Peace in Action

Transcript

Peace in Action: Episode 4 extra – Transitional justice in the Somali Regional State

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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 is Fowsia Abdulkadir. It's pleasure to have you, Fowsia,

Fowsia, you're the First Deputy Commissioner of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the Somali Regional State of Ethiopia. You're also the Research Director at the Hankaal Institute for Peace and Development in the Somali Region of Ethiopia. So you bring a tremendous wealth of experience and expertise of the region.

And we were particularly keen to have this chat because of the work you're doing with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which is clearly quite an important advance in the work of such commissions. We'll probably call them TRCs, quite a lot in this conversation, in that it's a regional TRC. But before we get into the role of the TRC, and when it was established, how it was established, perhaps you could just kick off by telling us a little bit about how you actually became involved yourself.

You and I met almost 10 years ago, when you were a civil society activist trying to encourage the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) to move into a more constructive phase of dialogue and peace talks. And at that time, we didn't really think there would be an agreement anytime soon, and then suddenly there was, and we got to a peace agreement in 2018 but maybe you could tell us your journey, how you became involved.

Fowsia Abdulkadir: Thank you very much, Jonathan, and thank you for having me in this podcast. So yes, as you mentioned, we have met a while ago, which is my days of a civil society human rights advocate in Canada. So yeah, I have been quite active in the diaspora community, particularly bringing to light the plight of the people of the Somali Region because of the previous regime’s atrocious human rights record. And in that, I have become kind of known in many connections to various communities, even across Europe, I have visited several times. And in my involvement, also, people have associated with me speaking for those who had no voice at the time. And I think when they decided to come about with a Truth Commission at a sub-national level, the regional level, my name must have been brought in, because I was -

summer of 2022 in Canada - when I was called and told that I'd be one of the Deputy Commissioners for the region. So, my involvement dates back to, I would say, two decades or so, and originally, because my parents fled from that region and I grew up with the stories of people getting displaced and marginalised and moving. Several generations of my relatives have been displaced. So that's how I became an activist, and I guess in that, being known to the community, both inside the region and in the diaspora, is probably how they thought about me becoming part of the Commission.

JC: Thank you. So the peace agreement was signed in 2018 in Eritrea. The Truth Commission started operating in … you were invited in 2022. So that was a bit of a gap in the process. Since 2022 Can you tell us a little bit about what the Truth Commission has been doing and how it's been working?

FA: Sure. So, yeah, the Commissioners were appointed in the summer of 2022, but the proclamation - the Parliamentary … Regional Parliamentary Act - was passed in the summer of 2021, and then they got busy with regional elections back then. And then in the summer of 2022 is when they have appointed seven commissioners. We have then had to hit the ground running. There's several of us that are from the diaspora, and four of them … three of us are from the diaspora, and four Commissioners are from the region themselves. Some with legal backgrounds, some of us with social science backgrounds and things like that. And we had to immediately get into, not only individually and personally, researching and reading, but also having some experience sharing and inviting people through the help of Conciliation Resources, getting some resource people such as the former Deputy Commissioner of the Kenyan Truth and Justice Commission, coming for three days in the fall of 2022, so, which kind of had another long kind of learning period for us. And then sitting down and talking about how to sell the idea of a Truth Commission in a region that was historically marginalised, had really a deficit of trust when it came to the system or the government or anything like that. What helped was, I don't know how much of a federal regime change happened in Ethiopia, other than a leadership change, but in the context of the Somali Region, there was a regime change. Notwithstanding the deep state and all the districts, but at the helm of the Jigjiga parliament, there was a regime change, and they were open to the idea of having a Truth Commission that looks at the past.

But our first task was to gain the trust of the people, particularly the victims that we would want to talk to. Because the idea of a transitional justice or a Truth Commission was new, and the idea of anybody listening to their stories was also not expected. So, at the beginning, we had to do a lot of sit-ins and dialogue with elders, dialogue with mothers, dialogue with religious leaders, just to tell them what the expected results could be of the Commission's work; to let them know that they can trust the process. And there was a lot of questions about, “Are you for real? I mean, is there a government in Ethiopia that is willing to hear our plight, that is willing to even entertain what we went through? Forget about, you know, doing justice. What justice?”

One area of initial challenge was the mandate of the Commission. It starts from 1991, but the history of the marginalisation of the region goes back to over 100 years. So, there was a lot of

questioning of some elders: why ’91? Why are you picking ‘91 and why can't you speak about the previous historical marginalisations? To which we had to say, there's nothing stopping the Commission from contextualising and writing about that longstanding, continuous marginalisation. But the mandate that is expected is, while the people are still alive, to document the victims’ stories, those who survived.

JC: And when you started, what was your expectation of how many stories you'd be able to document, and how many have you actually documented in the period you've been operating?

FA: Well, we were really at the beginning, as I said, because people were sceptical about justice in country. So, our expectation was, let's try and get to some stories. Really, the region is huge, and it is about, I think they have now created more districts, but about 11 zonal administrations, which has about 95 districts in it, and six city councils, something they call a city council. And we plan to reach every district.

