

Regional Integration in the Horn of Africa: Is Prime Minister Abiy's Initiative an Institution ahead of its Time?

Note: The Horn of Africa (HoA), for the purpose of this policy paper comprises of Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea and Djibouti.



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Attribute to: Somali Institute for Development Research and Analysis

Key Policy Messages

1. The Horn of Africa region has long suffered a plethora of authoritarian regimes, social and political unrest, civil and interstate wars and catastrophic famine.
2. The Horn of Africa Region is vital to the world security and trade; its peace, security and political stability have far-reaching implications beyond the region.
3. The recent dramatic turn of events in Ethiopia that saw the selection of Mr Abiy Ahmed as the new Prime Minister ushered in a new era that presents enormous opportunities of political, social and economic reforms in Ethiopia that will be undoubtedly reverberate across the region.
4. The Horn of Africa transformational integration initiative inspired Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed could be seen as a plausible approach to end long held animosity, rivalry and bloody wars between the neighbouring countries in the region. If it is carefully crafted - considering the ethnic diversity, societal, cultural and religious sensitivities of its populace - such integration could bring political stability and economic prosperity to the region.
5. Due to the region's history of ethnic violence, territorial disputes and trust deficiency, any reform such as the one currently championed by Prime Minister Abiy should not be rushed into but planned well with bottom up approach, first addressing the contentious issues of ethnic clashes and intra /inter country border disputes in the region, before any integration agreement is speculated.
6. Integration is not a mere free movement of people and goods across borders but a complex multi-layered process that will require profound changes and close alignment of political and governance structures, harmonization of laws and establishment of regulatory institutions, legal frameworks and agreements which will bind the nationals of these countries together.
7. The proposed integration plan leaves out the Republic of Djibouti, a small but strategically important country in the horn, and without its participation, the integration initiative by Abiy cannot reach its potential.
8. The current Federal Government of Somalia has more pressing security and governance issues on the ground and lacks the capacity and

Federal Government of Somalia (FGS)

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9. The impassioned discourse about future integration should not overshadow the overarching need to

stabilize the region, strengthen the rule of law and bring in democratic system of government. The leaders of the Horn of Africa countries should, by showing genuine aspiration and unity of purpose, take practical steps to realize closer partnership and cooperation on peace, security and economic development.

Background

Population

The region is estimated to have a population of about 136 million in which over 60% are under the age of 30 years. While this disproportionately young population (often referred to as youth bulge) presents broad array of challenges, nevertheless, the region can be transformed into a great economic power with its population growth-purchasing power, mineral and other natural resources.

The geographically strategic location of the Horn of Africa (HoA) region straddling the Gulf of Aden, Red Sea and Indian Ocean, where 80% of the international maritime trade moves through, provides strategic importance for the region. The region is estimated to have a population of about 136 million in which over 60% are under the age of 30 years. While this disproportionately young population (often referred to as youth bulge) presents broad array of challenges, nevertheless, the region can be transformed into a great economic power with its population growth-purchasing power, mineral and other natural resources.

The region is home to some of the fastest growing economies in Africa and the world. Despite encouraging signs of progress and economic growth with largely untapped natural and human resources, it is still a region that is inexorably marred by inter-state conflict, terrorism, wars, unemployment, poverty and famine which greatly impact adversely on political, economic and social stability of the region and Africa at large.

The historic armed conflict between the two largest countries in the horn, Somalia and Ethiopia, is considered to be one of the oldest, the most bitter and enduring hostility in the entire continent of Africa. In the last half of 20th century alone, Somalia and Ethiopia went to war twice (1964 and 1977) over the Somali region of Ogaden in eastern Ethiopia. Resolving the territorial dispute between

the countries through the use of force has failed in both occasions but caused grave destruction, poverty and displacement that caused the influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees into Somalia. Despite numerous shuttle diplomacy and mediation attempts by OAU (Organization of African Union, the parent organization of the current African Union -AU) and some other countries in Africa and the globe, the territorial dispute between Ethiopia and Somalia has never been fully resolved.

