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# CITIZENS' PERCEPTION TOWARD CIVIL SOCIETY

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A Public Opinion Survey in Ethiopia



June 2016

## Background

The environment for civil society in Ethiopia is among the most restrictive in the world. The ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) has overseen a continuous crackdown on opposition, independent media, and civil society. As the EPRDF marks 25 years in power, civil society groups struggle to maintain operations and keep their doors open. The 2009 Charities and Societies Proclamation (CSP) was particularly crippling for civil society organizations, especially human rights NGOs. The CSP places severe restrictions on foreign funding and operational autonomy of civil society organizations. Its enactment caused many groups to abandon democracy and human rights work or scale back operations.

From April 16 to May 5, 2016, Freedom House, in partnership with Real-Time Interactive Worldwide Intelligence (RIWI), conducted an online nano survey using RIWI's random domain targeting methodology. The survey reached over 18,600 internet users in Ethiopia. Of these, over 1,400 people responded to all 10 survey questions. The average response rate for substantive (non-demographic) questions was more than 2,700 individuals.

## Key Findings

- ◆ Civil society in Ethiopia has strong citizen support despite the government's longstanding attacks and citizen demand for civil society's work is high.
- ◆ Citizens overwhelmingly believe that civil society should be involved in human rights and democracy work.
- ◆ Citizens are not aware of the significant challenges facing civil society or the crippling effect of the CSP. This demonstrates that civil society does not have the space or capacity to reach out to citizens and advocate for themselves.
- ◆ There is a strong indication from citizens that civil society has an important role in promoting peace which may be indicative of growing concerns of unrest in the country.

## Recommendations

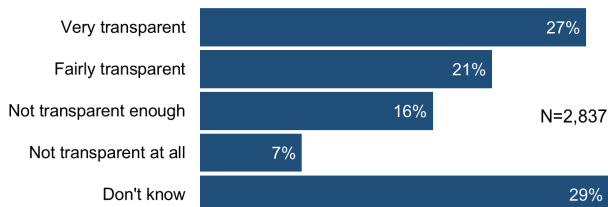
- ◆ While citizens support civil society engagement in human rights and democracy promotion, they are not aware of the challenges and risks civil society faces for engaging in these activities. There is a need for comprehensive support to civil society, through capacity building, advocacy, and resource mobilization, to enable them to advocate for their work and mobilize citizen support.
- ◆ Youth are a key demographic in Ethiopia and civil society needs to systematically tap into the reservoir of positive attitudes from this group.
- ◆ There is a need to conduct more comprehensive research and studies on the important role civil society has in promoting human rights and democracy in Ethiopia and ensure that the findings reach local communities.

## What should CSOs be working on and how effective are they?

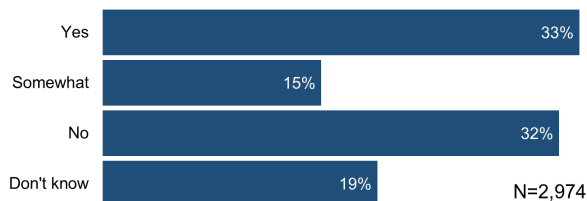
Over 60% of respondents feel that the primary role of civil society in Ethiopia should be promoting peace, providing education and health services, and providing humanitarian assistance. Promoting peace received the highest percentage of respondents with 27% and service delivery received the lowest with 14%. A whopping 84% of these respondents believe that CSOs are effective in what the respondents have identified as primary roles.

However, according to the respondents, the story regarding transparency within CSOs is markedly different from their effectiveness. Only 48% of respondents believe that CSOs are transparent, very transparent, or fairly transparent about their work while 23% think that CSOs are not transparent enough or not transparent at all. A sizable percentage of respondents (29%) responded 'don't know' to the question. The fact that the majority of respondents answered the question on civil society transparency with 'not transparent' or 'don't know' should be a matter of serious concern when the sector looks into its credibility and legitimacy among the public.

