Humanitarian Crisis and Response of Non-Governmental Organisations in the Tigray War

B. G. Kahsay

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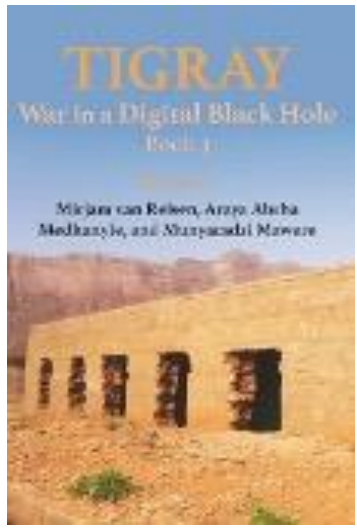

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The list of figures in colour can be found here:
https://raee.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Figures_Tigray.-War-in-a-Digital-Black-Hole-Volume-3-1.pdf

Contents

Chapter 6

Humanitarian Crisis and Response of Non-Governmental Organisations in the Tigray War

B. G. Kahsay

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Water be for those thirsty; advice be for those who listen.

Abstract

This study explores the response to the humanitarian crisis, due to the siege and communication blackout during the Tigray war. People suffered from lack of food, water, shelter, and healthcare, leading to malnutrition, starvation and disease. Despite efforts by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and United Nations agencies to respond, challenges like access issues, lack of funds and fuel, and political tensions hindered aid delivery. The international community's response fell short, with the government exacerbating the crisis through actions like blocking aid. Key shortcomings included gaps in protecting civilians and addressing urgent needs, with a call for further studies on the relevance of the involvement of local NGO in humanitarian efforts. It was found that the local NGOs were in a better position to meet needs in the situation and deal with the security issues. Recognising the vital role of local NGOs, this study concludes that the collaboration of large humanitarian organisations with local NGOs is crucial for an effective humanitarian response and long-term recovery in Tigray.

Keywords: Tigray war, humanitarian aid, Ethiopia, NGOs, INGOs, human rights-based approach

Introduction

Ever since World War II, the world has witnessed some of the worst and intense humanitarian crises (Lopour, 2016). In 2020, almost 82.4 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced from their homes, out of which 48 million were internally displaced persons (UNHCR, 2021a). The number of people in need of humanitarian assistance is growing (OCHA, 2015). Protracted conflicts are a major driver of current humanitarian needs (ICRC, 2016). The United Nations (UN) estimated that at least 235.4 million people would need humanitarian assistance in 2021 (Care International, 2020).

The provision of humanitarian assistance in extremely political contexts such as war, is not a recent phenomenon (Lange & Quinn, 2003). In fact, the global capacity to respond to complicated emergencies has increased (Duffield, 1997). In 2018, for example, a significant investment by the United Nations and partners was made in utilising USD 15.1 billion of the demanded USD 25.2 billion to assist 97.9 million of the most vulnerable people globally (Ravishanker & Mwangi, 2019). The key objective of humanitarian aid is "to save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity with programming that adheres to the guiding principles of humanitarian action: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence" (Hinga, 2018, p. 6). However, the ability of organisations to meet these objectives and deliver aid is often challenged in conflict situations.

The UN is the most important international body providing relief in war zones. However, it does not have the advantages enjoyed by other non-governmental humanitarian organisations in terms of access and local knowledge (Duffield, 1997). The ability of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to provide humanitarian assistance is also substantial (Duffield, 1997), as they are often well established in remote areas where the UN agencies have partial or no operations. They are also often able to engage with local actors, including the parties involved in the armed struggle. Therefore, they should be treated as equal partners, equivalent to UN agencies, and be involved in all aspects of humanitarian assistance, including strategic decision-making (OCHA, 2015).

Whenever an emergency or crisis has occurred because of manmade or natural disasters, coordination of aid delivery is inevitable, and several humanitarian actors work to support the affected people (Reindorp & Wiles, 2001). Coordination is the delivery of humanitarian aid in a combined and effective way through the systematic use of policy instruments including strategic planning, information management, enlistment of required resources, ensuring accountability, segregating labour, negotiations, and preserving a functional framework with local political authorities and plays a leadership role (Minear *et al.*, 1992). Furthermore, the coordination platform for international responders to humanitarian needs, instead of creating separate or parallel ones, are supposed to build on existing national and local level apparatuses (OCHA, 2015).

