

Community Policing or Policing the Community? The Emerging Police Practice in Ethiopia

Yeshiwas Degu Belay

College of Law and Governance, Mekelle University, P.O.Box 452, Mekelle, Ethiopia

Abstract: *The implementation of community policing, which strives to change the very nature of police practice, is a complex and difficult task in a country with the experience of strong public suspicion and mistrust towards the police apparatus. Materializing the ideas into day to day activities and motivating officers to adopt new instructions and changing their traditional police practice are quite difficult. Moreover, making the communities to engage in partnership with the police is perhaps the most challenging issue to overcome. The main objective of this study is to investigate the practice of community policing in Ethiopia with a particular focus on Bahir Dar town, the capital of Amhara regional state, as a case study. Using qualitative research methods, this article argues that the police department in Bahir Dar has been implementing community policing since 2007 which can be seen from three different levels: individual, community and organizational. At the individual level officers were provided with training to improve their competence in crime prevention and problem solving activities. At the community level the police department has made a great effort to reach out to communities that had long been "alienated" from the police. At the organizational level, the department has restructured itself in order to embed the philosophy of community policing. However, community policing in Bahir Dar is the practice of a specific and specialized Community Policing Sub-Unit rather than a department wide organizational and operational activity.*

Keywords: Community policing, police, community, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia

1. Introduction

There has been a glaring acceptance of the idea that without security there can be no development. Security from disorder, crime and violence is fundamental for reducing poverty and achieving sustainable socio-economic and political developments [1]. The police force, one of the main providers of security, can play an important role in creating conditions in which development can take place through maintaining security and order, upholding the rule of law and performing their duties with sensitivity and regard for members of the community [2]. Hence, without sense of safety, security and order that the police can provide, the potential for wider political, social and economic development dips dramatically [3].

Ethiopia established a modern law enforcement and administrative justice in the early 20th Century. A modern police system by the name of *Arada Zebegna* had been established in 1917. During the time of Emperor Hialesellassie (1931- 1974), the main role of the police had been "to protect peace, order and security of the communities" [4] [5]. However, all sorts of police extra-legal and brutal activities come to the surface [6]. The police continued to serve the regime of the day during the period of the *Dergue* military rule (1974-1991). Though the police were not solely responsible the regime has left terrible memories of brutal lawless law enforcement [5].

Following the coming into power of Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in May 1991, the whole structure of the police force was reorganized under the policy of decentralization. However, the police couldn't confidently pronounce that its relations with the communities and its effort in providing security and order have significantly improved [5].

Since security is a precondition for sustainable development, security sector reform (SSR) is essential in the transition from war to peace in conflict affected countries; without which democracy would not be consolidated, while good governance and economic development would remain elusive [7] [8]. Since the early 2000s, in lined with the above idea, Business Process Reengineering (BPR), a reform process in the police organization, has been undergoing in many police departments throughout the country amid at institutional improvement and better service delivery. The very fact of considering their work as "service delivery" is in itself seems a basic departure from the past policing strategies.

Recently, many police departments have implemented community policing as an important police strategy and practice. In Amhara National Regional State (ANRS), it has become a vital policing model. In Bahir Dar, the capital of the ANRS, the police department has been implementing this strategy since 2007. This study is a first step towards gaining this knowledge in-depth.

2. Conceptual Framework

The term community policing has a recent usage and appears to be increasingly popular around the world. It has received a widespread support from politicians, academics and the media [9] [10]. It has a strong intuitive appeal to the general public. This new terminology has multivariate definitions and thus it does not lend itself to easy conceptualization [11]. There is, therefore, no unanimity of opinion on what constitutes community policing. However, there is a need to reflect briefly what has been found in the literature.

Community policing, or simply, policing with and part of the community originated in England, is both a philosophy (a way of thinking) and organizational strategy (a way of

executing) that allows the police and the community to work together to solve problems of crime and disorder [12]. As defined by *Sage Dictionary of Criminology* it:

...promotes community-based problem-solving strategies to address the underlying causes of crime and disorder, and fear of crime and provides reassurance. It is a process by which crime control is shared, [...] with the public, and a means of developing communication with the public thus enhancing the quality of communities and building police legitimacy. [13]

The police can't successfully prevent or investigate crime based exclusively on their own resource. Thereupon, they should transform communities from being passive consumers of police protection to active co-products of public safety. Community policing is this 'collaborative effort between the police and the community that identifies problems of crime and disorder and involve all elements of the community in the search for solutions to these problems'. It infers a partnership between the police and community members to improve the quality of life through implementation of strategies to enhance neighborhood solidarity and safety [14]. Thus, it also rests on the view that in order to find solutions to community problems, the police and the public must move beyond a narrow focus on individual crimes or incidents, and instead consider innovative ways of addressing community concerns [3].