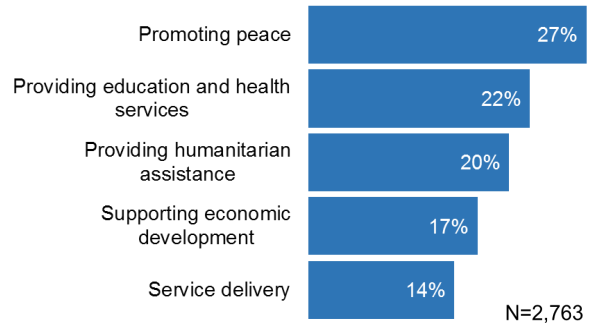
### In your opinion, how transparent are civil society organizations/NGOs about their work?



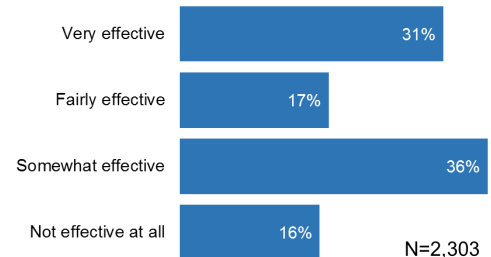
### Have you personally benefitted from the work of a civil society organization/NGO?



### In your opinion, what should be the primary role of civil society organizations/NGOs?



### Based on your answer to the previous question, how effective do you think civil society organizations/NGOs are?



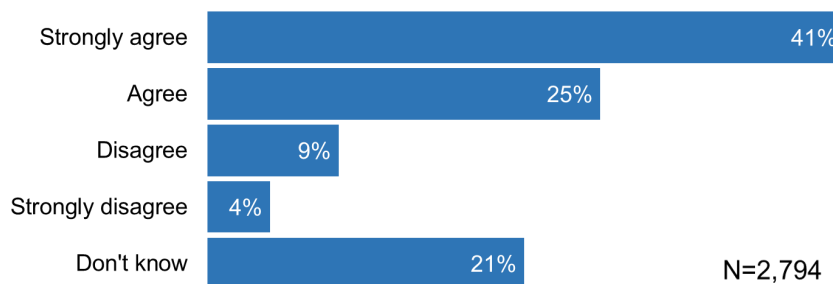
Interestingly, while 84% of respondents believe that CSOs are effective in what they do only 33% of them said that they have personally benefited from the work of civil society. Fifty-one percent of respondents responded that they have not personally benefited from the work of CSOs or do not know whether or not they have personally benefited.

The high percentage of respondents who responded 'don't know' to the question on civil society transparency could indicate that people feel they do not have enough information on how CSOs operate or what they do. This gap highlights a need for CSOs to work vigorously to make their operational methods and impact known and understood by the public.

## Civil society organizations and human rights

One of the most interesting findings of the survey is that 66% of respondents agree or strongly agree that civil society organizations should engage in human rights and democracy promotion. Only 13% strongly disagree or disagree. Given the very restrictive environment for independent civil society work in general and human rights NGOs in particular, as well as the persistent government rhetoric about civil society should only focus on development activities rather than rights advocacy, it is encouraging to see that citizens believe that civil society organizations have a role to play in promoting human rights and democracy.

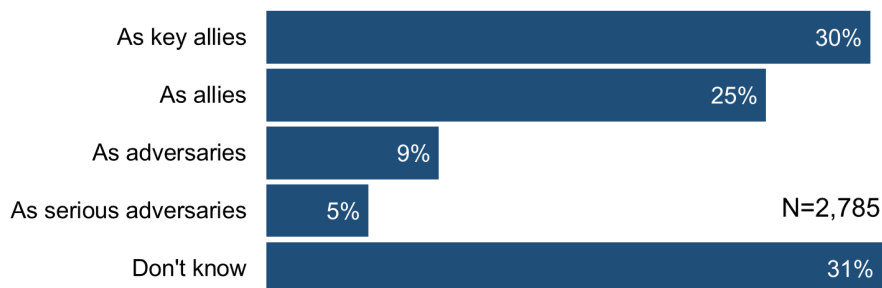
### Do you agree that civil society organizations/NGOs should engage in human rights and democracy promotion?