In many conflict-torn situations around the globe, constraints on humanitarian access continue to affect the ability of affected populations to receive adequate humanitarian aid from UN agencies as well as national and international NGOs (Harmer *et al.*, 2018). In the Tigray region of Ethiopia, several reports have highlighted the serious humanitarian crisis due to war and the fact that aid has not been delivered at the required level. At the end of February 2021, 4.5 million people in Tigray were reported to be in urgent need of humanitarian support; towards mid-May 2021, this figure was increased to 5.2 million people (Annys *et al.*, 2021). A Bureau of Agriculture and Rural Development led multi-agency assessment concluded that the total number of people in need of relief support for 2022 reached 6,525,097, being the sum of the Productive Safety Nate Programme (PSNP) and relief beneficiaries, and internally displaced persons in the Tigray region (Bureau of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2022). Despite the urgent need, access to Tigray for humanitarian actors from the start of the conflict was extremely constrained, mainly by the Ethiopian government, but also due to security issues posed by armed groups operating in the area (Stoddard *et al.*, 2021).

This chapter assesses the humanitarian crisis in Tigray and the responses provided by NGOs operating in the region in 2020–2022. It looks at the role that NGOs played in delivering aid to the people

in Tigray during the crisis. It examines whether advantages of NGOs have been of use in the delivery of aid to conflict-affected people. It also identifies the aid delivery approaches adopted and how the humanitarian assistance was coordinated in the very dynamic and unpredictable operational context of the Tigray war with shifting administrations.[1] This research aimed to investigate the challenges encountered by the NGOs in delivering humanitarian assistance.

This chapter explores the humanitarian support provided in response to the humanitarian crisis in Tigray during and after the war. The main research question is: *What was the role of NGOs in responding to the humanitarian crisis in Tigray during the war?*

This question is advanced through the following sub-questions:

- What humanitarian needs arose in the Tigray war and how did NGOs respond to these needs?
- What approaches were used to respond to the humanitarian crisis?
- How was the humanitarian assistance coordinated and what operational challenges hindered aid delivery?

Methodology

The study is based on both primary and secondary sources of data and has used a qualitative approach. Primary data was collected in two phases. The first phase was during fieldwork; the interviews and FGDs were conducted from November 2021 to January 2022. The second phase was in June 2023, during which the researcher conducted eight interviews with selected informants who participated in the first phase to see the evolution of the humanitarian situation

[1] When the conflict occurred in November 2020, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) was administering the Tigray region. After the conflict started, the TPLF-led government of Tigray fled, and the Tigray region came under the interim administration from the federal government of Ethiopia. In June 2021, the government of Tigray (TPLF) again came to power. On 2 November 2022 a Cessation of Hostilities Agreement was signed in Pretoria between the federal government of Ethiopia and the TPLF. In March 2023, the elected government of Tigray was dissolved after the Pretoria Agreement, and the Interim Regional Administration (IRA) of Tigray Region was formed.

and the support provided by the NGOs. Throughout the data collection period, the researcher was immersed in the daily life of the crisis with the affected people in Tigray. This placed the researcher in a position to gather data on the humanitarian needs and responses in the Tigray region. The researcher interacted with personnel from NGOs and International NGOs (INGOs). The term NGOs is used for the generic term of NGOs in general; where relevant in the text these are specifically divided between national or local NGOs and INGOs.

Table 6.1. Data collection method, sampling techniques, and locations

Method	Selection	Location
30 interviews with heads[2] of INGOs based in Tigray	Purposive	Mekelle
5 interviews with heads of local NGOs working in Tigray	Purposive	Mekelle
3 interviews with heads/representatives of UN agencies in Tigray	Purposive	Mekelle
3 interviews with cluster and working group coordinators	Purposive	Mekelle
4 interviews with experts from the Government of the State of Tigray under the TPLF administration	Purposive	Mekelle
8 follow-up interviews	Purposive	Mekelle
3 FGDs[3] with IDPs	Spontaneous	Mekelle, Shire and Adigrat
Observation	Systematic	Mekelle, Shire and Adigrat

[2] The word 'heads' is used for uniformity because the real positions of the interviewed representative of INGOs were various that include 'head of sub-office', 'head of regional office', 'field coordinator', 'area coordinator', 'regional coordinator', 'regional manager', 'area manager', 'emergency response manger', 'program manager' and 'team leader'.

