Peace in Action

Transcript

Peace in Action: Episode 4 – Somali Regional State

“We met a woman in a refugee camp in Kenya, from the Somali Region, and we said: ‘What do you want to get from a process like this?’ And I remember she said: ‘I want to see my children.’ She left six of her children. For her that was what peace looked like.”

“So there was a lot of kind of secrecy, I would say, around the idea of peace talks, that it almost doesn’t seem as though the peace talks relate to the fates of millions.”

Welcome to the Peace in Action podcast from Conciliation Resources. I’m Jonathan Cohen, Executive Director of Conciliation Resources. In this series to mark our 30th anniversary, I’ll be talking with some of the people involved in the diverse work of peacebuilding around the world. We’ll hear stories from a range of guest speakers and uncover how dialogue and mediation support can help to create more peaceful societies and bridge divides.

Jonathan Cohen: Joining me today are Aden Abdi and Juweria Ali. Aden, you're joining from Nairobi. Juweria, you're in Birmingham, and I'm calling in from London. So, a little bit of a geographic spread today. Juweria is a Research Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Democracy at the University of Westminster. I'm also very pleased to say that for the current year, you're a British Academy Research Fellow with Conciliation Resources. Aden is the Director of Conciliation Resources’ Africa Department, and has worked with Conciliation Resources since 2012, initially leading our work in the Somali Regional State in Ethiopia, and for the last five years as Director of our Africa department.

Conciliation Resources is marking 30 years of working in peacebuilding and supporting mediation. And the Peace in Action podcast series is looking at dialogue in its various forms, how it has shaped our experience of working alongside people living through violent conflict, and the ways in which dialogue can bring about change. Today we'd like to focus on Conciliation Resources’ experience of supporting the transition from war to peace in the Somali Regional State in Ethiopia, a process we started to support in 2012 which led to the signing of the Asmara Peace Agreement in 2018. Since then, we've been working to support the implementation of that agreement. So, without further ado, I'd like to ask the two of you to give us a sense of what the region is, how the Somali Regional State sits within Ethiopia, and what the background to the conflict is. Perhaps I could turn to you to start Aden.

Aden Abdi: Thank you, Jonathan. I mean this, this conflict in in Ethiopia, in the Somali Region of Ethiopia, also called the Ogaden region of Ethiopia is rooted in identity and also territory. It’s one of those classical kind of African conflicts, where, during colonisation, people were put together into one state where they actually had very little in common or did not actually consent to the to the idea of becoming kind of one country. So, around 1880s is, of course, when the colonialists were coming into this part of the world, in Africa. Ethiopian state, which was Abyssinia at the time, was also expanding to the lowlands of Ethiopia. And then, through various series of treaties Somalis were handed over. This, what we call the Somali Region of Ethiopia, was handed over to Ethiopia. So, then that, of course, was against the… there wasn't an

agreement by the local people. Then with the nation building process, not being inclusive, with, you know, the governance system, of course, not one that allows people of you know, this diverseness strength is also not one of the strengths, of course, of the governments at the time. So, as a result of those factors, then the Somalis started resisting the Ethiopian… that incorporation into Ethiopia, and that's what triggered this conflict. The armed conflict has gone through phases. The latest, the one, the process that we're going to talk about is one led by the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF). And it started in 1994 and that particular conflict came to an end in 2018, so that is the essence of this conflict.

JC: And Aden, what triggered it in 1994?

AA: So, 1994 had particular element to it, but the root causes of the conflict, as I explained earlier, were rooted in territory, identity, belonging the - what we call, in our language - the right to self-determination. So, you know, the right to rule yourself, the right to decide the governance system. So, 1991 Ethiopia's military government collapsed after a series of armed groups brought it to an end. Then Ethiopia came up with a new constitution. It came up with a federal system, and the right to self-determination actually was enshrined in the in the transitional charter, but also in the Constitution in 1994. So ONLF, who were an exiled group, came back to Ethiopia in 1991, or the leadership came back to Ethiopia in 1991, so they contested the elections in 1993 because this is a whole new system. They won majority of the parliamentary elections in the Somali Region. So, by then, the Somali Region has become one of the nine or 10 regional states of Ethiopia. Then when the ONLF then formed the government in the Somali Region, Eritrea, which was part of Ethiopia, also managed to secede. So, then the first thing that Somali… the ONLF-led government did was to ask for secession, similar to Eritrea.

