looking alternatives that are informed by—but not imprisoned within—the past. This endeavor demands genuine intergenerational responsibility, balancing accountability for historical choices with responsiveness to present realities. Persisting with political practices that undermine civic culture, by contrast, risks intensifying polarization, conflict, and institutional erosion.

In moments of sustained mutual listening, participants may rediscover a transformative insight: authority need not always be seized—it can be built through consent; it need not be hoarded—it can be shared; and it need not be lost through upheaval—it can be transmitted with dignity. Such dialogue would not eliminate disagreement, nor should it. Instead, it could quietly achieve what decades of top-down reform have failed to deliver: a lived experience of power as trusteeship rather than conquest, and of institutions as living bridges between generations rather than monuments to the triumph of one cohort over another. Under these conditions, the constitutional order may come to be seen by younger generations as a framework they are entitled to shape, and by older generations as a legacy that principled change does not betray.

For this transformation to take root, intergenerational dialogue must be institutionalized rather than be episodic. This includes ensuring balanced generational representation in consultative bodies, creating structured mentorship pathways within the civil service and security sectors, establishing public deliberative platforms that pair experienced and emerging voices, and embedding intergenerational learning within educational curricula so that national memory remains living rather than archival. An open and ongoing dialogue is indispensable for reshaping Ethiopia's political culture into one that allows competing interpretations of the past, contested assessments of the present, and diverse visions of the future to coexist without descending into mutually destructive conflict.

Within such a framework, no single narrative claims absolute authority. Each perspective is recognized as partial, contextual, and shaped by lived experience—always open to contestation and reinterpretation. Through critical reflection on inherited norms, values, and ideals, Ethiopia can begin to dismantle the obstacles that have long hindered the emergence of a truly inclusive political culture—one that tolerates dissent, accommodates difference, and respects popular will. Ultimately, this process offers a pathway for

breaking entrenched cycles of grievance and violence, redirecting political energy toward constructive competition and cooperative institution-building.

The human, social, and economic costs of failing to pursue this path have been immense. When power remains detached from inclusive institutions and state-society grievances are left unaddressed through dialogue, Ethiopia remains trapped in a cycle of disruptive rather than reformative state-building. A deliberate, well-designed intergenerational dialogue is therefore not a luxury but an indispensable condition for bridging past and present, transcending zero-sum approaches to governance, and constructing resilient institutions capable of serving generations yet unborn. By navigating the delicate interplay between historical experience and contemporary realities, intergenerational dialogue enables Ethiopians to critically examine how power has been acquired, exercised, and contested—and to envision transformative alternatives that rebalance state-society relations, renew civic norms, and lay the foundations for sustainable national renewal.

Governance, Leadership, and Peacebuilding

The dynamics discussed thus far extend naturally into the domains of governance and leadership, where political participation, legitimacy, and effectiveness are inseparable from questions of generational equity. When age-based exclusion becomes institutionalized—whether formally or informally—trust in public institutions erodes rapidly among marginalized cohorts. Disaffected generations, particularly youth, may disengage from conventional political processes, resort to civil disobedience, or align with non-state actors who promise agency and recognition. The asymmetry inherent in contemporary governance is especially stark: decisions taken by today's leaders will generate their most profound and enduring consequences—climate vulnerability, sovereign debt, technological disruption, and security spillovers—for those who currently possess the least voice in shaping them. Sustainable governance and institutional continuity therefore depend not merely on representation, but on

deliberate intergenerational co-authorship of political and policy choices.

Intergenerational dialogue, in this sense, is not limited to ensuring numerical inclusion of younger cohorts within state institutions. More fundamentally, it is a mechanism for the transmission and recalibration of knowledge, values, ethical orientations, and leadership attitudes. Through sustained engagement, past generations can reflect critically on their legacies—both achievements and failures—while current generations contribute their perspectives, skills, and adaptive capacities across political, economic, security, legal, and diplomatic domains. Such exchange empowers emerging leaders to address contemporary challenges with historical awareness and ethical grounding, while avoiding the repetition of strategies that have previously produced exclusion, instability, or conflict. In a rapidly changing national and global environment, this reciprocal learning is indispensable for cultivating leadership capable of navigating complexity at home and projecting responsibility beyond Ethiopia's borders.

Politically, intergenerational dialogue offers the current generation a critical opportunity to understand the intricate relationship between governance failures, crises, and societal transformation. It enables deeper reflection on how institutional weaknesses, leadership choices, and public trust interact to either stabilize or destabilize political systems. More importantly, such dialogue can help reorient the fundamental purpose of governance—away from power accumulation and regime survival, and toward the consistent prioritization of citizens' needs, rights, and dignity. In doing so, it reshapes the meaning of leadership itself, emphasizing service, accountability, and foresight rather than control. Over time, this recalibration can lay the foundation for more resilient state-society relations and redirect the objectives of politics toward inclusive development and shared security.