[3] The FGD participants were 11, 14, and 9 in Mekelle, Shire and Adigrat, respectively.

Moreover, the researcher was in Tigray throughout the crisis working on the delivery of humanitarian aid to the war affected people in Tigray. In providing aid, the researcher physically visited several locations observing the situations of crisis-affected people and the responses provided by different organisations. Moreover, the researcher attended several aid coordination sectoral meetings from which a large amount of updated information about humanitarian support in Tigray was obtained.

In addition to these observations, key-informant interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted as primary data collection methods. The below table presents the details of the methods, selection techniques, and locations of data collection.

All the interviews and FGDs were conducted face-to-face, except for four interviews which were conducted through email communication. Semi-structured questionnaires were prepared for the interviews and administered to collect primary data. Purposive sampling technique was used to select heads of NGOs, UN agencies, and local government representatives as key-informants. This technique was used purposively based on the researcher's prior knowledge of NGOs, their humanitarian interventions, and the period in which they have been operating in Tigray. For the government representatives, their role in the cluster-based coordination of the humanitarian assistance was used to select them as respondents.

The FGDs were randomly conducted with people from different age groups and sexes, hence heterogeneous groups. The FGD participants were 11, 14, and 9 in Mekelle, Shire and Adigrat respectively. The locations for the FGDs were also selected purposefully, as some of the top Internally Displaced People (IDP) hosting locations in Tigray.

The data from the observations was captured using field notes and photographs. The FGDs were conducted in Tigrinya, and summaries of the FDGs were made to mainly present the perspectives of the conflict-affected people, but also to substantiate the other data. The interviews were conducted predominantly in Tigrinya but some in English. All the email interviews were in English particularly

informants from UN agencies and cluster coordinators. There was no digital equipment used to capture the interviews. The data first collected in Tigrinya from FGDs, and interviews were translated to English, after which it was coded, processed and labelled.

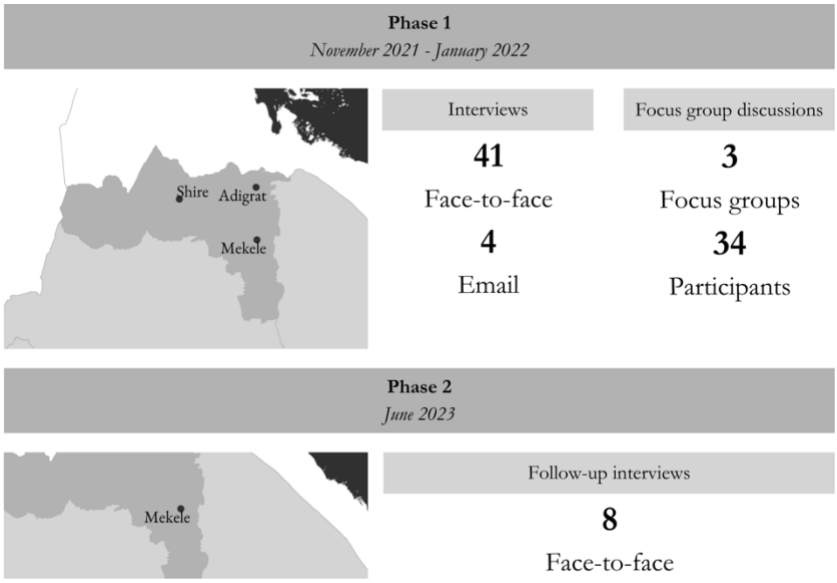

Figure 6.1. Location, date and number of participants in the interviews and focus group discussions

Throughout the research, no major ethical concerns arose. The respondents were asked for their consent to participate and provide their thoughts on the topics being researched, and for their contributions to be reported. The anonymity of respondents was ensured.

While conducting this study, the researcher was an employee of an INGO working in Tigray. This enabled the researcher with ample information and data on the research theme and access to study subjects. However, this research was undertaken independently and was not part of the official assignment of the author as staff of the INGO. The views and analysis presented in this chapter are solely those of the researcher and not the INGO with which he is associated.