While Somalia and Ethiopia were proverbial adversaries, plotting the subversion of one another by supporting armed rebellions within their borders in 1980s, the similarity of the fate of the two state ended in the aftermath of the downfall of their respective governments in 1991.

The collapse of Somalia's totalitarian regime in January 1991 had precipitated a bloody civil war that destroyed much of the country and its institutions including its once strong and highly respected security forces. The disintegration of Somali state and the lack of a legitimate central government since 1991 placed the country in a precarious position, rendering it a lawless land controlled by ruthless warlords and a fertile ground for criminals, pirates and extremist groups. It gave foreign entities like Ethiopia all kinds of justifications to intervene in its internal politics. Ethiopia sent thousands of its troops into Somalia on the premise of protecting the weak transitional

Conflicts

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government in 2006, an incursion that finally came to end in the ignominious withdrawal of Ethiopian troops from Mogadishu. The restoration of some semblance of Somali government took over two decades and culminated in the completion of the political transition and the formal recognition of United States of America in January 2013.

Unlike Somalia, the departure of the military dictator, Mengistu Haile Mariam, and the capture of Addis Ababa in May 1991 by Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) came to pass in an orderly manner paving the way for the leader of TPLF, Meles Zenawi, to become the first post-civil war Prime Minister of Ethiopia. Although Ethiopia has adapted ethnic based federal system of government, Meles presided over autocratic governance structure which ultimately gave him unfettered chance to consolidate state power in the hands of TPLF. Ethiopia has partly succeeded in its endeavour to rebuild and restructure its security forces, economy and infrastructure and emerged as the uncontested hegemon of the Horn of Africa region, with great influence on Somalia's political mapping and affairs.

Eritrea seceded from Ethiopia in 1993 two years after the fall of the military regime headed by Mengistu Haile Mariam. A fierce border war broke out between the two countries in 1998 that has claimed

the lives of close to 100,000 people and produced up to one million internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees. The war had a devastating impact on both countries, not the least on their meagre resources as hundreds of millions of scarce hard currency have been diverted from public service deliveries and development programs into arms procurement and military build-up. Eritrea was accused of meddling in Somali internal affairs as it provided a political and military base to Somali opposition groups (Asmara group) against Somalia transitional government in 2006 – 07 and supplied arms to the Islamic militants and other insurgents who were fighting to defeat Ethiopian forces in Somalia.

Djibouti, the smallest country in the Horn of Africa region, clashed with Eritrea over the border dispute of Dumeira Mountain and Dumeira Island in 2008. The disputed territories is at the heart of Bab-el-Mandeb strait, an important shipping route for global commerce. Ethiopia relies heavily on Djibouti for access to the Red Sea, since the eruption of Ethiopian - Eritrea war, positioning Djibouti as the life line support for Ethiopia's trade with the outside world. A continued military conflict between these countries would destabilize the regional security as well as risk to disrupt global trade, increasing the price of oil and other commodities.

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Horn of Africa

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The Horn of Africa: Changes, Challenges and Opportunities - Analysis

The Horn of Africa (HoA) region has been riddled with inter-state armed conflict, poverty, drought, extremism and famine. Dictatorships and authoritarian regimes have ruled much of the region and contributed to the broken political and social system in the region. Decades of underdevelopment coupled with social disparity and divisions along ethnic, religious, tribal, cultural and political lines have contributed to the conflicts and social upheavals within the region.

Despite the complex ethnic and border disputes that have plagued the region in the recent past, its strategic importance in geographical location cannot be ignored. The region is a conduit for trade as an estimated \$700 billion trade and trans-shipment pass through Bab Al Mandab on the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden each year. The regions' strategic waterways, its close proximity to this Middle East and its unexploited natural resources would make it very attractive and lucrative environment to international businesses

and foreign investment. This geopolitical salience, economic potential and the threat to global trade posed by pirates attracted many powerful nations such

as the US, China, NATO alliance, Japan, Turkey and the Gulf States to the region.