Robert R. Friedman (1992) viewed community policing from three perspectives. (1)From the police perspective: there is a need to improve ties with the community for relying on more community resources to assist police work, improving police basis of intelligence gathering, and increasing police legitimacy within the community; (2)from the community perspective: there is an increasing recognition that the community deserves and should relieve improved service, greater police accountability, and increased power sharing in police decision making; and (3)from both the police and community perspective: community policing assumes that crime related problems are produced by societal factors over which police have relatively little control [10]

Therefore, community policing is not a simple policy or strategic change. It is not a mere restructuring of the police to provide the same service more effectively. Nor it is a cosmetic decoration designed to impress the public [15]. It is a different and by large a new way of life for police officers to see themselves and to understand their role in a community. It envisages a police department striving for an absence of crime and disorder and concerned with, and sensitive to the quality of life. It also provides a problem solving partnership and shared responsibility with community members.

3. Research Site and Methods

3.1 Research Site

The naming of Bahir Dar, which laterally mean near to lake, has a connection with its near proximity to the two water bodies of Lake *Tana* and River *Abay*. The town is found in Northwest part of Ethiopia, at a distance of 578 kms from

Addis Ababa, the capital of the country. It is bordered by Lake *Tana*, source of Blue Nile, on the north and crossed by *Abay* River on the east [16]. At present, Bahir Dar is the capital of the Amhara National Regional State.

The town has an estimated total population of 182,676, of whom 93,610 (51%) are male and 89,066(49%) are female, with an estimated area of 28 square kilometer [17]. Administered by the municipal authority, the town is divided into 21 administrative *kebeles*, the smallest administrative organizations. *Belay Zeleke*, *Tana*, *Fasilo* and *Gish Abay kebeles* were purposively selected on the basis of their progress in implementing community policing strategy as the police department report shows. The first three were the pilot sites (in 2007) of community policing implementation.

3.2 Methods

This qualitative study has employed three research methods: semi-structured interviews with purposively selected two police officers from the Amhara National Regional State Police Commission and two officers from the Bahir Dar Police Department; in-depth interview with 20 local police officers and 16 community elders; and non-participant personal observation. The relevant police department files, legal documents and reports were also utilized.

4. The Historical Context of Policing in Bahir Dar

In light with the post 1991 policy of decentralization in Ethiopia, regional states established their own police institution. As a result, the Amhara National Regional State (ANRS) Police Commission was established to maintain law and order in the region. The police role has been decentralized up to local administrative level that can easily be accessible to the community.

The Bahir Dar Police Department is one of law enforcement agencies in the region responsible for preserving peace, security and order of the people of the town. It is organized as a town police force with six police main stations in 21 *kebeles*. Community Based Crime Prevention, Crime Investigation, Human Resource Development and Administration and Traffic are the main units. It has employed a total number of 457 sworn and non-sworn personnel of which 381 (83%) are male and 76(17%) are female. They are obliged, among other things, to wear the light blue uniform which is "assumed to show how friendly the police are towards the community" [18]. Roughly 54% of the police personnel are assigned to the Community Based Crime Prevention Main Unit.

Through its mission statement, which found at the gate of each police station, the police department says: "with broader community participation and strong information system, preventing crime, conducting good quality crime investigation and providing traffic safety to preserve the peace and order of the people of the town". This mission statement describes the department that is clearly committed to the community it serves

4.1 Crime Setting and Police Practice

The police force exists to ensure the continued existence of vital elements of personal life; the protection of life and property against criminal attack and the preservation of the peace. In reality, these elements have been threatened in Bahir Dar. The major crime-related problems include: house break-ins, theft, cheating and sometimes murder. Consequently, community's way of life and property were rendered insecure, peace and stability was disturbed and economic activities were interrupted. The police had been relying on reactive strategies to suppress crime "though supposed to maintain stable conditions of social life through proactive crime prevention strategy at the first place" [19]. The principal aim of policing had been to address crimes and capture criminals, rather than proactively to address and reduce crime and fear of insecurity.