The following sections set out the literature review on the role of NGOs in humanitarian crises and the rights-based approach.

NGOs and their role in humanitarian crises

The World Bank's Operational Directive 14.70 defines NGOs as private organisations:

> *[…] characterised primarily by humanitarian or cooperative, rather than commercial, objectives […] that pursue activities to relieve suffering, promote the interests of the poor, protect the environment, provide basic social services, or undertake community development.* (World Bank, cited in Werker & Ahmed, 2007, p. 3)

NGOs share common characteristics: they are not created to generate personal profit; they operate voluntarily; have some degree of formal or institutional existence; are independent; are not self-serving; and function in the public arena (Adibe & Obinne, 2021). However, the fundamental nature of NGOs as self-mandating and not operating under the control of any state or international body has made them susceptible to criticism as 'ungovernable' and 'unaccountable' (Adibe & Obinne, 2021). Unlike states and democratically elected governments, NGOs are accountable only to their donors and sponsors (Adibe & Obinne, 2021), and to some extent to the people they support.

NGOs work independently and alongside bilateral assistance organisations, private-sector infrastructure operators, self-improvement associations, and local governments (Werker & Ahmed, 2007). They play a vital role in humanitarian crises in reaching people in need of emergency support. While INGOs have long been acknowledged for the part that they play in the global humanitarian system, national NGOs are often the first to respond when a humanitarian crisis occurs (Ferris, 2011). International organisations can be limited by security concerns or political constraints. By working with national NGOs and civil society groups, international actors can gain contextual information about affected people and relatively better access to affected people (Saavedra & Knox-Clarke, 2015).

Conflict and disaster-affected people have the right to receive services from the international community, which are usually delivered through NGOs. However, it is still fundamentally important that people continue to obtain services from the state. The Kampala Convention, under Article 4, clearly states that state parties are obliged to "ensure assistance to internally displaced persons by meeting their basic needs as well as allowing and facilitating rapid and unimpeded access by humanitarian organisations and personnel" (African Union Convention for the Protection, 2009, p. 6). Article 7 (5-g) of this Convention states that, specifically in the situation of armed conflicts, members of armed groups are prohibited from "impending humanitarian assistance and passage of all relief consignments, equipment and personnel to internally displaced persons" (African Union Convention for the Protection, 2009, p. 7). The first regional convention of its kind, the Kampala Convention overtly protects the rights of people affected by natural disasters, armed conflict, general violence, desecrations of human rights and displaced persons affected by development projects (African Union & IDMC, 2010).

In any humanitarian crisis, NGOs can experience challenges in delivering aid to the affected. These include security risks, restrictions on access to certain locations, aid diversion, politicisation of aid, and influence of donors. In addition, there is an overlap between crisis response and development programmes, which can lead to lack of clarity about their role. Other challenges are posed by the relationship between NGOs and state and non-state actors, including armed groups (Norwegian Refugee Council & Handicap International, 2016). Working with the state in situations where the state by itself is involved in an armed conflict, or is the trigger for the humanitarian disaster, can create concerns about the ability of the NGO to adhere to the humanitarian principles of independence and neutrality (Saavedra & Knox-Clarke, 2015).

INGOs have operated in Ethiopia for at least half a century – since the famines of the 1970s and 1980s (Clark, 2000). The NGOs of those years, largely foreign organisations, focused on emergency relief operations, which helped prevent massive loss of life (Clark, 2000).

According to Stoddard *et al.* (2021), in the crisis of 2021, Tigray had the highest percentage of people in need, as a proportion of the whole population, but the lowest number of assistance providing organisations and the lowest percentage of people in need reached by humanitarian support. However, 7 months into the crisis, more than 50 national and international NGOs and UN agencies had an operational presence in the region (Kahsay, 2021).

Rights-based approach

The 'rights-based approach' is a concept that emerged as a development paradigm in the late 1990s, when the two elements of foreign assistance and global policy – human rights and development – merged, integrating the principles of human rights with those of poverty reduction (Kindornay *et al.*, 2011). The rights-based approach is a theoretical outline for the course of human development, which is normatively based on universal human rights standards and operationally engaged in promoting and defending human rights (UNHCHR, 2006). Under this conceptual framework, "human rights are the means, the end, and the mechanism of evaluation, and the central focus of sustainable human development" (Ferris, 2011, p. 102).

