

OPEN LETTER

October 21, 2004

H.E. Ato Meles Zenawi
Chairperson, Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front
Addis Ababa

Your Excellency,

This letter is in reference to the civil society debate organized by Inter Africa Group (IAG) and held on Sunday, September 26, 2004. Representing the NGO sector, we participated in the debate and although the format and the level of focus on the subject of discussion had limitations, we found the varying ideas exchanged to be quite interesting.

The NGO sector in Ethiopia is a sector whose operation is purely based on volunteerism, a self-initiation and earnest willingness to help the marginalized and disadvantaged Ethiopians in improving their lives. Accordingly, not only do we make contributions towards the development effort, but also mobilize funds from abroad and design projects and programs that benefit the lowest level - grassroots. NGOs have, in fact, been quoted to be the only organs that work at the lowest level of development and the remotest parts of the country; and are thus, the closest to the reality of poverty. Furthermore, the limited studies conducted on NGOs indicate that 20% and above of total aid to the country is channeled through NGOs. Considering this figure, it is hardly possible to state that NGOs' work is negligible. Furthermore, NGOs have been the primary actors in saving millions of lives in times of emergency relief and this has been a contribution much recognized by the Government.

We believe that as much as we have to learn from our partners, we also have knowledge and experience that we can pass on. This has been evident especially in our programs of food security, education, health, income generating schemes, etc., which the Government has not only accepted as workable and effective but is also now adopting some of the approaches as part of the national poverty reduction program. Similarly, the Government is involving NGOs in national programs such as the Sustainable Development for Poverty Reduction Program (SDPRP) and Capacity Building Program. Thus, we believe taking advantage of such collaboration, the Government can benefit from considering NGOs' programs in its development plan, thereby maximizing resources and efficiency. Dialogue and debate between our two sectors can help in fostering this, should the Government positively consider such mechanisms.

Despite these obvious facts, we have been surprised and even found confusing to hear the negative statement given at the debate by the EPRDF representative against the NGO sector. While working in close consultation and collaboration with the Government we have been receiving positive responses even from the highest body, which is a contradiction to the statements made by the above representative. The understanding between NGOs and government and the state of operation of NGOs has been one of complementarity, which has been appreciated by both sectors. This has been a promising move only to be overshadowed by the statement, which not only negates efforts of building a firm base between the two organs, but



also gives a false image to the general public, seriously hampering the good partnership work.

We would like to stress the fact that as legally registered organizations, NGOs' operation is guided by regulations to which we abide by. As a senior official of the ruling party and the Government, we believe the EPRDF representative should know very well how NGOs carry out their programs in Ethiopia and to what extent they are tied by stiff regulations. We also believe that the EPRDF - led Government is well aware of our contributions through our annual narrative and audit reports submitted regularly. In view of the above, the EPRDF representative's statement is not only baseless but also self-defeating in that it casts question marks about the credibility of the Government's own institutions that monitor NGO operations. Our work is undertaken in close consultation with government bodies, which can, in fact provide required information on NGOs.

Accountability is an important element in the work of NGOs. The sector is morally accountable to the Ethiopian people who are the primary recipients of development benefits. Within their own community, NGOs abide by a Code of Conduct, which they have voluntarily developed to govern their professional ethics i.e., to the rules of transparency, accountability and credibility.

NGOs have voluntarily established themselves to work for the good of this country and one of their greatest contributions has been the introduction and growing practice of voluntarism. But labeling us as ineffective defies NGOs, efforts thereby discouraging growth of a sector that Ethiopia can benefit much from. NGOs believe that the success of any development program lies only in the unified effort of the Government, private and civil society sectors; never can one sector account for any positive result single-handedly. This is a universally accepted fact and proven in several countries which have recorded success in their development programs. For this reason, our (Government and NGOs) focus should be on building the partnership foundation rather than eroding the already weak foundation in this aspect!

In light of this, we trust that the accusing statement made by the EPRDF representative may not really represent the thinking of the EPRDF or of the Government nor can it be supported by any evidence. The statement only undermines the work and image of the sector and, therefore, we demand the withdrawal of the statement (that claims NGOs are inefficient development agents). As we work with the poorest of the poor, such statement is damaging as it erodes trust. Expression of trust and confidence of the Government in the NGO sector should not be a hollow statement but actually practiced.

Thus, the following NGOs and NGO platforms, expressing our disappointment in the allegation made against the NGO sector, we expect your Good Office to heed to our request.

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Christian Relief and Development Association (CRDA)

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Consortium of Reproductive Health Association (CORHA)

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Ethiopian Inter Faith Forum for Development Dialogue and Action (EIFDDA)

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Environmental Development Action (ENDA)

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Enweyay Civic and Social Education Center (ECSEC)

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Good Governance Forum

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National NGO Forum

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Network of Ethiopian Women's Associations (NEWA)

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Union of Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations

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