The Abiy Factor – An Inflection Point

There have not been any significant political developments in the Horn of Africa region before the selection of Mr. Abiy Ahmed as the new Prime Minister of Ethiopia in April 2018. Prime Minister Abiy is from the largest ethnic community in Ethiopia, the Oromo, who for decades faced economic and political marginalization. He is from a mixed Christian and Muslim background which makes him suitable for the diverse Ethiopian religious dynamics and the region at large.

Prime Minister has shown to be charismatic, astute and visionary leader who is willing to take risks with his reform agenda in Ethiopia and integration initiative in the horn region. For many people in the region he is inspirational, others, however, are concerned of the haste pace of his reforms and reconfiguration of Ethiopia's political economic and social landscape in a country that is divided along ethnic and political lines which had never known any form of openness and democracy. Such concerns are warranted, given the history of this region where iron-fisted, hard core authoritarian regimes have until recently been the norm, and human right ideals such as freedoms of expression and thought, equality and the right to justice were non-existent.

In few months, Prime Minister Abiy had made swift, momentous and unthinkable changes in the region, from lifting the state of emergency and ordering the release of political detainees in Ethiopia, giving dissidents permission to return home and unblocking websites and TV channels to making peace with its neighbour Eritrea by agreeing to give up on the disputed territories. Abiy factor has catapulted the region into diplomatic frenzy of exchanges of visits, rapprochement, peace agreements and restoration of relationships.

The opposition who once had tense relationship with the former authoritarian regime are suddenly finding themselves in a very conspicuous space in a spontaneous agreeable relationship. Welcoming the changes and recognizing the stability of the country depends on meaningful institutional reforms and the revision of the laws that have for decades took away citizen's rights and freedoms, the opposition leaders are cautiously going along with Mr Abiy's reforms which they believe not only represent a significant shift in policy and direction of government but an inevitable and irreversible political transformation, sustainable peace and democracy.

Regional Integration in the Horn – An Institution Ahead of its Time.

It would be overly simplistic to attribute the concept of horn of Africa regional integration only to the inspiration of Mr Abiy Ahmed. For some time, this idea of regional integration was floated in a number of local and international forums as the springboard to construct viable

polity to improve security and trade in the region. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has openly suggested the possibility of such integration to his people on national television after a meeting with the Presidents of Somalia and Eritrea. It is not yet clear whether the

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issue of integration of the three countries were discussed and agreed in principle in the summit or whether it was Mr Abiy's post hoc rationalization of the direction, strategic significance and ultimate goal of his reform agenda.

To gauge the public opinion of the reforms introduced by Prime Minister Abiy and its impact on Somalia and the region in general, SIDRA asked Somali scholars and experts in the region on their take of the reform. The respondents welcomed the reforms in Ethiopia and wider region and noted the prospect of these changes to bring the region political stability and economic growth. Most of the respondents were apprehensive about the scale and speed of its implementation amid ethnic tensions and territorial disputes within Ethiopia as well as in the whole region.

On the issue of Prime Minister Abiy calling for the integration of Ethiopia, Somalia and Eritrea and perhaps having one president one day, the majority of the respondents concurred that the feasibility and success of such plan is highly unlikely in the near future. Experts in the region posit that any integration of these three countries is decades away if not impossible but a marriage of sorts between Ethiopia and Eritrea could be a possibility since the two countries were once one nation and share many similarities.

The tripartite agreement between Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia excluded Djibouti which is important to the region's peace, security and economic development. Experts rationalized this absence of Djibouti from the tripartite agreement with the unresolved territorial dispute between Djibouti and Eritrea while others feel that the integration is partly orchestrated by Saudi Arabia/UAE and the exclusion of Djibouti is a politically motivated deliberate ploy to isolate Djibouti as a punitive action against its disagreement with DP World

over the Port deal.

Somali political analysts downplay the possibility and practicality of a political integration between Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia. They argue that the tripartite agreement was nothing more than an attempt to further the détente between Ethiopia and Eritrea. The current nascent Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) is reeling with a combination of political, security and economic problems ranging from its armed struggle against Alshabaab to political tensions with its Federal Member States.