Rights-based development is all about incorporating human rights while framing plans and projects, i.e., recognising 'rights holders' and 'duty-bearers', confirming local participation, establishing and reinforcing ways of 'citizen-government accountability', and decreasing discrimination against marginalised groups (Kindornay *et al.*, 2011). It is also a means of emphasising the importance of the development process in addition to the results (Kindornay *et al.*, 2011). In this approach, people are seen as holders of privileges and rights, instead of as 'beneficiaries' of assistance and aid (Ferris, 2011).

A rights-based approach is:

> *[…] a conceptual framework and methodological tool for developing programmes, policies, and practices that integrate the rights, norms, and standards derived from international law.* (Dufvenmark, 2015, p. 16)

It provides a different approach to development and is contained in globally approved legal documents (Nyamu-Musembi & Cornwall, 2004). It empowers rights-holders to claim and exercise their rights and clarifies the position of duty-bearers as having a duty "to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of the poorest, weakest, most marginalized and vulnerable, and to comply with these obligations and duties" – these are the two dual aims of the human rights-based approach (Hausen & Launiala, 2015, p. 8).

A Common Understanding of the Human Rights-Based Approach to Development was established by three UN agencies, namely, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) (Kindornay *et al.*, 2011). These agencies were the foremost champions of the rights-based approach, while Oxfam and Care were the first INGOs to adopt this approach, followed by others, like Save the Children and Lutheran World Federation (Kindornay *et al.*, 2011). In the Common Understanding of the Human Rights-based Approach to Development Cooperation, the United Nations identified six rights principles that should guide all programmes, i.e., universality and inalienability, indivisibility, interdependence and interrelatedness, equality and non-discrimination, participation and inclusion, and accountability, transparency, and rule of law (Dufvenmark, 2015).

Much of the focus of the rights-based approach has been on development support and programming (Cotterrell, 2005), because humanitarian crises can result in massive human suffering and the violation of international human rights and humanitarian law (OHCHR & UNHCR, 2013). However, in recent years:

> *[…] humanitarian actors, including governments, donors, UN agencies and NGOs, have adopted the language of human rights and human rights-based approaches […] in their policies and programming.* (Cotterrell, 2005, p.1)

This tendency has served as a response to criticisms that humanitarian action has often failed to promote human rights (Cotterrell, 2005), given that the protection of human rights is vital to effective humanitarian assistance (OHCHR & UNHCR, 2013).

In the humanitarian crisis in Tigray, this research studied how the rights-based approach was mainstreamed in the work of NGOs.

Results of the study

In this section the main findings are discussed in relation to:

- The humanitarian needs in Tigray
- An inventory of NGOs operating in the region
- A detailed analysis of the humanitarian response of NGOs
- The major challenges in providing humanitarian assistance

Humanitarian needs in Tigray

The people of Tigray have experienced multiple shocks, including failure to properly harvest their agricultural products of that harvest season. The collapse of the market system has seriously disrupted the demand and supply chain, complete interruption of communication and transportation due to seizure and the closure of banks has obstructed people from accessing their savings. In addition, there has been massive internal displacement within Tigray (Kahsay, 2021). At the same time as the war broke out, there was also a desert locust attack[4] (Kahsay, 2021). The beneficiaries of Ethiopia's Productive Safety-Net Programme have been blocked from receiving services since the war began, which means that highly vulnerable people have not been receiving the monthly ration that they are entitled to get from the government (Kahsay, 2021). These shocks have given rise to massive humanitarian needs in the Tigray region. The people of Tigray, regardless of their social status or economic condition before the crisis, have had to look to humanitarian aid to survive.