Police practice was much more problematic. The police might capture many criminals, but if it does so, by using brutal methods. It was a policing practice based up on "unconstitutional act" of "controlling illegal acts illegally". Excessive force was the weapon utilized on the part of the police [18]. These practices had never prevented crime and disorder behaviors.

4.2 Police- Community Relations

Historically, the police in Ethiopia had lost a good relation with the community. This is true to varying extent in almost any areas across the Amhara region [19]. Police officers had little interaction with the community. In essence, police contact with the individuals mostly occurred only when a matter of criminal law is involved. The police departments, including in Bahir Dar, paid little attention to the inclusion of the community in policing matters. Opportunities for participation in policing had not been offered or community empowerment had been significantly ignored.

The community had been less sympathetic and friendly. The police had a reputation for rudeness, brutality, dishonest and partiality. For a long period, policing practices had kept suspicions and mistrust between the police and the community which discarded the chance to establish a cooperative relation. The community was substantially unwilling to voluntarily assist the police [19].

Recently, however, the police department has acknowledged the importance of community participation, and called upon police offices to develop new partnerships. In 2004 the Amhara National Regional State Police Commission and Militia Office established territorial based community crime prevention structures known as "*Yegott Yewenjel Mekelakel Aderejajetoch*". The program was practiced in Bahir Dar. Certainly, the effort of crime prevention at the most local level has been a priority issue in practice since this time onwards. This endeavor has achieved some encouraging results: improved police- community relations and relatively reduced crime problems in two consecutive years. However, its capacity and opportunity to work with the community and to increase their support in crime prevention activities

remained highly constrained, and thus police- community relations remained unsatisfactory during these years.

5. Community Policing in Bahir Dar

The concept of community policing has been in Ethiopia for more than a decade. However, due to the lack of genuine awareness and understanding it has not been implemented until recently. In 2006, the Amhara Regional State Police Commission adopted a *Community Policing Strategy Manual*, which is the basis for all community policing efforts in the region. The manual describes that 'community policing' is as philosophy of crime prevention and an organizational strategy whereby both the police and the community work together to address crime, fear of crime and social and physical disorder. The manual offers strategic guidelines. It stated that the main objective of community policing is providing basic solutions to basic problems rather than controlling crime problems. More fundamentally, it articulates that policing practice should "place the highest value on preservation of human life".

It focuses on establishing continuous police-community relations based [19]. By soliciting community cooperation police can get improved information, resources and moral support to make their work more effective [20].

5.1 Implementation of Community Policing

The implementation of community policing came to existence due to the ineffectiveness of past policing strategy, i.e., "traditional policing" to reduce crime problems effectively, and the lack of viable organizational structure to strength police- community relations. The ability of police force to preserve peace and order through law enforcement based exclusively on their resource has been hardly effective.

It is recognized that the implementation of community policing should be appropriate to the needs and realities of communities while holding the core principles of community engagement, problem solving and organizational change [21]. The *Community Policing Strategy Manual* pointed out that different communities have different policing priorities and needs, and therefore, the implementation of community policing should be *kebele* based [19]. Certainly, a best-fit approach is more important than best practice to implement this strategy, and that it appears that because community policing is concerned with local conditions. Therefore, community policing is not monolithic but it is adaptable to the nature of the community where it is being implemented that enables to adopt local solutions to local problems.

In 2007 the ANRS Police Commission officially launched the implementation of community policing in all Zones, in 46 *woredas* (28.93%) and 333 urban and rural *kebeles* (9.87%). Bahir Dar was one of the pilot sites.

5.1.1 Entry Points

The Amhara regional state has its own. On the basis of this constitution there are certain legal frameworks that enable the regional administration to implement community

policing. For example: article 49(3.9) states that the council of regional government assumes directives necessary for preserve the peace and security of the region and establish its own security and police force; and article 98(9) states the council of *kebele* administration ensures the preservation of peace and security of the public and maintenance of law and order throughout the *kebele*. The existence of such constitutional-legal frameworks can be seen as 'windows of opportunity' for the ANRS Police Commission to implement community policing in the region. The second most important entry point is the territorial based crime prevention structures developed since 2004, aimed at reducing crime problems and public disorder. These structures emphasized on the need for cooperative efforts between the police and the community. This endeavor, with its encouraging outcomes, has laid down the foundation for community policing.