## Government perception towards civil society

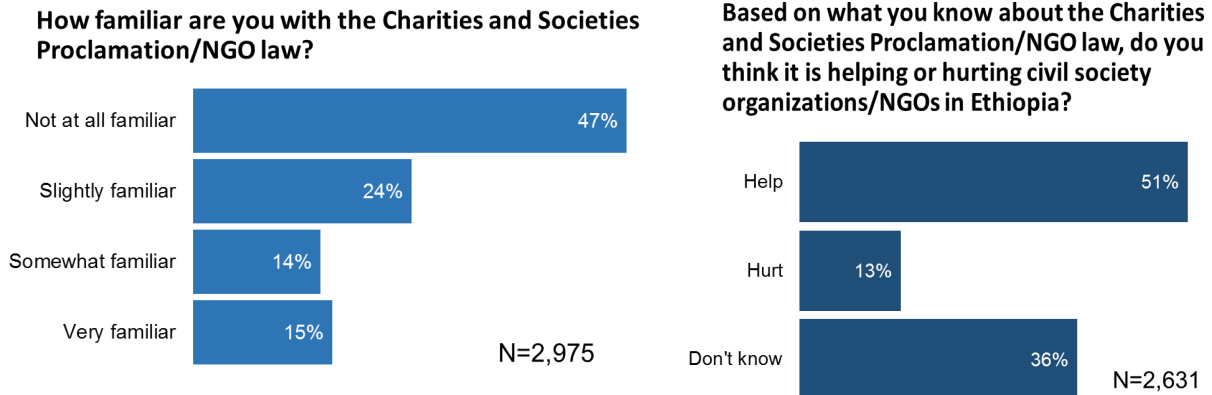
Despite EPRDF's years of hostile rhetoric and practice that portray civil society and nongovernmental organizations as 'rent seeking', 'anti-development' and agents of foreign powers, citizens seem to think that the government perceives civil society as allies. In this regard, 55% of respondents think that the government views civil society as 'key allies' or 'allies' as opposed to 15% who think that the government perceives civil society as adversaries. This is a testament that the years of government smear campaign against civil society has not gained significant traction even though civil society has not been in a position to effectively counter the government's rhetoric and promote an alternative narrative. Another important observation is that 31% of respondents answered 'don't know' to this question, indicating that they do not feel they have sufficient information to respond.

### How do you think the government generally views civil society organizations/NGOs?



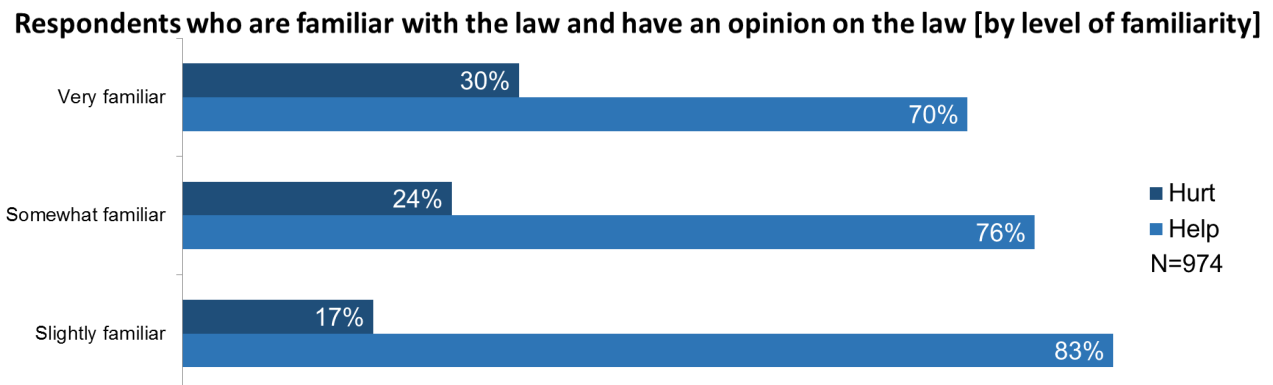
## Civil society and the Charities and Societies Proclamation (CSP)

The Charities and Societies Proclamation (CSP) that places severe restrictions on foreign funding and operational autonomy of civil society organizations in general and human rights NGOs in particular has been in effect for six years. Despite the availability of extensive commentary and discussion about the draconian provisions of this law and its damaging effect on the country's independent civil society, a sizable proportion of respondents (47%) say they are not familiar with the CSP at all.



