HORN CENTER FOR DEMOCRACY
NURTURING DEMOCRACY

YOUTH LEADERSHIP FOR DEMOCRACY AND SOLIDARITY

YLDS

Cohort I Newsletter

Six Days of Learning, Leadership and Regional Solidarity



ARRIVAL

Arrival and Welcoming

The YLDS Cohort I participants have arrived in Addis Ababa, marking the beginning of their six-day in-person journey.

Following three virtual sessions that helped participants connect and laid the foundation for their learning, participants gathered on Sunday evening for their first in-person engagement.

Coming together from across the Horn of Africa, the welcoming dinner offered an opportunity to reconnect, put a name to the face, and begin building the YLDS community.

Our Program and Partnerships Director, Yemisrach Kebede, welcomed the participants and highlighted the importance of creating a space where young people share experiences and strengthen youth agency in advancing democratic values and solidarity across the region.

The conversations, energy, and optimism around the dinner table reflected a shared sense of purpose and anticipation for the days ahead.







OFFICIAL INAUGURATION

Official Inauguration / Opening

Horn Center for Democracy Launches First Youth Leadership for Democracy and Solidarity (YLDS) Cohort to Advance Youth Leadership, Democratic Engagement and Regional Solidarity

Horn Center for Democracy



Frew Demeke
Executive Director, HCD



Yemisrach Kebede
Program and Partnerships Director, HCD

DAY ONE

Understanding the Region, Rethinking Leadership

The day began with participants collectively establishing ground rules for a safe, inclusive, and respectful learning environment, followed by presentations of assignments from the first three virtual sessions. These opening activities helped connect the participants' online learning with the shared journey ahead.

Participants then explored the Horn of Africa's governance and security landscape, examining regional realities, emerging dynamics, and the interconnected challenges shaping the region's future. The discussions moved into political biography and power literacy, creating space to reflect on how personal experiences, historical contexts, and power relations influence political understanding and leadership.

The day concluded with reflections on colonial legacies and the dual realities of governance and political life, encouraging participants to look beyond immediate challenges and consider the deeper historical and structural forces that continue to shape institutions, leadership, and civic engagement across the region.



DAY TWO

From Rethinking Leadership to Putting it into Practice

Building on Day One's reflections on regional realities, governance, and political leadership, Day Two of YLDS Cohort I combined collective bonding with practical learning.

The day began with morning physical activities that encouraged connection, teamwork, and a shared sense of solidarity among participants, reinforcing the importance of building trust and relationships within the cohort.

The sessions then moved into practice through case study clinics, a gallery walk, and sessions on mediation as political leadership. Participants explored real-world challenges, exchanged perspectives, and examined approaches to constructive political engagement.

A multi-party mediation simulation provided an opportunity to put these insights into practice, strengthening skills in dialogue, negotiation, and collaborative problem-solving.



DAY THREE

From Self-Awareness to Strategic Action

A day of looking inward and planning outward.

Building on the reflections and practical learning of the first two days, Day Three of the YLDS Cohort I focused on translating leadership insights into strategic advocacy and meaningful action.

Participants explored the role of emotional intelligence in high-stakes advocacy, deepened their understanding of theories of change and institutional entry points, and began shaping their 100-day projects into actionable initiatives.

Through peer feedback, collaborative discussions, and project refinement, they exchanged perspectives to strengthen their ideas, and identified practical pathways to turn their leadership commitments into tangible outcomes.

KEY LEARNING

Effective leadership begins with self-awareness, is guided by strategic thinking, and finds its purpose in meaningful action.





DAY FOUR

Understanding Power, Youth Agency, and Civic Engagement



Meaningful change requires more than recognizing challenges. It calls for understanding how power operates, identifying structural barriers, and finding pathways for action.

Day Four of the Youth Leadership for Democracy and Solidarity (YLDS) Cohort I explored these questions through sessions on agency, power and structural barriers; policy frameworks as diagnostic tools; positionality, access points and civic action; pathways to civic engagement; and the fundamentals of digital advocacy.

Through a group simulation focused on solving a real-life problem, participants put their learning into practice by analyzing challenges, examining different perspectives, and exploring practical pathways toward change.

Beyond the classroom, Days Three and Four also created space for bonding, trust and solidarity. The experience extended into a documentary screening, offering an opportunity to reflect together on leadership, political participation, and collective action.

DAY FIVE

Civic Action, Institutional Engagement, and Cultural Celebration

On Friday, Day Five, participants explored coalition-building, civic action pathways, strategic messaging across media, and digital ethics, safety, and safeguarding. They put their learning into practice through a civic action planning simulation.

In the afternoon, participants visited the African Union Commission and engaged with representatives from the Political Affairs, Peace and Security Department, the Governance and Conflict Prevention Directorate.

The discussions explored relevant policy frameworks, including the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda, as well as institutional architectures and mechanisms for youth engagement in governance and peacebuilding at the continental and regional levels.

Friday night came alive with a cultural celebration, as YLDS participants proudly wore their traditional attire, shared their cultural heritage, and celebrated the diversity that enriches the Horn of Africa. At its heart the celebration was a moment of connection, mutual appreciation, and solidarity.







DAY SIX

Connecting the Dots, Building Regional Solidarity

The final day of the Youth Leadership for Democracy and Solidarity (YLDS) Cohort I brought six days of learning together around a shared vision for regional integration and solidarity. Through a participatory session, participants connected key lessons across the five modules, explored regional barriers and institutional architectures, with a focus on IGAD, and reflected on how their learning could translate into collective action. The rich reflections and feedback demonstrated the depth of engagement and connections built throughout the journey.

The day also celebrated individual growth and collective leadership. Through a peer recognition exercise, participants acknowledged one another's leadership qualities and the specific moments that made those qualities visible. Guided by reflections on what they brought to YLDS, how the experience challenged them, and how they had grown, participants moved from individual learning to envisioning their future as a regional community committed to democratic leadership and solidarity.

These reflections culminated in a collective pledge and the establishment of the YLDS alumni community. Participants elected a lead and co-lead to coordinate the community for the next six months in collaboration with the Horn Center for Democracy (HCD). The newly elected representatives presented the alumni declaration, which was endorsed by participants, marking a collective commitment to carry the spirit of YLDS beyond the training.

> The journey concluded with a certificate ceremony, celebrating the participants' commitment, growth, and readiness to take their learning forward.


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