5.1.2 The Implementation Process

The implementation of robust community policing strategy is a complicated and multifaceted process which requires key changes at every level of police department and each areas of police work as the organization began to adopt procedures consistent with the new approach. In doing so, it requires both time and a substantial effort. For the purpose of this study the implementation of community policing in Bahir Dar is examined into two stages.

1. The Preparatory Stage

This stage allows the police department to assess the political and security context. It can also help to establish a cooperative relation with the community and other public agencies in order to enable understanding and dialogue on security and safety issues and to conduct assessment on potential resources. The key activities that are incorporated in this stage include the following:

Training: In order to make the implementation process so effective as well as sustainable, the capacity of police and local communities to undertake community-based policing need be strengthened. To this end, it is vital to provide training for both the police and the community. Particularly, it plays a key role in shaping the values and norms of police officers at individual level.

Accordingly, the Bahir Dar Police Department has provided training for police officers about the concept and the strategy of community policing. It has also conducted meetings to disseminate the importance of this new strategy. Voluntary officers who would be community policing trainers and subsequently community policing officers were recruited from the existing officers based on their work experience, educational level and strong commitment. They received in-service training on the areas of communication, interpersonal relations, conflict resolution and problem-solving. The police department in collaboration with the ANRS Police Commission has also launched field training to ensure that these recruited officers and their immediate coordinators have understood their new responsibility. Although the training was limited in its scope and time, it is reasonable to say that in its early inception, community policing training was provided.

The police department has also conducted public meetings with officials, representative groups from residents, businessmen, youth and women associations and NGOs to discuss about the benefit and concept of community policing. Otherwise, it would be difficult for community policing to consistently reach its potential unless all the parties share an understanding of its philosophy.

Resource Mobilization: To carry out and sustain the implementation process, the Bahir Dar police department has initially explored public and private sources of funding. Unlike the USA experience where the movement towards community policing has been supported by the federal government, local funds have been providing substantial incentives and resource for the implementation and expansion of community poling. In particular, the Office of City Administration allocated a large amount of many to construct community policing centers in piloted sites and to fulfill the necessary logistic. Private business owners and other nongovernmental agenesis (like Forum for Street Children) have also contributed financially.

Selection of Pilot Sites: With feelings of insecurity running high across the town, potential pilot sites were not easy to identify because there was an intention that the pilot projects shouldn't be ineffective, rather the realistic one and replicable elsewhere in the town. Having this in mind, three pilot *kebeles* *Belay Zeleke*, *Tana* and *Sefene Selam* were selected, but without a clear justification.

2. Institutionalization and expansion stage

This stage involves the implementation of action plan that have been developed. Initially, community policing Coordinators, within the Crime Prevention Unit, were assigned for each police main stations such as 8th, 4th and 6th found in *Sefene Selam*, *Belay Zeleke* and *Tana pilot Kebeles* respectively. Newly trained community policing officers have been assigned in 20 community policing centers. Community policing officers introduced themselves to members of the community where they assigned to work, registered members of each household and provided their phone number. This practice has its own rationality. Effective problem- solving and public safety is dependent upon knowing the territory and the people who reside and work effectively to gain their support [18]. Soon, efforts have been made to discuss about community policing and crime prevention issues with members of the community.

Since the 2007, community policing has been expanding citywide and now it covers all police main stations and all administrative *kebeles* in the town. A few successes of the project, including declined crime rate and police visibility in pilot *kebeles*, had "a spillover effect" in other *kebeles* in demanding the implementation of the program. As the program expanded, in 2008 10 new *kebeles* practiced community policing while the number of officers and community policing centers grew to a total of 53 and 46 respectively. Currently, there are more than 85 community policing centers and more than 100 center officers.

In sum, community policing at the Bahir Dar Police Department appears to have evolved from the territorial based crime prevention structure that can be seen retrospectively as the first step toward what would later evolve into a department effort to incorporate community policing. The implementation process has been carried out based on plan and implementation approach in which both process occurred simultaneously that allowed the department to implement certain programmatic elements of community policing in pilot sites while the planning process continues.