Intergenerational engagement also facilitates the responsible transfer of experience in areas critical to national survival, particularly diplomacy and

security. Ethiopia's veteran diplomats, security officials, and public servants possess accumulated knowledge in safeguarding national interests, navigating regional rivalries, and managing complex negotiations. At a moment when Ethiopia faces unprecedented geopolitical shifts, economic pressures, and regional instability, transmitting this expertise—while subjecting it to critical reflection—is essential. Younger generations, conversely, bring fluency in digital technologies, global networks, and evolving international norms. Intergenerational dialogue thus creates a bridge between strategic continuity and adaptive innovation, enabling leadership renewal without institutional amnesia.

Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation

The indispensability of intergenerational dialogue reaches its most profound expression in the realm of peacebuilding and conflict transformation. A growing body of scholarship demonstrates how trauma experienced by one generation is transmitted to subsequent generations through narratives, emotions, and socialization practices that can sustain or reignite conflict. When conflicts remain unresolved, elders often pass on grievances, fears, and perceptions of injustice; the young inherit not only historical accounts, but also the emotional charge that keeps cycles of resentment and revenge alive. This inherited trauma affects youth with particular intensity, shaping identities and political orientations long before they have had the opportunity to interrogate the origins of these narratives.

In Ethiopia, the absence of sustained intergenerational dialogue has reinforced a politics of fear and mistrust. While some crimes of the Derg era were addressed through judicial processes, the deeper societal conversation necessary for healing rarely took place. Retributive justice, in the absence of collective reflection, left trauma unprocessed and memory polarized. The failure to openly confront political violence through inclusive dialogue has contributed to the normalization of violence as a legitimate political instrument. Without deliberate intergenerational engagement that reframes the past as a source of

learning rather than a script for retribution, today's youth remain entangled in yesterday's wars—burdened by conflicts they did not initiate and deprived of the future they seek to build.

Ethiopia's cumulative experience of political violence, repression, and civil war has produced layers of unresolved trauma that, if left unaddressed, risk detonating future cycles of conflict. Intergenerational dialogue offers a critical mechanism for surfacing injustices, inequalities, and experiences of marginalization at both societal and state levels. When carefully designed and facilitated, such dialogue fosters open communication, mutual understanding, and empathy through attentive engagement with diverse voices. It contributes to rebuilding trust, repairing damaged relationships, and establishing foundations for durable peace. Equally important, it enables systematic examination of conflict drivers across generations, identifying leverage points for recalibrating social norms, institutional arrangements, and political practices that perpetuate violence. These processes, however, must be accompanied by safeguards to mitigate risks of retraumatization, polarization, or instrumentalization.

Incorporating historical perspectives on past conflicts—alongside forward-looking strategies for managing contradictions and preventing future risks—is essential if intergenerational engagement is to promote healing rather than deepen division. Properly structured, such dialogue can illuminate conflict-sustaining attitudes, behaviors, and structural contradictions, while simultaneously opening pathways for transformation. By revealing underlying perceptions and reinforcing mechanisms, intergenerational dialogue generates valuable inputs for integrated peace-building initiatives. Inclusive participation nurtures empathy and normative change, while protected spaces enable candid expressions of pain, responsibility, and loss. Central to this process is the creation of forums where suffering can be articulated and acknowledged—an indispensable step in processing generational trauma and advancing reconciliation.

Comparative experiences from post-conflict

societies across Sub-Saharan Africa illustrate the transformative potential of structured intergenerational approaches. In Rwanda, initiatives such as Multifamily Healing Spaces have brought together survivors and perpetrators' families in facilitated dialogues addressing invisible wounds, improving communication, parenting practices, and social cohesion. Participants report shifts from confrontation to active listening, enabling parents to discuss traumatic histories more constructively while allowing youth to articulate how these legacies shape their lives. In Burundi, community psychotherapy followed by intergenerational dialogues has challenged ethnic stereotypes, fostered empathy, and strengthened individual and collective resilience. In Somalia, transitional justice efforts incorporating intergenerational dialogue and psychosocial support have tried to address historical grievances while generating recommendations for integrating mental health care into reconciliation processes. These models demonstrate how deliberate, facilitated dialogue—often combining therapeutic and civic dimensions—can counter the manipulation of history, reduce susceptibility to hate ideologies exacerbated by social media disinformation, and equip youth to resist polarization while contributing to peaceful societies. For Ethiopia, adapting such context-sensitive approaches might offer a promising pathway for healing transgenerational wounds and building lasting social cohesion. Intergenerational dialogue thus serves as an essential bridge, enabling successive generations to engage honestly with inherited triumphs and failures, refine a shared national vision, and construct a resilient political order capable of addressing inequality, fragmentation, institutional decay, governance deficits, and barriers to sustainable peace.