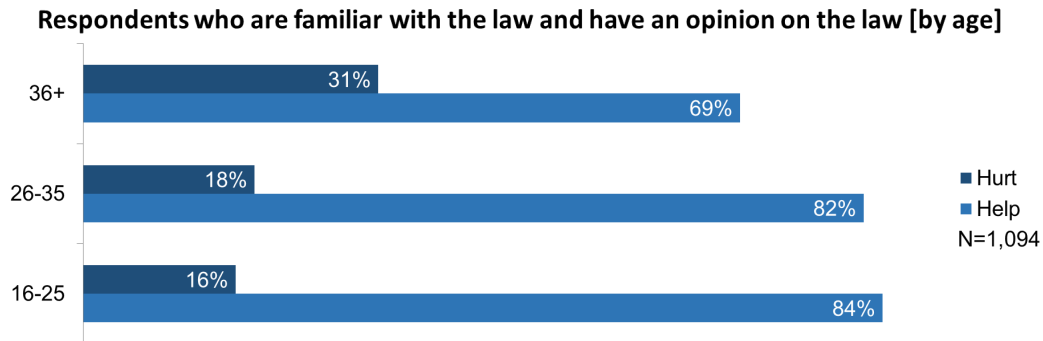
More interestingly, 51% of respondents believe that the CSP is helping civil society. Only 13% think that the law hurts civil society and 36% responded 'don't know'. This finding is especially worrisome given that 54% of respondents to this survey have some level of college education and should presumably have had some degree of awareness about the CSP and how it affects the work of civil society in Ethiopia.

Furthermore, 76% of respondents who have some familiarity with the law, excluding those who are 'not at all familiar' with the law and who 'don't know' if the law helps or hurts CSOs, said that the CSP is helpful to civil society. Respondents that are very familiar with the law are more likely to view the law as hurtful (30%) as opposed to 17% who are slightly familiar. This indicates that an increased awareness of the law increases the likelihood that the individual will believe that law hurts CSOs, but the overwhelming majority of all respondents remain convinced the law is helpful to CSOs.



## Civil society and the Charities and Societies Proclamation (CSP)

Finally, the survey finds that with regards to opinion about the CSP in relation to age group, 78% of the respondents of all ages said that the CSP is helping civil society. Older respondents, ages 36+, seem less likely to view the law as helpful (69%) as opposed to younger respondents of ages 16-25 (84%).



This last part of the survey seems to raise more questions than it is able to answer; and on the face of it, the data seem to suggest that there is a predominantly positive view of the CSP among respondents who claim to be familiar with the law. On the other hand, the awareness about the law itself even among college educated urban youth is very limited. In the absence of awareness even about the existence of the law, citizens are unable to truly see or appreciate the damage it causes to civil society.

One plausible explanation for the apparent discord between these responses and the reality, aside from the limited sample surveyed, is that civil society has not been able to make citizens aware of the damaging effects of the law in their work. This, in turn, prevented civil society from capitalizing on citizens' generally positive attitude towards the sector (indicated in the data on civil society's role in human rights). The lack of space, resources and capacity, which in large part is the result of the government's conscious effort to undermine and delegitimize independent civil society and nongovernmental organizations diminished their abilities to effectively reach citizens, cultivate strong constituency and mobilize supporters enough to counter the government's sustained attacks on the sector.

## Conclusions

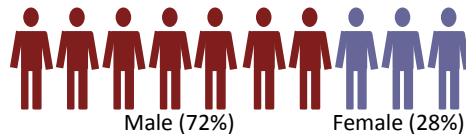
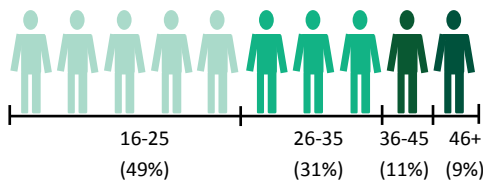
This abysmal state of independent civil society in Ethiopia is a reflection of the overall constrained political space and the government's growing intolerance for dissent. Heavy handed policies and action do not leave space for independent voices to organize, inform, and influence political discourse. This survey provides a glimpse of how a total blackout in independent information curtails citizens' abilities to organize and participate in matters that affect their daily lives. The survey also points to the critical need for Ethiopia's civil society to re-orient its purpose and organizational model in way that will help make it relevant to average Ethiopians. Examining the *raison d'être* of the sector with a focus on making it accessible, participatory and accountable to the public will make civil society better equipped to respond to government attacks and more effectively mobilize allies.