But for the new government in Ethiopia, the federal government, having lost Eritrea in 1993, this group asking for the Somali Region to secede in 1994 was a step too far for them to take. Then that brought them into conflict with each other. So, a regional government that is demanding for secession and the right to self-determination - because there are steps in the Constitution you demand for… the regional parliament votes and if it's two thirds, then the federal government is supposed to organise a referendum that decides the fate of the region. So that's the disagreement. And then some of the ONLF leaders were arrested, some were killed. You know, that's how the violent conflict started in 1994.

JC: Then we had a period of over 20 years of violent conflict. And how did you observe this Juweria, growing up as a member of the diaspora?

Juweria Ali: I came to understand and learn about this conflict, I would say, later on in life, I was born in Copenhagen, grew up in the UK, and my grandparents, actually fled the Haile Selassie regime. So, this is back in the 60s, if not earlier. They fled the region due to violent instability and conflict, came to Somalia, and that's where they established themselves and grew up until the collapse later on, when they then left Somalia and came to Europe.

But I guess my own kind of personal background and personal history shows the intergenerational aspect of the conflict in the Somali Region that Aden was just describing. This continuity across various different Ethiopian regimes, from the monarchy under Haile Selassie to the DAG to the EPRDF. There have always been these specific, kind of structural issues that have inspired conflict or inspired resistance from various communities in the Somali Region.

So, for me, I kind of started engaging with the Somali Region, or came to know the Somali Region very much through a human rights angle. Even though there was a media blockade and a complete embargo on the region after the 2007 Abole bombing, the only way to hear of what was actually happening in the region was through testimonies of people who had fled the region, who had come to neighboring Dadaab and elsewhere. And as someone with family from the region, of course, you've got, you know, you've got those connections. You've got those links. You've got… you'll hear parents or grandparents speaking with relatives who tell them, 'Look, this happened so and so'. But then it was such a surveillance state where even relatives or people living in the region couldn't openly communicate with their relatives abroad to tell them what was happening, because of this understanding that their phones were most likely tapped. People could not even send remittance money.

I mean all that to say my connection was very much through that human rights angle and just seeing family members go to protests. My earliest recollection of just hearing about the Somali Region actually was my uncle going to a protest in Brussels because Meles Zenawi was coming to Brussels for, it was a major international conference, that's what I remember. And you had Somali communities from across Europe, you know, taking like overnight buses traveling to Brussels to protest in the cold. And for me, I was just fascinated by their dedication, curious to learn more about what it is that they were protesting about, mobilising around. And then that's when I came to learn about the genocide that was happening, saw the, you know, the reports that were emerging from the region. So that was my initial engagement.

JC: And so that was through the phase of violent conflict. But in 2012 we reached a position where the Ethiopian government initiated a process of talks. And I remember back in 2012 and Conciliation Resources' office in London, we had a visit from a representative of the ONLF who told us that they had been approached by the Ethiopian government via Kenyan intermediaries and invited into a process of talks. And they were grappling with, 'what do we do with this? We've been fighting, we're in exile. We're not sure how to engage with this request'. And they wanted some advice on how they should take it forward. And we were asking ourselves, "What contribution can we make?" And at that point, Aden, you became involved in our work at Conciliation Resources. I wonder if you can give us a sense of how that very early phase evolved, and what your motivation for becoming involved was, because you, at the time, as a Kenyan Somali, were working in Nairobi, and it'd be great to get a sense from you, taking us back to 2012, what drew you into it, and how we took those first steps to initiate the support for the talks.