Because it's unique situation, Somalia is not ready to be part of regional 'conglomerate'. It is a mendicant state which depends on 22 thousand strong African Union peacekeepers for its own security and protection. The Federal government of Somalia has more pressing security and governance issues on the ground and lacks the capacity and competence to join such an enterprise. It is suggested that the first starting point for any future integration is to allay the fear of Ethiopian domination. Somali people feel very strongly about issues of sovereignty, national identity and ethnic distinctiveness. One of the major issues of great concern to many Somalis is the increased inflow of Ethiopian immigrants into Somalia in search of job opportunities or as a transit point for outward migration to the Arabian Peninsula. Ethiopian population is nearly 100 million compared with around 14 million of Somali population.

Regional integration becomes possible when the constituent states have, aside from geographical location, shared interests and commonalities and unity of purpose to create such integration. Integration is not a mere free movement of people and goods across borders but a complex multi-layered process that will require profound changes and close alignment of political and governance structures, harmonization of laws and

Respondents

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Tripartite Agreement

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Federal Government of Somalia

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Ethiopia

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establishment of regulatory institutions, legal frameworks and agreements which will bind the nationals of these countries together. It will demand lengthy and costly negotiations, intricate planning and agreements which will require technical expertise and financial support.

Prime Minister Abiy has cited in a number of times his landlocked Ethiopia's ambitions to take stakes in Somali ports, albeit a mutually beneficial proposition to both countries. It has not been outlined what Somalia would get out of such an integration apart from economic prosperity which could be pursued through other forms of cooperation short of political integration.

Some political observers argue that the prospect of political integration might motivate horn of Africa nations to reform

their political governance, modernize and liberalize their economies, promote rule of law and human rights.

Ethiopia and Somalia are already members of Inter-Governmental Authority for Development (IGAD). IGAD advocates for peace, prosperity and regional integration for its member states (Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya, Uganda, Djibouti and Sudan). IGAD is a fully-fledged institution better placed to lead any regional integration for its member states. Prime Minister Abiy's integration initiative for horn of Africa countries alone might divide IGAD into two blocks; Horn of Africa region and others (East African region). It could be also argued that, provided a good ground work is laid, the benefits of integration of the horn may strengthen IGAD and facilitate faster political and economic integration for the whole east and horn of Africa region.

The Gulf cash offensive

Gulf States

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The Gulf States, particularly the UAE and Qatar has been expanding their leverage in the Horn of Africa. The broadening power of the UAE and Qatar in the Horn is mostly driven by Qatar – Saudi Arabia/UAE crisis, political competition for influence in the region and strategic commercial interests. The geopolitics of the horn is fluid due to the UAE and Qatar's increased involvement and competition to buy partnership and cooperation in the region. Although the peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia was facilitated by Saudi Arabia and UAE, the rivalries between UAE/Saudi

Arabia and Qatar and to some extent the disagreement between UAE and Djibouti could impact the stability of the region and could turn it as a battle ground for Gulf States.

This contention could cause further instability specifically in Somalia where the weak Federal government, strapped for cash, is switching sides for its survival at the time when the region as whole is scrabbling with the wind of change by Ethiopia's Abiy.

Somalia: The Underdog and Unsure Government

UAE

The UAE relations with the Somalia's Federal government has collapsed but paradoxically the UAE influence in Somalia and the region at large is growing due to the Ethiopian and Eritrean peace reconciliation.

It is evident that long proxy politics is being played in Somalia. The friction and the fall out between Somalia's Federal government and its Federal Member States could be attributed partly to the Gulf countries' apparent interference in Somalia. The UAE relations with the Somalia's Federal government has

collapsed but paradoxically the UAE influence in Somalia and the region at large is growing due to the Ethiopian and Eritrean peace reconciliation. This particular rivalry of Gulf states has been destabilizing for Somalia owing partly to the lack of competent government to weather the diplomatic storm.