The war in Tigray has resulted in the displacement of more than 2.2 million people (OCHA, 2021g). According to one interviewee from an INGO in Tigray, several factors are driving internal displacement. First, there was an ethnic cleansing in the western part of Tigray, which pushed people to move to the North Western and Central

[4] Just before the war occurred and partly during the initial time of the war, several parts of Tigray were attacked by desert locusts.

zones. The people who were sheltered in major towns[5] in these zones were displaced again because the fighting escalated towards the end of 2022, when the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) and its allied forces controlled the whole North-western Zone and part of the Central Zone. Second, the fighting has pushed people to leave their homes and villages, especially in the areas bordering Eritrea and the state of Amhara and in pockets where the armed struggle continues. Third, many people have moved to the major towns in search of aid, where humanitarian organisations can reach them (Interviewee SS, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, December 2021, Mekelle).

The displacement dynamics in the southern part of the region are a bit different from other parts. None of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) who moved from *woredas* (districts) in the Southern Zone to major towns like Alamata, Michew and Mekoni were classified as IDPs, as they stayed within the same zone (ESNFI cluster, 2021). However, those who moved from other zones in Tigray and from other parts of the country were categorised as IDPs by the zonal interim administration.

In Tigray, the IDPs were initially the major recipients of humanitarian aid. However, later the situation changed, as local people also received aid due to the disruption of basic services, including banking services, and the siege on Tigray. Hence, almost the whole population of Tigray needed food aid. The United Nations issued several warnings about the alarming situation of food insecurity in Tigray and the risk of malnutrition, in a joint statement on 10 June 2021 by the World Food Programme (WFP), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and UNICEF (UNHCR, 2021b). From the total population of 5.7 million in Tigray, it is estimated that 91% (or 5.2 million) needed urgent food assistance in 2021. Although there were clusters that did not target all the people in need of food and water, sanitation and hygiene clusters did attempt to reach all 5.2 million people from May to December 2021. The required budget for the plan was USD

[5] Towns such Sheraro, Adi-Daero, Shire, Aksum etc.

853.4 million, which was later revised to USD 957.0 million; out of this the funding gap was USD 373.6 million (OCHA, 2021e).

A UN press briefing on 2 June 2021 clearly stated that while humanitarian partners were scaling up the relief response, they were not yet meeting the escalating needs (UNHCR, 2021b). In relation to this, a middle-aged man who participated in an FGD in Shire Town in Tigray stated the following, describing the first year of the crisis, although the situation was even worse in the consecutive two years:

> *It has been a year since we [IDPs in the Shire] come to this town. We had a good life before the war. Many of us had land and animals on which our means of subsistence depended. Living as IDP, we have nothing…just nothing. No food, water, shelter, health service, education etc. Look [pointing at a school compound full of people] at the shelter that we are living in. There has never been food distribution that covered all the IDPs, and the food rations supplied were not sufficient, hence, never sustained us beyond a few days. We did not have basic non-food items such as a sleeping mat, blanket, cooking dish, and Jerri cans. There is also no medical assistance.* (Interviewee A2, FGD with Kahsay, face-to-face, December 2021, Shire)

Humanitarian partners estimate that 100 trucks of food, from which 90 trucks or 3,600 metric tonnes of food, non-food items, and fuel, must enter Tigray every day to sustain an adequate humanitarian response (OCHA, 2021f). However, the incoming aid to Tigray has never met this need, placing people in a desperate humanitarian situation. That was why an interviewee from one of the INGOs said, "the humanitarian need in Tigray stands hard to explain in the common humanitarian language […]" (Interviewee SS, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, December 2021, Mekelle). For the period May 2021–May 2023, only six rounds of food distribution took place in Tigray.[6] This means that the people in need had received a food ration that would meet their requirement only for a period of six months; as one round means a monthly food ration, the people had to suffer the remaining 18 months of the crises without food assistance.

[6] Tigray Region Emergency Coordination Centre. (2023). Meeting PPT, 19 May 2023.

Adequate shelter and non-food items were pressing needs in the Tigray humanitarian crisis. By the end of 2021, a total of 4.2 million people, including 2.2 million IDPs, needed assistance with emergency shelter and non-food items in the Tigray region in addition to food assistance (OCHA, 2021g). In December 2021, it was possible to support about 35% of the targeted 2.4 million population (OCHA, 2021g), which was less than 20% of the total people in need. Camp coordination and camp management support were also needed for the 1.8 million people living in camps. By May 2023, over 2 million people needed emergency shelter, food, nutrition and non-food items, and repair kits. Over 51,000 IDPs were accommodated in schools and needed alternate shelter, for which more than USD 10 million was required to support the relocation of IDPs from schools.[7]