AA: I was born in in northern Kenya, so this is also a region that is similar in many ways, to the Somali Region of Ethiopia, where the local communities were at loggerheads with the newly formed Kenyan state at the time of independence from the British. So, their similarities are similar with many other African conflicts. So, this region, the northern Kenyan region has always had communal conflicts, also after I mean, there was the state conflict, but also there was communal conflict. I've always seen my grandfathers solving conflicts. You know, you sit under the acacia tree, you know, the elders will come together and they will resolve conflicts between communities, between the warring kind of ethnic groups. So, I've also had that kind of growing up. I've always seen conflict resolution kind of through traditional means. So, I came into contact, actually, with the Somali Region of Ethiopia conflict in 2006-7, around that time, when there were many refugees that came into Kenya. Because this was at the height of the ONLF. The armed group attacked a Chinese oil plant, and then the government formed a local militia, what later on became the Liyu police, or the special police. So, there was massive displacement, the… what Juweria was alluding to earlier, of course, it's been series of course, of massive human rights violations. And, you know, so, there were many refugees that came to Kenya at the time. I remember, I was working for an organisation that was working on refugee issues, and so these new arrivals was something that was new to me. And then that's how I came to know the conflict in the Somali Region.

So fast forward, I came to hear the peace talks between the government of Ethiopia and the Ogaden National Liberation Front. As you said, came from a request that the Kenya government received from the federal government of Ethiopia, then led by Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, who died in office later. Then, once the Ethiopian government, of course, approached Kenya government, then Kenya government then formed a facilitation, a mediation team to lead the process. So, this facilitation team and the ONLF. So ONLF, the political leadership lived in London and many other Western capitals. So, the foreign secretary of the ONLF, Abdul Rahman Mahdi, who later became the chairman of the group, was living in London. So, he used to come into Conciliation Resources' office to pick up booklets on latest publications, as many other exiled you know, leaders were doing at the time, because we had this big *Accord* publication that documents mediation processes. So, both the Kenyan government and the ONLF then approached Conciliation Resources to support the process.

JC: Let's explore how we then got into a peace process, because I think we got that initial invitation to support the ONLF in their thinking about how to approach a peace process. I think it's quite a dynamic moment in a process when an armed group takes that decision to delve into talks and see whether or not those talks can help them achieve their objectives. They were doing this from a position outside the region, and quite detached from the region because of the sorts of constraints that Juweria, you described. So, I wonder, what do we learn about how it's possible to facilitate a process of talks, and in fact, over the six years of the talks, there weren't that many direct engagements. So, what constituted the process of talks that over a six-year period was able to lead to the signing of a peace agreement?

AA: So, in a peace process, there's the substance, and then there's the process. In terms of process, the request that we received from the Kenya government and from the ONLF group, was to provide them with technical support, but also logistical support, because the Kenyans were also the ones who were leading the process. So, if I describe a little bit about the technical support - what we do is, in this instance, for example, the two parties agreed on four agenda issues. They were big, broad agenda issues. So political, security, human rights, humanitarian issues. And then the fourth bracket was, wealth sharing, natural resource elements. So, we kind of helped the… I mean, the Kenyans and us, helped the parties to kind of define the agenda and the substance of what they were going to discuss.

But when they approached us at the time, I remember us meeting with the ONLF somewhere outside London, in this rural, remote place in the UK. And of course, you know, when you're getting involved in a process, of course, you want to understand the process, and you know, what does the group want to achieve from the process. And the first thing that came to mind was for the ONLF "What do you want to achieve from this process?" And the answer was like, "We want, we want Ethiopia to agree to a referendum on the status of this region." And we were just looking at ourselves and kind of saying, we're in this cold, kind of, you know, winter in in the UK, and we're talking about a region in Ethiopia, you know, thousands of kilometres away. We kind of then went into the process, kind of saying, okay, but you're here today.

So, what you do is you enter one thing at a time. You enter talks with, with Ethiopia. Then you, of course, agree an agenda. Then, kind of talk about those agendas. Some you disagree, some you agree. There's, you know, some things you will have to concede, others that you'll have to gain. Then, you know, if things all go well, it leads into an agreement. And then you'll, of course, have to have a transitional mechanism, because you're here in the UK, you need to go to Nairobi for the talks, but also later on, go into the Somali Region of Ethiopia, which you have been away from for 20 years. So this is a kind of thinking that we kind of provided to the process, to think through the steps of the process. We bring in comparative learning from other groups. Of course, you know, this is not the only place that has a conflict. You know, Northern Ireland, for example. Because we're in the UK, we're saying, you know, you've got a similar situation here. You know, in the Philippines, in the Basque Country, you know, there are many other places in the world with similar context and conflict, and you know, so then they've gone through some processes. There are some things you could learn. And then, of course whatever you learn, you have to contextualise. So, yes, so that's how our involvement came into being.