JC: And the population?

FA: The population? There were no censuses done recently. The last census was done in 2017 of the Ethiopian calendar, which is about seven years behind. So 2017 would be like maybe 2010 and in that they were predicting something about the Somali Region becoming about eight million in 2023 but you know, some Somalis say 10 million, so it's between eight and 10.

Now we were very practical in the sense that we were not going to do census, we were not going to touch every head, but we wanted to reach as many of the victims as who were willing to come to us. So we announced our coming to each district. We had outreach before getting there. We had, prior to sending any data collectors, training. So we would see, then for days, who comes, who shows up, or we would have guides - victims who are part of the umbrella of victims’ groups in the region - would know which districts were hit harder, and they will guide the data collectors. So, we really didn't expect anything, we just wanted to get something, but we ended up documenting 50,000 statements from witnesses, and we have created this statement questionnaire in a way that the individual speaking could speak about themselves, but also could speak about family members. So, each statement then carries more than one story in that because, you know, culturally, no Somali will speak about themselves alone. They'll have to speak about what happened to the household, what happened to the extended family, and we kind of built in that into the questionnaire, asking them: “The story you're telling us, who did it happen to? Did it happen to you? Did it happen to a relative? Did you witness it?” And in that then we were able to collect 50,000 statements. But when we counted the individual stories that are in it, there are about 65,000 stories.

JC: And what will happen to this body of material? It's an incredible wealth of human experience that has been documented through this process.

FA: We have initially created a questionnaire and then digitised it into a Kobo Toolbox, and we are now also in the midst of building a database for it. So, we have had these data digitally saved in a Kobo account, and we're now migrating it to a database that is being built by

Huridocs. Was a database, but we also, to corroborate those stories, ran about - when I count the multiple lines of evidence we have carried - it's about 12 lines of evidence. So, multiple focus group discussions, some generic in the sense of having elders who were part of the first regional parliament when there was the change in Ethiopia in 1991 and some who then have been subjected to multiple things to corroborate what we have heard.

We've also done what we called mapping. Because what we wanted to do before we even spoke to the people, was have dialogues with people who can talk about zone X or Y and what has happened while we're in Jigjiga. Take that data to validate in the particular district, and then meet elders on the ground and say: “This is what we heard from people. Are we missing anything? Did we capture all the things that have happened?” And they would then add to that, corroborate and say that “You're missing, you know, all these stories.”

We have also while traveling, stumbled on a mass grave. So then created a protocol of documenting the mass graves across these 95 districts. And so we have over 150 mass graves where the minimum number of people buried in one is about three, and the maximum goes to something like 80 people, or something like that. So there were a lot of military bases across the region that people were stumbling on people's bodies when they try to now buy this land as a civilian and build on it.

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JC: In documenting these experiences, what's the intention, what's the material going to be used for? How does it fit into the process of political transformation in the Somali Regional State?

FA: Well, the hope of any transitional justice is to lead to some kind of a justice. With us though, being practical, knowing what part of the world this region is located, I think a major achievement is for this region to have a historical record of what has happened in a formal way. Particularly when you think about me doing 20 years of advocacy outside of the formal structures, as a civil society member. Now there's an opportunity to legally say, here is a record, do what you have you, you know, to the leadership, but I think it's also kind of acknowledging to the people what has happened to them. When I talk about just the historical record, I'm not minimising the kind of justice that can come out of it. But what I am hopeful is for people to be able to sort of get some recognition of what has happened to them and some healing to come out of it. Because I think Ethiopia is poor, and the Somali Region is even poorer. For any particular monetary compensation or things like that, even though they do deserve to get reparations, I think if they get acknowledgement, it'll be good enough.

JC: Can I ask you a couple of questions related to that then? One is, you talk about trauma, and I can imagine the stories were traumatic, both for the people telling them and sharing them and for the people documenting. How did you manage that question of trauma for the participants in this process?

FA: It is hard, and it will always be hard to hear this firsthand from the people. But one of the hardest parts of it for all of us was to have seen people who had such, such an abject poverty condition that we had to stop the data collection and everything and provide some livelihood support. And we had to then say, okay, any Truth Commission will have a reparation strategy at the end of it, but going to some of these villages and meeting some of these victims, we realised that there was bloodletting that needed to have been addressed in form of livelihood. So, we came back to the Somali Regional Administration and said, we can't talk to people about what happened to them in human rights past story when their current livelihood is facing such dramatic need. So we then drafted what we call the Urgent Reparations Manual, where we then entered into a memorandum of agreement with about 14 offices; the social services, the livestock management, the agricultural bureaus, to sort of say “If we meet people who need food, who need some immediate medical attention, we're going to have to triage them in a way that is not your general population waiting in line. They have to be helped.” So we have an emergency reparations package happening and ongoing.

JC: And how broad have the reparations package been? How far across society has it reached? Because, as you say, there's a lot of poverty and region and to allocate resources to this can't be straightforward.