The Challenges and Transformative Potential of Intergenerational Dialogue in Ethiopia

Intergenerational dialogue in Ethiopia confronts formidable structural, historical, and psychological obstacles rooted in decades of state violence, communal conflict, and unresolved political

ruptures. These legacies have deeply scared multiple generations and produced a political culture marked by fear, silence, and selective memory. A persistent reluctance—or inability—to confront questions of accountability has allowed grievances to fester beneath the surface, reproducing cycles of mistrust, suspicion, and unhealed trauma. Rather than being processed collectively, painful experiences have often been internalized or transmitted informally within families and communities, creating generational fault lines that complicate open engagement.

These challenges are compounded by Ethiopia's entrenched political culture of hierarchy and coercion, where authority has historically flowed downward, and dissent has been punished rather than deliberated. Profound communication and values gaps have emerged as a result of sharply divergent life experiences. Older generations, socialized under imperial centralization, Derg-era repression, or the at times inflexible constraints of ethnic federalism and its competitive identity politics, tend to prioritize collective survival, order, and deference to authority. Younger generations, by contrast, have come of age in an era of global digital connectivity, exposure to transnational norms, and heightened awareness of rights and accountability, while simultaneously facing chronic unemployment, blocked mobility, and forced migration. These contrasting worldviews frequently generate mutual misinterpretation, with disagreements over national priorities framed not as legitimate differences but as moral or existential threats.

Power asymmetries further exacerbate these tensions. Cultural norms that emphasize respect for elders—valuable in many social contexts—can inadvertently suppress younger voices, especially when combined with the political and ethnic legacies of past conflicts. Many young Ethiopians view elders as either complicit in historical failures or as gatekeepers who monopolize political and economic opportunities. Conversely, elders often interpret youth activism as reckless, disrespectful, or destabilizing, particularly when it challenges long-standing narratives of authority and unity. This reciprocal suspicion makes genuine engagement difficult, rendering intergenerational

dialogue hesitant, defensive, and emotionally charged.

The absence of safe, neutral, and trusted spaces for dialogue significantly undermines meaningful exchange. In both rural kebeles and urban centers, political polarization has transformed communal spaces into arenas of surveillance, protest, or factional control rather than sites of open deliberation. Logistical barriers—linguistic diversity, regional fragmentation, resource constraints, and time pressures driven by economic precarity—further limit participation. As a result, many dialogue initiatives risk devolving into superficial encounters or top-down monologues, where dominant voices prevail, and the promise of mutual learning remains unrealized.

Unresolved intergenerational trauma presents another profound barrier. Events such as the Red Terror, prolonged civil wars, mass displacement, and recent episodes of communal violence have left enduring psychological wounds. Within families, histories of loss, survival, or trauma are often shrouded in silence, inhibiting emotional vulnerability and honest reflection. At the societal level, the failure to collectively process these experiences has normalized violence as a political instrument and discouraged empathy across generational and communal divides. The systematic exclusion of youth from formal decision-making processes—particularly during elite-driven political transitions—has further entrenched disengagement, reinforcing perceptions that dialogue is performative rather than consequential.

Socioeconomic inequalities intensify these divides. High levels of youth unemployment, limited access to land and capital, and stark urban–rural disparities transform generational differences into sources of resentment rather than collaboration. Migration, whether internal or elsewhere, drains communities of young people while deepening perceptions of abandonment and betrayal. In this context, intergenerational tensions are not merely cultural or attitudinal; they are embedded in material conditions that shape life chances and political behavior.

Despite these formidable challenges, context-sensitive mitigation strategies offer pathways toward transformation. Ethiopia possesses resilient cultural assets that can be mobilized to support authentic intergenerational engagement. Creating dedicated safe spaces by revitalizing and adapting traditional forums—while ensuring their political neutrality—can provide familiar yet protected environments for dialogue. Trained facilitators with deep knowledge of Ethiopia's ethnic, linguistic, and historical sensitivities are essential to enforce balanced participation, prevent domination by authority figures, and foster mutual respect. Integrating psychosocial elements drawn from community-based healing practices can help address trauma and emotional readiness before engaging in contentious political discussions.