In addition to the displacement of millions of people, the conflict has destroyed public service centres, infrastructure, and private property. Agricultural assets valued at more than USD 30 million, equivalent to 84% of agricultural property in the state, have been looted (70%) and destroyed (14%) (Bureau of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2021). Agricultural support is estimated to be needed for 3.7 million people (OCHA, 2021g). In addition to the immediate damage during the war, the Agriculture Cluster reported 9 of 15 known transboundary animal diseases including Foot and mouth disease, Peste des Petits Ruminants (goat plague) and lumpy skin disease (LSD) had been registered in Tigray, resulting in a total of 83,259 animals falling sick while 15,547 died.[8] Moreover, the sudden death of animals due to metabolic disorder has been reported, the suspected cause of which was toxic substances in the plants eaten by the animals, which may have been due to war-induced chemical accumulation from weapons.[9] As of mid-May 2023, an estimated

[7] Tigray Region Emergency Coordination Centre. (2023). Meeting PPT, 19 May 2023.

[8] Tigray Region Emergency Coordination Centre. (2021). Meeting minutes, 24 December 2021 (internal document).

[9] Tigray Region Emergency Coordination Centre. (2021). Meeting minutes, 24 December 2021 (internal document). The report of the Agriculture Cluster (given at this meeting) further explained the chemicals possibly were accumulated in water, soil, different plants, animal, and humans and might result in serious health effects of animal and human in the future.

36,900 metric tons of fertilisers, 228,750 litres of pesticides, 12,200kg of agrochemicals, 18 million livestock drugs, more than 16 million animal vaccines, and livestock feed were needed to support the agriculture sector.[10]

By mid-December 2021, the severe acute malnutrition and moderate acute malnutrition rates in children under five were at critical levels (about 3% and over 24%, respectively), while the gestational acute malnutrition rate in pregnant and lactating women reached an alarming level of 73% (Interviewee ZL, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, December 2021). The malnutrition status has worsened in 2022 and 2023. The number of children under five years of age and pregnant and lactating women requiring malnutrition preventative and treatment interventions in Tigray was estimated at 1.6 million people (OCHA, 2021g).

The Education Cluster is another sector that was severely affected by the conflict, resulting in millions of children out of school. More than 30,000 schools in Tigray, comprising high schools and elementary schools, excluding the Western Zone, have been damaged (Bureau of Education, 2021). More than 20,000 chalkboards and 300,000 student desks were looted, burned, or destroyed (Bureau of Education, 2021). In addition, the region's four universities were closed, with more than 7,500 academic staff and 72,000 students, had to stop working and attending classes respectively because of the war(Nyssen *et al.,* 2021). Even after the Pretoria Agreement was signed, the resumption of education in Tigray was challenged by several factors, including schools being occupied by IDPs, land mines that affected the free movement of students, limited human resources, a shortage of school equipment and supplies, scarcity of scholastic materials, shortage of food, traumatised school community, increased students with special needs, mixed-age and over-aged school students, and an increased

[10] Tigray Region Emergency Coordination Centre. (2023). Meeting PPT, 19 May 2023.

number of students. As of May 2023, more than 1,179 schools had not opened, while only 1,313 schools had started operating.[11]

Water supply systems were damaged in five zones in the region (nearly 55% of the assessed water schemes), at an estimated value of more than USD 74 million, affecting 2.3 million people (Water Resource Bureau, 2021). By mid of 2021, approximately 54% of water points in Tigray were not functional, depriving more than 3.5 million people of access to safe drinking water (OCHA, 2021g). There were 2.7 million people who required protection assistance, out of which the concerned cluster targeted only 1.4 million (OCHA, 2021e). By May 2023, over 70% of water points were non-functional.[12]

Regarding health facilities, 85% of the health centres and 70% of the hospitals have been rendered partly or entirely non-functional, leaving only 15% of health centres and 30% of hospitals to provide services to those in need, including mothers and children (Gesesew *et al.*, 2021). The destruction of these facilities together with enormous internal displacement and the obstruction of basic utilities has resulted in massive health needs in the region. An estimated 3.9 million people required health services in Tigray in 2021 (OCHA, 2021g). As the crises continued through 2022 and was sustained in 2023, almost all health facilities ran out of medical facilities and could not provide even the most basic services, including those in major cities and towns.