And then on the process side, of course, you know, someone has to book a ticket for these guys. You know you have to have the venue for the talks. The venue has to be secured, of course, by the Kenyan government, who are the hosts. So, we played kind of both technical support and logistical support as well. We helped them with the booking of the flights. We played a secretarial role, which was also very important in terms of someone needs to take the notes of the discussions and record them, because that's what you will go back to and will form the basis for the agreement.

JC: I think Juweria what would be interesting, because Aden is describing the substance and the technical side of the talks that were going on between a very small group of people, and you were a researcher engaging with people in the community. How did people from the diaspora look at the prospects for peace as these talks were evolving, and how did you look to become involved in the changes that potentially could be happening?

JA: Building on what Aden described in terms of what was happening on the formal end of things, I think there's a parallel process happening, which was the civil society kind of involvement and engagement. A lot of the time it was… I mean, there wasn't a direct role that they had. It was very much a space that had to be carved out. Because, as we know, peace talks, they're not… it's not a large or broad kind of inclusive process. It's very much, you know, specific individuals, usually the leadership and usually male, with these types of organisations. There's also a generational kind of gap as well, a lot of older gentlemen, and then there's also the sense that, you know, these are sensitive issues. So there's a lot of kind of secrecy, I would say, around the idea of peace talks that it almost doesn't seem as though the peace talks relate to the fates of millions, or to do with the cause that represents millions. It's very much… it almost has this kind of exclusive feel, I would say.

AA: As Juweria was saying, the negotiation table is undemocratic. You know, it's a table so only you know, X number of people can sit. In this instance, it was five people from the government side and six people from the ONLF. They were exclusively male, older men. We knew that sustainable peace has to involve inclusion of other people in the society.

JA: But I mean, it was great that Conciliation Resources at the time had a specific agenda that pertained to engaging civil society. So, I remember there were focus group sessions with women's groups, with youth groups. I remember actually participating in some of the youth group discussions that happened, and just kind of finding a way to have perspectives coming from different segments of society feed into the process in whatever capacity. And I remember that making a huge difference, just in terms of… I mean, it's crucial for buy-in as well, isn't it? A peace agreement is not really going to hold if it doesn't have the buy-in, even if the formal peace agreement is a success. You know, if you don't have the buy-in of different members of society, it could easily then fall apart afterwards.

AA: This is where the work that Juweria was describing with the youth, with the diaspora, because a lot of the diaspora also, I mean, ONLF leaders lived in the diaspora, but they're also providing funding support to the armed group, refugee community, it was important… the elders, the professionals and intellectuals, women groups. You know, these are the people who normally do not necessarily find themselves at the negotiation table, because it's very few people who can go there, but they're also …these are people who've experienced the conflict. They have their perspective to share. They have a stake in the solution and so we had a piece of work focusing on making this process as inclusive as possible by bringing the perspectives and the voices of these normally excluded voices from the process. So, then they will bring

those voices into the process itself, through either the Kenyans, through ourselves, or through the parties themselves.

JA: But also relating to this, I think, and it links with Aden's point earlier. I think trust means, what I, you know, think about when, as Aden was talking, what I what was coming to mind was, these two groups who have been fighting each other quite violently for a number of years. What's the role of trust in this? Because the default position is distrust, right? They do not trust each other. And I find that, I mean, we're probably going to move the discussion on, we can draw on this later on. But that distrust surely shapes the process of the peace process, and then, even after the process as well, its implementation is also very much shaped by that same distrust that characterised the relationship before. Yes, Aden.

AA: One of the examples I remember from, from that experience, was the four agenda issues that the parties are talking about are very broad. And, you know, they were, of course, they got entangled in kind of the substance of, you know, is this Ogaden region of Ethiopia, or Ogaden region in Ethiopia? And so, as part of a you know, series of you know discussions, meetings with the communities, we met a woman in a refugee camp in Kenya from the Somali Region, and we said, what do you want to get from a process like this?' And I remember she said, "I want to see my children." She left six of her children in the Somali Region. She fled from that conflict. So, she didn't, of course, have chance as many refugees face. You know, you leave, of course, quickly, and you leave whatever you hold dear, including your… in this instance, her children. And she was kind of like, "I want to go back to the Somali Region. I want to go and see my children." You know, for her, that was kind of what peace looked like. You know, those are the perspectives that are important to bring into the talks. Otherwise, it will just stay at the high level, kind of talks that is devoid of the lived realities of people who are directly affected by the conflict.