Institutional reforms are equally critical. Meaningful inclusion of youth in formal decision-making—through mandatory quotas in national and local processes, including ongoing National Dialogue initiatives—can signal genuine commitment rather than symbolic engagement. Linking dialogue to tangible socioeconomic interventions, such as livelihood programs, skills development, and local economic initiatives, can further ground conversations in lived realities and demonstrate that dialogue is not detached from material concerns. When dialogue is paired with opportunity, it becomes a catalyst for cooperation rather than a forum for airing grievances alone.

At its deepest level, intergenerational dialogue in Ethiopia demands moral courage and collective introspection. It requires Ethiopians to confront uncomfortable truths—not only about historical atrocities, but also about widespread poverty, stagnant socioeconomic transformation, and recurring political violence. The objective should not be retribution, but a form of collective cleansing through acknowledgment of shared failures, including moments when society remained silent in the face of injustice and mass suffering. Such honesty can help rebalance distorted power relations, address the misuse of state authority, and challenge the normalization of impunity.

This process calls for what might be termed *reparative citizenship*—a civic ethos that views politics not as a zero-sum contest but as a creative and ethical project aimed at restoring humanity. Reparative citizenship demands accountability not only for past wrongs but also for how present actions shape the futures of generations yet to come. While the scars of Ethiopia's past cannot be erased, deliberate and sustained intergenerational dialogue offers a means to prevent their repetition, soften inherited suspicions, and lay the foundations for a more humane, inclusive, and forward-looking political order.

Lessons from Global Survivors and the Risk of Internalized Hate

Comparative global experiences—most poignantly those of Holocaust survivors—offer sobering lessons about the long-term consequences of unprocessed trauma and the absence of intergenerational dialogue. One survivor famously warned that the death of a perpetrator, even one as symbolic as Adolf Hitler, does not in itself end the violence. The true danger lies in what remains when hatred, fear, mistrust, and dehumanization are internalized by victims and passed down to subsequent generations. When this occurs, the perpetrator's legacy endures not through power, but through psychological inheritance. Violence, in this sense, survives its authors by colonizing the inner worlds of those it once oppressed.

In Ethiopia's context, the implications of this warning are profound. Decades of political repression, civil war, mass displacement, and communal violence have generated layers of trauma that, if left unexamined, risk eroding the nation's moral and emotional foundations. Without sustained intergenerational exchange, survivors and their descendants may gradually lose the capacity for trust, solidarity, and collective hope. Pain becomes normalized, suspicion becomes rationalized, and the imagination of a shared future shrinks. In such an environment, even peace agreements or political reforms struggle to take root, as the deeper relational fabric necessary for coexistence remains fractured.

Intergenerational dialogue is therefore indispensable to the task of future-making. It creates a structured space in which Ethiopians can collectively articulate the country they wish to inhabit—one grounded in inclusion, dignity, and shared responsibility rather than exclusion and fear.

This requires more than symbolic reconciliation; it demands substantive conversations about the institutions, norms, principles, and laws that regulate state-society relations. Through equitable, tolerant, and participatory engagement, dialogue can transform abstract aspirations into concrete political and social projects, shaping national destiny through deliberation rather than coercion.

Fostering Reconciliation and Breaking Cycles of Division

When anchored in empathy and mutual recognition, intergenerational dialogue becomes a powerful instrument for reconciliation in post-conflict societies. It enables participants to move across temporal boundaries—looking backward to reckon honestly with historical injustices while simultaneously projecting forward toward a more interdependent and equitable social order. This dual orientation is essential: without historical reckoning, the future remains haunted; without future-oriented imagination, remembrance risks devolving into grievance.

Such dialogue directly challenges the entrenched cultures of suspicion, fear, mistrust, and political violence that have been inherited across generations. By confronting these legacies openly, intergenerational engagement can disrupt the normalization of violence as a legitimate political tool. It creates the conditions for collaboration across ethnic, regional, and generational divides, enabling diverse actors to pursue meaningful social, economic, and political transformation. In doing so, dialogue shifts reconciliation from a narrow legal or elite-driven exercise into a lived societal process that heals communities as well as individuals.