FA: It has reached a lot. But when you think about how huge the districts are, I would say it didn't reach everybody yet. The other thing that we have encountered that will make reaching these remote, nomadic communities hard is when we collected the data, we asked people if they had any form of ID. And 50% of the people we reached, that 64,000, said they had no form of ID. So, these are people who are nomads, who move from area to area following the rain, are not connected to any government services. So we are hoping to channel some services to hard-to-reach people in these remote parts. So we, you know, I don't have the exact numbers. We had to transport some from really remote areas and bring them to headquarters. Some to Jigjiga, some to other zonal headquarters. Some were treated in Jigjiga for physical, medical attention. Some needed psychosocial support. Some just needed outright something to eat. So I would say a few hundred people we reached. We couldn't reach everybody with that. And it's not just the Commission. We are connecting them to the regional administration offices in their areas. So yeah.

JC: So it weaves into the evolution of governance and political process.

FA: It does, and some also requested, there are what we call TVETs, the technical training institutions across the region. Some people who survived prison experience, who did not go to school, wanted to be retrained in some kind of a skill that they can then earn some living. So we are also recommending that, and we have gotten about 40 or so people trained in some skill that they can then earn some living.

JC: Which is a very small number in the face of the mass number, but it starts the process.

FA: It's a process, and I am hopeful that you know, with the recommendations that the Commission will make, we are going to have something, an institution, that is responsible for looking after these people. Because even you know, your abject poverty eradication process is going to take years, it's not going to be something that can be done in a year or two.

JC: When I visited Jigjiga on a couple of occasions, I was taken to Jail Ogaden by some victims' and survivors' groups. People who'd experienced the torture in the jail and who were able to tell the story, and I was struck by very courageous individuals speaking out and contributing to the process of transformation. How has the relationship been between the Commission and some of the victims' and survivors' groups?

FA: I would say it was very good because, and it still is, because, you know, on the onset, we had to do an outreach. One of the things that have happened, and I think the Commission was very lucky in that sense, there was a very active umbrella of survivors' organisations. And as soon as they heard the Commission was established, they reached out to us, we reached out to them, and we have had, we've been having weekly meetings, we have had an MOU to work together. And even when we were training the data collectors, we would make sure that most of the data collectors, half of them are survivors as well, because they know what happened to people, and they can guide us through the whole thing. So our relationship with the umbrella of survivors - there are four very strong and vocal civil society organisations of survivors, and they have formed an umbrella, and so we have a great relationship with them. We had to start from there, and I think we were lucky that they were able also to open up to us.

JC: I'm conscious that you're operating in a very patriarchal society, political system, and I wonder if you could tell us what your experience has been as a woman, being a leader of a complex process in this context. How does that play out in a real context?

FA: In a complex way, very complex way, there is, there is no minimising patriarchy. Patriarchy is real, and it is on wheels in the Somali Region, it is very patriarchal. Mind you, Somalis are, you know, a clan lineage, who your father is, you know, matters and things like that. So, you know, not minimising all the effort I put into, who I am or what I did. There's also some social capital that comes with who I am. So when you are from a prominent family, educated family, whatever have you, there is a bit of a social capital that comes with it. So in my individual story, I would say a lot of effort that I have individually put into my advocacy time, being part of the diaspora, being very active in multiple arenas, helped when they were selecting people to sort of say, you know, let Fowsia be part of it. Many of the survivors' umbrella also know me. So as a woman who is in that position, I can walk the talk, if you will. But I don't want to also make it like every woman could do that, yeah? So I have to own some of the some of the social capital I come with, be it the history that I have had as a human rights advocate, or be it from the family I come from. So there's a combination of that. And one thing I have to give to the Somalis is, if they know you, they will trust you. So, it is not easy for a woman to navigate a position of power, but if you are a known woman, you know from a known background, also you could navigate that.

JC: I'm sure you draw a lot of lessons from your experience in this role, and we know that one of the most challenging questions in our wider field is the relationship between peace and justice in the search for reconciliation. I wonder if you can share the key lessons that you have learned from doing this work.

FA: I think you know, I know the literature is like peace or justice and things like that, but I think there is no justice without peace, and there is no peace without justice. So you can have the bloodletting stop. We have been fortunate in the Somali Region when the ONLF surrendered their guns and decided to enter into peace talks with the government, which is what we've been advising them to do for years. So that kind of lulled the bloodletting, if you will, because people were no longer being targeted as sympathiser or whatever have you of ONLF. So to me, you need that piece to navigate then, okay, what happened and who needs support and who needs help and who needs healthcare, and you know, to even be able to engage in dialogues, you need peace. But having peace or having the conflict stopped doesn't mean that there isn't a need for more work to be put in for that justice, for that ultimate sort of saying, okay, we're not going to go back. And so the peace we have in the Somali Region and all over Ethiopia is very fragile. Addressing the past and addressing the wounds of the people and what has happened to them, and reassuring that you know this is not going to happen again. Because initially, when we were starting the Commissioner's work, the communities were just waiting for the other shoe to drop. This is real. Is really a political change happened? So I would say peace and justice need to go together hand in hand.

JC: Thank you so much. Fowsia. It's been a pleasure talking with you.

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