JC: That resonates very strongly with an experience I had a few weeks after the signing of the Asmara agreement in 2018. You might remember Aden, we were in Addis Ababa meeting with the first ONLF leader who'd gone back to Addis for the next phase of talking through the process of implementation. And I remember him running up to me, waving his mobile phone at me, and saying, "Look, look!" And he showed me a photograph on his phone. He said, "Look, these are my four sisters. I haven't seen them for more than 20 years," which is when he'd had to leave. And that sense of people being able to reconnect was very powerful in that process of change. But I want to take you back to something you were talking about, Juweria, about this question of trust. Because I remember during the course of the process in having meetings in our office in London with diaspora, representatives of the diaspora from the Somali Regional State, who were thinking through, analysing what the context was, trying to look at how they could change the situation, what issues they could work on and a number of those people had lost family members in the conflict, but have subsequently gone on to be senior officials in the new government there, including the President.

So how is it you feel watching what they did? They moved from this position of conflict and enmity to one where they were able to build a degree of trust that essentially means that in the six, seven years since the signing of the Asmara agreement, the Somali Regional State has been perhaps one of the most stable in Ethiopia, which still sadly experiences a lot of contestation in different parts of the country.

JA: Yeah, absolutely. I think a lot of these people have a stake in the region. A lot of these people have those really strong connections. They did not leave the region or flee the region by choice. It was by circumstance. It was due to the violence that was happening at that time. They always had a vision of returning, just like the mother Aden mentioned, who wanted to reunite with her children. It's true. I mean, it would require a significant amount of a trust or a leap of faith, essentially, to give it, you know, to give it a try. But I think there's also a sense that when you see a region that's suffering so much under a specific ruling system. When there was a political change in 2018 there was a sense that, well, there's a chance to do things differently this time around. And if there's this opening where we can be the ones to take charge of that, or to engineer this new process, then we're going to take that.

There's more to be said about, kind of, the ONLF dynamic and how they related to the peace that came in 2018. So in addition to this kind of period of reunification, it was an exciting time in late 2018, early 2019. And then when that period of initial kind of celebration wore off a little bit, it was time to confront the deeper issues that maybe had been left unaddressed or that had led to conflict to begin with. And I think that's where some of the tensions or issues around implementation of the Asmara agreement started to emerge in those conversations.

There was a joint committee that was established, supported by Conciliation Resources in 2019 between the regional government and the ONLF, and then series of other kind of engagements of this kind to think about how to address some of the issues that led to conflict in the first place. And that was one of the provisions in the Asmara agreement actually. And I think that's been one of the most challenging things to kind of get around, because although there had been a change in administration and political system, some of these structural drivers of conflict are very much entrenched into the state system, regardless of the change in leadership.

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JC: It makes me think that as you go through the process of striving to achieve peace and make peace tangible, you're having to make lots of compromises, and they're always imperfect compromises. And I think that's what we saw happen as the ONLF struggled with reaching an accord in 2018, and then has subsequently struggled with its own identity in the years since that, as a process of politics has evolved in the Somali regional state, with people grappling for power, grappling to bring about change. But also trying to protect their own positions. And it can sometimes get very messy, and there's always that risk that things can descend back into violence, so we see setbacks happening. How do you think Aden, the political and social actors, have dealt with those setbacks and have tried to keep things moving in a positive direction?

AA: I mean, trust is a process. It's a continuous process. Actually, peace negotiations itself is a trust-building process, because you're actually saying, “Come on, can we find a solution to our conflict by sitting down and by being in the same venue, by eating together?’ You know the process I was talking about, it’s actually a trust-building in itself. So, you build that process because you want to configure a new relationship from one of fighting to one of actually working together for peace and for addressing, as we call them, the root causes of the conflict, the structural issues that are underpinning the conflict. So, Jonathan, in response to that question, of course, you need the goodwill. You need a kind of a different mindset to kind of say, now we are partners in peace. Then you build the trust through that process, and then you now transfer that into the implementation of the peace agreement, whatever you agreed with.