The Federal government need to examine the details of the proposed regional integration, considering the unique situation in the country, its peace and state

building priorities and distinctiveness its people.

The Odd Brother: Eritrea

Eritrea’s strategic location of occupying almost one thousand kilometres of the Red Sea coastline makes it very important in the region. Its brief history is full of conflicts and border disputes with its neighbours (Ethiopia, Djibouti, Yemen and Somalia). The country has been excluded from IGAD and isolated from the international scene by debilitating UN sanctions. Eritrea is run by a totalitarian regime where people are denied the right to exercise their most fundamental freedoms. Something as simple as walking outside could risk detention and jail sentence. The total absence of independent judicial system, persecution and extreme poverty made live unbearable for most Eritrean who only less than three decades ago were euphoric to gain independence from

Ethiopia. An indefinite harsh national service has forced mass exodus of young people to flee the country and risk their lives on perilous journeys to Europe. Eritreans are the third largest migrant community behind Syrians and Afghanis according to UNICEF.

The peace agreement, restoration of diplomatic relations and reopening of the border with Ethiopia and the lifting of the UN sanctions give a glimmer of hope and a new dawn for Eritrea. the normalization of relations between Somalia and Eritrea and the peace accord with Djibouti over the Dumerira Mountains and Dumeira Island dispute brings the region a sense of stability and better outlook into the future.

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A City-Sate of Crossroads - Djibouti

This small nation of 820,000 people gained its independence from France in 1977. France was dominant of Djibouti’s political, security and economic affairs after independence in exchange for a military base and training facilities. Djibouti saw its neighbouring Somalia and Ethiopia overthrow authoritarian regimes in the early 1990s, giving it strategic influence due to its stability and economic growth. The emergence of Eritrea was something Djibouti had to contend with as well as all the upheaval and skirmishes between the two small states. The chaotic situation in Yemen, just only 30 kilometres away from its coast, exacerbated the instability in the region.

years, standing for elections since 1999. In the last election Guelleh changed the constitution to stand for a third term. The opposition boycotted the election, in protest to this unilateral change in the constitution, resulting in unrest and violence. The tension with the opposition is very challenging for the Djibouti leadership who are accused of political manipulation, intimidation and unlawful detention.

Eritrea and Ethiopian conflict over the border disputes, the loss of Ethiopia’s access to the ports of Massawa and Assab and the rapid economic transformation in Ethiopia have presented unparalleled opportunity for Djibouti. Djibouti and Ethiopia became intertwined in trade, enhancing the economic situation in Djibouti and its image as an oasis of

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President Ismail Omar Guelleh has been ruling the country for almost twenty

Military Bases

US Africom base, France's military presence and Japan's military facilities has also given this small enclave in the Horn of Africa strategic importance.

Djibouti

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Although Djibouti resisted foreign interference, it is not immune to the political instability and the strong man presence in president Guelleh, who failed to introduce transparent political reforms to go along with the substantial economic progress. Broader employment opportunities and wider income distribution is still non-existent despite economic growth and regional influence.

Djibouti's dependence on Chinese debt worth about 88% of its 1.72 billion in GDP will result in the small nation handing some key assets to China. This move is

worrisome for the US since China's first overseas military base which opened in 2018 is only 6 miles from the US military base. This close proximity of China has been challenging for US policy makers, military planners and US intelligence community as well as DP World of the UAE who suddenly has seen their role diminish by the Chinese presence.

The ongoing dispute between UAE's DP World and Djibouti over the management of Doraleh Container Terminal retards the development of the vital Djibouti ports. China is gaining a strong foothold in Djibouti, investing a new \$3.5bn free-trade zone, the largest of its kind in Africa when it is completed.

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Conclusion

The dynamics in the Horn of Africa (HoA) region is delicate and changing. The region is no longer politics as usual region of yesteryear. Its population is young and growing, unemployment is rampant, particularly among the youth and economic opportunities for the masses are scarce. Discontent, marginalization and totalitarianism are triggering a new kind of public awakening that may lead to uprising in the youth and those desiring political and economic freedoms.