6. Community Policing in Practice

Community policing, which theoretically represents a new and innovative police strategies can be implemented in many different ways in practice with different schemes, patrol modes, operation functions, geographic scope and degree of community engagement [22]. In fact, understanding the philosophy of community policing is not the same as its practical implementation. Therefore, what does community policing look like in practice in Bahir Dar?

6.1 Broad Police Function

One of the most significant changes observed is the change in nature of police work. Community policing officers have been dealing with a broad range of problems, not simply crime. They define themselves as “de-facto leaders” of the community. While reducing crime remains a key function, officers have been working as community organizers and problem solvers to help reduce fear of crime and improve the overall quality of neighborhood life. They engaged in organizing the youth and street children to help prevent them from getting associated with criminal activities. They also tried in addressing many cases of domestic violence and neighborhood conflicts. This overall practice demonstrates “an expansion of the police mandate” [23].

6.2 Community Involvement

The community has been widely taken as a resource to be mobilized to, reduce tension between police and public and, control and prevent crime [24]. Accordingly, the communities in Bahir Dar are represented and engaged in policing practice in two major ways, through *Consultative Councils and Public Meetings*, and thus they are provided with formal access to the decision making process.

Consultative Council: Community policing officers in Bahir Dar are expected to set up formal councils and committees in their respective *zones*. Accordingly, in all geographic zones Consultative Councils are established consisted of representatives from the militia, youth and women associations, religious leaders, elder people, and business men and women. *Kebele* administrators are the chair persons of *kebele* Consultative Councils. Currently, there are more than 953 individuals who are members of *kebele* Consultative Councils (in each *kebele*) and Center Consultative Councils (in each zone). The councils have a supportive role and can serve as a step in providing the local authority a say in policing affairs.

Generally, the major functions of consultative councils include: advising and providing information for community policing officers; allowing residents to ventilate grievances against the police; solving neighborhood conflict and patrolling together with community policing officer; and mobilizing the community in local development project. For these functions, the councils are divided into several committees: the *Developmental Committee, Conflict Resolution Committee, Advisory Committee and Resource Mobilization Committee*.

Community Meetings: Meetings are important tools available for community engagement. Street meetings or briefings to street children, the youth and merchants and locality based meetings with residents are common once in Bahir Dar. Community meetings have been held in every zone once in two months to discuss with officers on local security issues and strategies. These meetings provide an open forum where individuals may bring problem and allow them to be addressed with the appropriate joint police and community response. Community meetings are also a line of communications where the police department able to inform the community of its programs and enlist community help in crime prevention projects.

6.3 Community Policing strategies and tactics

Strategies and tactics are key operational elements that translate the general philosophy of community policing into actions and behavior. These include the following:

Geographic Focus: By involving the same officer in the same community on a longer term basis, resident will develop trust in providing information to the police. To execute this idea, more than 100 community policing offices are assigned in 83 community policing centers [18]. All *kebele* administrations are subdivided in to several *zones* (named as *Zone A- G*) for the purpose of community policing, ‘which can help to tailor problem solving efforts to the communities’ unique problems’ [25]. Thus, community policing officers, most of whom are assigned for more than two years in specific areas, are responsible for small geographic areas, i.e., *zones*, so that they can able to know residents, social problems and their concerns.

Crime Prevention Focus: Many officers have based their strategies on the ‘broken windows’ hypothesis of crime reduction through eliminating disorder behavior. To prevent the occurrence of crime problems rather than to react after the incident, the capacity of the community to prevent crime has been strengthened by encouraging them to have civilian patrols. In this regard community members becoming “the first line of defense in the fight against crime [26]. In all *kebeles* more than 150 civilian patrolmen who are locally and formally recruited and paid by the communities are deployed.

The Use of Foot Patrol: It is also the case that the deployment of on foot community policing officers in Bahir Dar has continued. Foot patrol, popular tactic of community policing, may put officers in closer contact with citizen and reduce opportunities for disorder in urban areas [21]. Some

officers are also provided with bicycles (mostly in *Tana* and *Belay Zeleke kebeles*) to enable them to mobilize the community and to make as much interaction with their peers.

Positive Interaction with the Community: it is argued that police should take every opportunity to engage in positive interaction with all members of the community [27]. In doing so, most community policing officers have been attending neighborhood meetings and involved in *Eder* and *Equb*, indigenous community associations in Ethiopia.