You know, you can be stuck in one issue for, you know, two years or so. I mean, the constitutional issue, for example, took us two years to resolve, and then the issue of the of the formation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, you know, took another three years, and you constantly have to reconfigure the discussion. So, they formed a five-member task force that included the government, the ONLF, the traditional elders and two victims - victims and survivors of the human rights violations are critical, because at the end of the day, they're also the people who have borne the brunt of these violations. That changed the dynamics, and we were able to kind of midwife a process that eventually led to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which is now entering its study and is still documenting the testimonies.

JC: And we'll actually have a separate conversation with Dr Fowsia, one of the leading figures in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, who will be able to talk through how it's operated. I wonder, Juweria, as a young woman, who has gone back to the context, spent a lot of time there, engaged in the changes… one of the things that's also struck me in working with colleagues, there, has been the changing place of women in the society, and it's been a struggle. It's an ongoing struggle, but I think we've seen some really important changes, both structurally and individually. I wonder if you can reflect on how you observe that and how that speaks to the changes in the in the context and the peace process.

JA: Yeah, I think with an opening of the civil society space, actually, before the opening of the civil society space, just the fact that the kind of the human rights conditions that we saw prior to 2018 - the fact that that's no longer there, is immediately like the biggest factor, I would say, contributing to women's greater visibility in society. You've got the women's spaces, emerging women networks, and that's directly tied to the opening of the civil society space. So, you've got networks such as Ugaaso, for instance, you've got former female combatants’ organisations such as Hormuud, who are working to uplift themselves, then promote their socio-economic development and the political visibility of women. So, it's interesting, and not just women, but various types of women. So, women combatants, for example, they would prior to 2018, would have been the most kind of marginalised, not just because of their status as women, but also their affiliation with the ONLF and their kind of their rebel identity, not just as supporters of rebel politics, but as active participants. So, they would have been targets for serious types of abuses, prolonged imprisonment and so forth. And now we see those exact type of women taking a

leading role in society, essentially advocating for a diverse set of women, not just themselves, but women's… gender-based violence, for example, domestic abuse and so forth. So it's not just that they're focusing on women-related issues. They're increasingly involved in broader kind of societal issues and issues pertaining to the peace agreement, for example.

And one of the conversations I remember having with one woman from the Hormuud organisation, the organisation of former female combatants, was her saying during times of combat, it was very much, yes, we were all working towards this big, sort of grand agenda. But whenever issues around women's participation or women's leadership, even within rebel politics, was raised, it was always shut down with, you know, we'll come to that once we achieve our goal of national liberation. Like, it's kind of a side issue, like, we'll get to that once we reach this bigger issue, you need to sacrifice your issues for the greater good. So, it was a series of, you know, sacrifices which people were kind of willing to just go with because of it was kind of a life and death situation. So, they thought, let's just come back to it.

It was almost as though whenever women, whether from the organisation or elsewhere, would talk about gender-related issues, is always interpreted as a kind of an exclusive issue, not as something that's intrinsically tied to the broader issue of, whether it's self-determination or regional autonomy, like, any kind of big structural issue that we're talking about. And I think that the two are fundamentally entangled.

I think there are some great insights, and, you know, ideas emerging from these women's organisations pertaining to the peace process, some of them to do with some of the compromises that were made. I think, as you mentioned, Jonathan, peace processes or agreements are imperfect, naturally. And one of the conversations that are being had now is, if on the Constitution issue, an agreement was reached at the end. Sometimes agreements on issues such as the Constitution, which was which was non-negotiable for the ONLF previously, it represented a compromise for them to accept, to enter into the agreement through the framework of the Constitution, you know, was that pragmatic decision that kind of emerged at the time due to kind of the political situation in 2018 across the Horn of Africa. But then you've got perspectives coming from those who are, who have a stake in the war and the conflict, who say things like, “Well, why couldn't this provision be accepted six years ago and we would have had less people killed? We could have saved the kind of people who were killed” And so these kinds of conversations are happening among, you know, women groups. Part of it's also kind of holding these men accountable. A lot of the time they were the ones who were making the decisions, and just kind of wondering, what would… whether it's the agreement or kind of political decision making in general, look like, had it included different types of, you know, stakeholders as part of the core leadership?