## Methodology

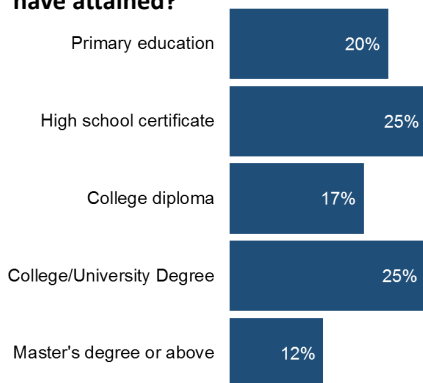
The survey utilized RIWI's proprietary Random Domain Internet Technology, to randomly capture a representative sample of Ethiopia's Internet users. Internet penetration in Ethiopia is less than three percent and the vast majority of users are located in urban centers such as Addis Ababa. This survey found a majority of respondents were young, college-educated, urban males.

- ⇒ 80% of respondents are between the ages of 16 and 35;
- ⇒ 72% of respondents are male;
- ⇒ 54% of respondents have a college diploma or higher;
- ⇒ Largest percentage of respondents (28%) live in Addis Ababa.

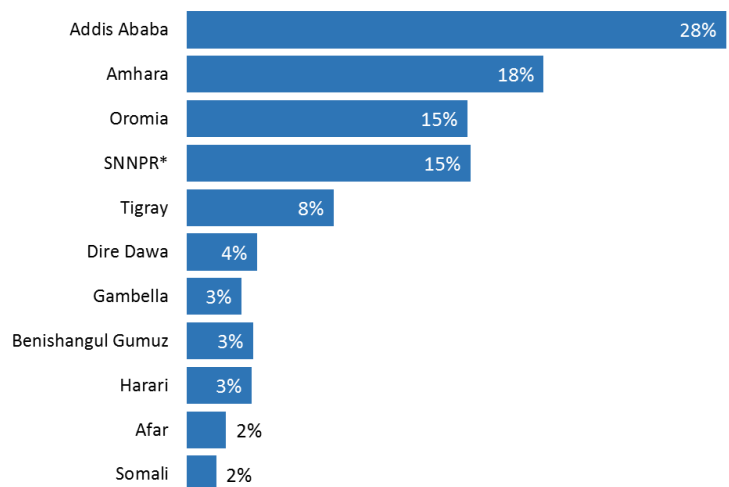
Freedom House does not claim that this survey provides an exact representation of Ethiopia's close to 100 million citizens. However, the small sample size reflects the overall age demographics of Ethiopia and the findings are useful starting place for a long overdue discussion of citizens' perceptions toward civil society in Ethiopia.



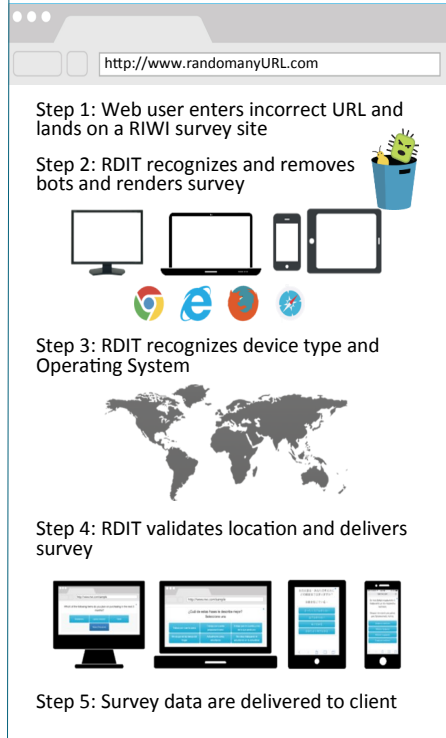
### What is the highest level of education you have attained?



### Which of the following regions do you live in?



## RIWI's Random Domain Intercept Technology (RDIT™)





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