Conclusion: Toward National Renewal and Co-Authoring the Next Chapter

When carefully designed and implemented in line with its core principles—namely inclusivity, reciprocity, and structured facilitation—intergenerational dialogue holds substantial promise for addressing one of the deepest drivers of Ethiopia's contemporary crisis: the erosion of shared national meaning that underpins polarization and social fragmentation. By enabling sustained and purposeful engagement across generations, such dialogue can support the emergence of a collective interpretation of history that is responsive to present realities while oriented toward common aspirations for the future. This capacity is especially vital in light of the insight, articulated by public intellectuals such as Kebour Ghenna, that while Ethiopia has historically endured diversity and shifts in power, it cannot indefinitely survive a condition in which different communities inhabit mutually exclusive truths without an overarching framework of shared meaning. The result of this condition has been a fragmented polity marked by rival narratives of imperial domination, coercive expansion, heroic survival, and systemic exclusion.

In bridging these generational and interpretive divides, intergenerational dialogue transcends mere conversation. It becomes a catalyst for long-elusive national renewal—a deliberate act of co-creation in which inherited trauma meets youthful agency, yielding not only the possibility of peace but the foundations of a reimagined national ethos. Its transformative potential lies in reclaiming history not as an inventory of grievances but as a shared reservoir of lessons, capable of binding a fractured society into a more resilient whole.

Ultimately, Ethiopia's trajectory will be shaped not only by constitutions, elections, or security interventions, but by the collective ability of Ethiopians to articulate a coherent answer to a fundamental question: what does it mean, and what ought it mean, to be Ethiopian today—across political, social, economic, legal, and institutional spheres? Without a persuasive response—anchored in a renewed civic covenant that acknowledges historical injustices without

weaponizing them, affirms cultural diversity without entrenching defensive exclusivities, and prioritizes civic solidarity over primordial identity while respecting difference—the future is unlikely to diverge meaningfully from the past.

Intergenerational dialogue is indispensable to meeting this challenge. It serves as a temporal bridge, rendering the lived experiences, ethical commitments, and hard-earned insights of older generations intelligible and relevant to younger cohorts, while preventing critical collective wisdom from being lost amid generational discontinuities. By institutionalizing such dialogue, Ethiopia can begin to forge a new civic covenant, addressing the roots of fragmentation where history has become a battlefield rather than a shared inheritance.

National renewal requires not only moral courage—the willingness to confront uncomfortable truths and align insight with corrective action across social, political, economic, and institutional domains—but also the recognition that intergenerational exchange is a strategic necessity. It is the most effective means of preventing generational rupture, countering the miscommunication of trauma, assumptions, and aspirations that perpetuate cycles of grievance. In this sense, dialogue is not peripheral but foundational: a mechanism for examining inherited norms and power relations in order to build accountability, resilient governance, and sustainable peace. Through it, a crisis of meaning can be transformed into an inclusive national narrative co-authored across generations.

Intergenerational dialogue must therefore be understood as an act of national construction. It connects past, present, and future, strengthening social cohesion while demanding restraint and responsibility from all sides. When genuinely inclusive, it becomes a powerful vehicle for addressing interlinked challenges—from social justice and human rights to sustainable development, climate change, and peacebuilding. Crucially, it must extend beyond healing historical trauma to interrogate the structural roots of poverty, inequality, and persistent underdevelopment. Moral renewal must be matched with material foundations for dignity—

employment, food security, equitable access to resources, and visible progress—without which consent remains hollow, and stability fragile.

Today's young Ethiopians are the most globally connected generation in the country's history, equipped with unprecedented access to ideas, technologies, and networks capable of revitalizing economic and social life. Yet without meaningful inclusion, guidance, and shared agency, these potential risks being squandered amid hardened identities and territorialized grievances. The systematic exclusion of youth from decisions that will define their futures—often justified through selective mobilization of history—serves neither stability nor progress. It traps collective memory in perpetual conflict and leaves communities isolated, each asking the same anxious question: who protects us now?

Intergenerational dialogue offers a different path. It opens the past not as a terrain for endless contestation, but as a source of insight—revealing the norms and values that shaped earlier choices, acknowledging both domination and resilience in state formation, and enabling younger generations to retain what is useful while discarding what no longer serves a humane future. Ethiopia's national narrative is currently caught in a cycle of inherited grievance and generational rupture, where history functions as perpetual accusation rather than as a basis for repair.

Institutionalizing intergenerational dialogue is the most reliable way to disrupt this pattern and transform a fractured legacy into a shared inheritance—one that no single group owns, but all can choose to sustain. Only when past and present generations convene as co-authors—listening as much as speaking, mourning together while envisioning renewal, and rejecting the logic that one group's pain cancels or justifies another's—can Ethiopia reclaim its history without being imprisoned by it. The era of isolated monologues has run its course. What is now required is a unified, courageous, and forward-looking conversation capable of laying the foundations for continuity, peace, and prosperity—a nation understood not as a prize to be captured, but as a shared home in which all can live with dignity.