JC: Thanks for sharing that, and it leads me to my last but one question for you both, because in describing the evolution of the space for women to start holding conversations that hold political actors to account. To me, that's an incredibly hopeful step. It's the first step of, or not necessarily the first, but it's one step in many that have to happen. But it is hopeful to see that

and to hear that. So, I wonder, what else gives you both hope in looking at the current situation in the Somali Regional State. So maybe I'll start with you, Aden.

AA: I mean, hope, of course, is what keeps us going. I mean, this process took six years and we knew one day, you know, peace will come. With all its imperfections and you know, all the ups and downs at the end of the day, it was very clear that both parties will not achieve their demands through violence and through the battle zone. So, we… I mean that, and that was clear to the parties, although, as we were saying earlier, of course, compromise also. You have to bring your constituency with you, you have to get the timings right. So there are a few other things there, but how you arrive at a compromise. So the hope was always there. And what gives me hope, of course, is with the story of the woman that I talked about who wanted to go back to the region, the refugees in a refugee camp, who are talking about a solution to the conflict. You know, these are people who lost a lot of… a lot in their life through this conflict, but here they are talking about a solution to the conflict. You know, spending hours and, you know, days with us on what solution would look like.

So, peacebuilding is all about hope, because that's what keeps you going. And we've seen, you know, as a result of that hopeful and you know, optimism is what led to the current situation that we see in the Somali Region, where the victims and the survivors have self-organised themselves. They've managed to come up with a dialogue with the government to turn the Jail Ogaden, which is this notorious jail, into a museum. The stone was laid to recognise this notorious jail, you know. About a month or two months ago, the regional government declared what they call the Black Day as a public holiday in the Somali Region. This was a very terrible day when a lot of prisoners were killed in this Jail Ogaden, you know, these are the people who have accompanied the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I can see a lot of friends, and you know, people we knew in the refugee camps are now in the Somali Region, they're back.

And of course, with peace also, you know, peace dividends come with it. You know, there are more hotels coming up. There's seven, eight flights landing in the Somali Region of Ethiopia, people like Juweria, of course, the people who lived in the diaspora, who, I remember some of the discussions we were having in the diaspora with some of the young people, was: when other Somalis go to Somalia or Kenya, or, you know, Djibouti or Somaliland, the ones from the Somali Region have nowhere to go to. And now, you know, children are going, diaspora are going to the region. So this is the fruits of peace. And you can achieve a lot through peace, and you know very little through conflict.

JC: Thank you, Aden. And Juweria, what gives you hope?

JA: I think similar to one of the points Aden made on victims, survivors and the way they've organised themselves. So, a former prisoner from Jail Ogaden, told me that … it was, it was really striking… So he said, a lot of the time when people were in Jail Ogaden and going through horrendous abuses, they kept hope alive, and they, you know, they stayed strong with the hope that they'd come out one day and they'd reunite with their people and so forth. And a lot of the people who were jailed for political reasons felt that they would come out and reunite

with their comrades and continue to seek the same political objectives that they were jailed for. And he said, a lot of the time, those who came who, you know, maintained their sanity during prison, were unable to do so after prison because of the sheer hopelessness and just in terms of kind of day-to-day survival, how difficult it is to survive post-war. You know, when you're emerging from a 24-year long conflict. And for me, what gives me hope is seeing some of those people who are able to kind of overcome those unimaginable challenges of post-prison life and come together, form organisations, actively work and advocating for their lives, for themselves, uplifting themselves and also educating people about these experiences.

It's because violence, and you know, atrocity, has such a long and deep-rooted history in the Somali Region, I feel sometimes people become desensitised. It just becomes, you know, something normal, something casual. And I think post 2018 one of the most positive things we've seen, and that gives me hope, personally, is breaking that tradition, and you know, no longer normalising violence and conflict. And that comes… an example of that is the turning Jail Ogaden into a museum, as Aden mentioned, for example. So really memorialising these atrocities and these issues. And I think that's an important step towards ensuring or at least working towards non-repetition, which I think is key, because we've seen periods of relative peace and stability and then a return to armed conflict.