Emphasis on Problem-Solving: Although most community policing officers have received little training, they have been using SARA problem solving model which involves scanning, analyzing, response and assessment crime related problems. However, problem analysis and response assessment were not routinely happening.

6.4 Organizational Changes

The movement towards community policing requires of fundamental organizational changes to promote community engagement and effective implementation of principles, strategies and tactics [28]. The Bahir Dar Police Department has made some progress in the area of organizational transformation, but there is a long way ahead. The specific areas of change include police responsibility, command structure, task assignments and evaluation procedures.

Mission statement: Community policing represents shift in the operation mission of policing [28]. At the gate of most police centers there is a written mission statement which tells the primary purpose of community policing. It says “based on [...] problem solving approach implementing community policing to protect the well-being of residents [...] through crime prevention and investigation”.

Decentralization and Supervision: The Police Department in Bahir Dar has provided officers with a sense of ownership and power to make decisions. With less restrictive supervision, they are motivated to identify problems within their respective zones and to undertake problem-solving projects without requesting prior approval. But, they are obliged to inform the Coordinators through reports. While community policing coordinators are responsible for facilitating and coordinating as well as the timely submission of all reports the office of Community Based Crime Prevention main Unit, officers who are responsible for the security and order of their assigned zone are authorized to make appropriate decisions to solve community problems.

Team Work: It seems a reasonable assumption that if community policing depends for its success on an increased flow of information between police and the rest of the community, then an increased flow of information among police officers is also necessary. The police department also changed its system to encourage team work among community policing officers working in *kebeles*. One mechanism is team meeting that brought together all officers twice a week. Community policing Coordinators, who have a supportive and advisory role than leadership, are responsible for arranging meetings.

Performance evaluation: Performance needs to be recognized and measurements need to be developed to give routine feedback about how well officers are doing [23]. The findings show that community policing officers unlike other members in the police department are evaluated based on the following elements: innovative crime prevention strategies, statistics of crime problems in their *zone*, efforts of interaction with private and governmental agencies, efforts of community mobilization and development activities. Rather than simply counting the number of crimes occurred and arrest made, performance is measured based on officers’ ability to solve community problems. Thus, community policing in practice represents not only a change in perspective of conducting policing, but also a change in evaluating policing efforts and police initiated programs.

7. Conclusion

Against the backdrop of the “traditional” model of policing that has operated since the formation of modern police structure in Ethiopia, community policing has appeared as a “transformative model” and a key step for police and community to work together to solve crime related problems and social and physical disorder. During the past seven years community policing has been implemented to an encouraging standard in Bahir Dar. Its philosophy is not only embraced but also practiced throughout the town with a relative uniformity across all community policing centers.

Community members are seen as participants in police affairs. They are also involved in civilian patrols. Besides, they have contributed money to facilitate and support community policing efforts. The role of community policing officers includes assisting the community members in identifying and solving crime problems (as a facilitator), identifying and solving community problems (as an expert), providing training for consultative councils (as an educator), guiding the community in problem solving efforts (as a catalyst of problem solving), and organizing different community groups (as an organizer). Furthermore, the practice of community policing provides access to decision making in local policing (directly or indirectly) to increase community members participation in their own neighborhood security and order.

From these practices community policing can be seen as more than law and order. Indeed, it is an entry point for the introduction of democratic values into policing; it holds the potential for fundamentally altering the traditional policing culture. The consultative councils where police officers interact with the community members at the local level and officer’s accountability to members of the community are the democratic dimension of community policing. These councils consisted of the representatives of community residents, elder, women and youth associations, public agencies and local authorities. This is a great manifestation that community policing is “democratic in action”.

Furthermore, the practice of community policing can contribute to a wider poverty reduction strategy. When successfully executed, it can both develop security and

secure development. It can ensure the safety and security needs of all groups in a particular community. While effectively combating crime, addressing local needs can improve safety and security and strengthens the conditions for development to take place.

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Author Profile

Yeshiwas Degu Belay received the B.A. Degree in Political Science and International Relations and M.A. degree in Peace and Security Studies from Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia, and M.A. in Development Studies from the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), The Netherlands. Currently, he is a Lecturer in Mekelle University Ethiopia.