The current political and economic reforms taking place in Ethiopia and the horn, led by Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, are commendable and may pave the way for economic growth and political stability in the region, but must be implemented with careful and gradual planning and cooperation. Given the political and social turbulence in the region, these reforms if hastily executed, run the risk of fuelling ethnic violence

and reignite the contentious issues of the border disputes.

The ground work must be laid first to improve and address the ethnic tensions, trust deficiency among the communities and border disputes. Peace and security of the region must be established and strengthened. Thereafter, economic cooperation (free trade, common market economy) or some other forms of closer ties that keeps the identity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of each country intact is the way forward.

For the case of Somalia, it needs to take caution and embrace a balanced approach with these new transformations. The Federal government should take a hard look at its internal security and politics and place its utmost priority to bring peace and security to the country. The fact that Djibouti has been left out of the deal should cause some considerable

uneasiness for Somalia. Djibouti has been a staunch ally of Somalia for much of its troubled past. Both Somalia and Djibouti share ethnicity and feel strongly about their distinctiveness as a homogeneous society. Somalia should also be cognizant and careful about the way Ethiopia is positioning itself as the power player in the proposed integration. The local ethnic conflicts and heightened tension between Oromo and Somalis in Ethiopia since Prime Minister Abiy came to power are regrettable but could bring further death and destruction and, if they are not addressed expeditiously, they could spill into other parts in the region.

The recent action of PM Abiy's recalling of their representative from Hargeisa Consulate points to a new strategy and commitment with the Federal government of Somalia. This new move to limit paradiplomatic relations with

Somaliland and other Federal Member States could prove very problematic for Regional governments including Somaliland as well as for Ethiopia. Given Somalia's federal structure, the Federal government is required to consult with the Federal Member States on issues that affect their interests such as cross-border trade. All the major ports of Somalia, except Mogadishu port, are in the hands of Federal Member States. Ethiopia's diminishing influence in the regions will make it harder to sell any future integration to the Somali people without the support of the Federal Member States.

There is the possibility of closer economic integration in the horn of Africa which could contribute to the region's development and prosperity, but the countries of the horn must first pursue peace, security, development and human rights for all of their citizens.

Recommendations:

1. Any integration initiative by the countries of the Horn of Africa must include Djibouti, which is vital to the political, security and economic development of the region.
2. The Federal government of Somalia must rebuild and reform its security forces and concentrate its energy to stabilize the country. It must build and strengthen its institutions and promote the rule of law as the only way forward to a lasting peace and stability.
3. The Federal government of Somalia must appreciate its limitation in terms of its mandate and capacity and refrain from committing to any initiative that supersedes the sovereignty, territorial integrity, unity and independence of Somali nation.
4. The Federal government of Somalia must examine Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's integration initiative and seek for technical and legal expertise in any treaty to create closer economic and political cooperation.
5. The countries in the horn of Africa region must reform their political structures and bring in democratic system of government, promote freedoms of expression and thought and liberalize their economies. Effective, independent and fair judicial systems are the cornerstone of just society. The horn of Africa region must put systems in place to realize transparency and accountability.
6. The recent conflict of the Oromo and Somalis in Ethiopia doesn't endear Somalis to the idea of Ethiopia's integration initiative. Historic hostility and suspicion loom large. This long-standing trust deficit must first be addressed to bring the communities in the region together, build their confidence, trust and cooperation, before fully fledged integration is formulated. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, in collaboration with Somali and Oromo leaders in Ethiopia, must find lasting solutions for this recurrent communal violence.

About SIDRA

SIDRA is a registered independent, non-profit Research and Policy Analysis Think Tank based in Garowe, Puntland, Somalia.

Our Vision

Somalia in which social justice prevails and inclusive economic growth benefits all and improves the well being of all people.

Our Mission

A centre of development and research that generates relevant and original knowledge for dynamic policy environment support, institutional capacity development and alliance.

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