JC: Thank you, Juweria. And indeed, the talking to the survivors' groups in Jigjiga is quite an inspiring experience, and having them show one around Jail Ogaden and talk about not just how they've survived, but in fact, how they have channeled their efforts into transformation and making the lives of so many people better. It sounds almost cliched, but it is incredible when you meet them and spend time with them. And I wonder, when we look back on the last 15 years, the period in which Conciliation Resources has been involved in supporting the process and supporting people like that. Aden, what would you reflect on as being a key lesson that you've learned from accompanying this process?

AA: One is, of course, the importance of what Conciliation Resources and other peacebuilding organisations provide in support of the parties to reach an agreement. So the technical support, the comparative support, the logistical support, these were important investments that keep the process going, even for a long time when there's very little resources, when probably the agenda and the media attention has moved away. So keeping kind of that process going, because that investment one day will kind of … the parties… the, right moment will come, the parties are going to come back to the negotiation table and things. And this is what happened to us, six years of continuous up and down, very little resources. You know, when there is very little media attention, we kept going and keeping the process alive, and the reflections, and, you know, talking to the parties supporting them was really critical. So technical support in a peace process is one of the lessons I've learned.

And then, of course, trust-building is something we've talked about a lot in this podcast. I mean, it's a continuous process, making sure that, you know, the coming together of the parties takes time. I mean, time is in itself a lesson, because, you know, you can't put time on peace

processes, this funding and all these things have a particular timing. But a peace process, I mean, a conflict that has been going on for, you know, 50, 100 years. It's not something that can be resolved in 10 days. So, this trust-building, you know, investing the time and the resources that's required into processes like this is really critical also, I mean, for me.

JC: And Juweria, how about you? What would be your key lesson from involvement?

JA: I think any issue that led to conflict to begin with. And these could be a range of, you know, different factors that are all intertwined. Anything that it's left unaddressed, finds ways to pop up. They come up. And this could be five years from now, 10 years from now, you know, a couple of, you know, months. Anything that's left unaddressed or brushed under the carpet, finds ways, finds life in some form. An example, so I mean, just at the top of my head, some of the kind of issues that people tend to say, you know, led to conflict in Somali Region, kind of, I would say in recent in the past few decades, would be kind of enduring, structural inequalities, power sharing issues, natural resources governance, revenue distribution, issues around regional autonomy, issues around equitable development, justice, accountability and so forth. So, at any given time when something happens, a political event happened, so recently with the developments with the Ogaden basin, for example, with the natural resource exploration. All of a sudden, we find the discourses around resource sovereignty gaining life, and we see a move toward more strong language that would, that raises concerns and fears around renewed conflict, even if it's kind of small scale. So, any issue that's not addressed, or its root causes not addressed, finds ways, finds life in some way, and can be a serious disruptor of peace.

JC: No, that's, I think that's really important. Juweria, thank you. And it kind of emphasises this point that peace is a process, and you can't take for granted the achievements that have been made and the progress that has been made, and it's very easy for that to slip through your fingers if you're not addressing these ongoing fundamental causes.

AA: I just wanted to reflect on something that Juweria was saying, the importance, of course, of the root causes, and, you know, the structural issues. You know, one of the things we realised when the insurgency conflict, when the ONLF conflict came to an end, suddenly, all the overlooked conflicts, particularly the communal conflicts, have come to the fore. At one time, we documented 70 kinds of conflicts in the Somali Region. So, it's also, it's a process, and making sure that you address one thing, but lay the ground and the foundation for resolving the other issues as well through the process. It's a journey. It doesn't end at the negotiation table. It's not the agreement. It's something that the parties and the wider society have to work together to make sure that this conflict comes to an end, but it also it doesn't reoccur.

JC: Thank you so much. I think that's a very profound thought on which to end. It's been a real pleasure talking to you. Thank you Juweria, thank you Aden. You've given us a real sense of what it means to undertake peace in action.

Thank you for listening to the Peace in Action podcast from Conciliation Resources. This series was produced by Nick Bennett and Jonathan Cohen. Learn more about our work at www.c-r.org and don't forget to follow us on social media. You can find more from this series on Spotify.