NGOs operating in the region

Seven months into the Tigray crises (by June 2021), there were 54 humanitarian actors, including UN agencies, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and government bureaus (Kahsay, 2021). However, this number excluded national and international NGOs that did not have completed or ongoing project activities before June 2021. Another 6 months later, by December

[11] Tigray Region Emergency Coordination Centre. (2023). Meeting PPT, 19 May 2023.

[12] Tigray Region Emergency Coordination Centre. (2023). Meeting PPT, 19 May 2023.

2021, in addition to 11 UN agencies, there were 55[13] INGOs and 34 local NGOs with emergency projects operating in the Tigray region.

Many of the INGOs had a presence in the Tigray region before the crises, working in development interventions or humanitarian assistance or both. There were about 15 national and international NGOs working in refugee protection in the region. Independently or through government structures and local partners, a significant number of INGOs had development projects in the region. Those that had development projects had to shift their budget to emergency interventions. However, some came to Tigray following the crises. For example, 3 of the 30 INGOs whose heads were interviewed had no presence in Ethiopia before the crises. Even among the national NGOs, there were those that did not have a presence in the Tigray region before the crises. Only, 2 of the 34 local NGOs with a strong presence and humanitarian assistance in the Tigray crisis in December 2021 were established by the end of 2020; most started working after the war started in response to the humanitarian situation in Tigray (Interviewee YY, interview by Kahsay, email, December 2021). Ditto

Many of the NGOs working in the Tigray crisis had their regional offices in Mekelle, although some were based in other towns, like Shire and Adigrat. Those that had coordination offices in Mekelle often had field offices in zonal and *woreda* (district) headquarters. To carry out their projects, many had rented vehicles in addition to their organisational cars. Excluding the UN agencies, on an average, there were 6 vehicles per organisation of the total 35 INGOs and NGOs contacted, the major organisations having more than 20 cars in their Tigray offices.

The 30 INGOs whose heads of sub-office for Tigray were interviewed for this study had a total of 2,783 national staff as of December 2021. The maximum number of staff per organisation was 498, and the minimum was 5. The number of staff hired in the international organisations decreased towards the end of 2022 and the

[13] The Tigray Regional Humanitarian International Non-Governmental Organisation (HINGO) Forum had participants from 55 INGOs operating emergency relief projects in Tigray, however, not all were actual members of forum.

beginning of 2023 as many of the NGOs faced funding challenges to continue with humanitarian operations mainly because of the blockade. This figure excluded incentivised community workers of any type. Very few NGOs had expatriate staff based in Tigray, although many of the organisations had support teams from their respective country offices or/and headquarters. Given that there were transportation blockages and non-Tigrayan staff were frequently evacuated, many of the INGOs had chosen to hire staff from the Tigray region, including at the managerial level (Interviewee DD, head of INGO in Tigray, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, 1 December 2021, Mekelle). This helped these organisations to manage the recruitment process and minimised the need to evacuate staff throughout the crisis. There was no external influence on NGOs during their recruitment process.

As of 26 August 2021, there were 472 UN staff from 10 UN agencies, including national and international staff, based in Tigray (OCHA, 2021g). This number dropped to 450 by the end of December 2021, as many international staff had to leave Tigray after the war spread to Amhara and Afar regions. The local NGOs had 15,724 staff, of which 32% were volunteers; a significant portion had been hired before the war (Interviewee RR, head of local NGO in Tigray, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, 25 December 2021, Mekelle).

Many of the NGOs were operating in more than one sector; a few even had projects in six of the eight clusters. The NGOs in Tigray did not have sufficient funds from the international community, yet many had budgets to utilise to support people in need in Tigray. On average, 55% of the budget allocated for 2021 was not used by the NGOs contacted for this study. UN agencies had partners to implement their sectoral focuses, although some of them directly implemented some projects. The major responsibility of the UN agencies was coordinating the assistance provided through their respective sectoral mandates, as in the case of International Organisation for Migration (IOM), which provided funding to many national and international partners; directly implemented shelter, water, sanitation and hygiene, and camp coordination and camp management projects, in addition to coordinating the camp management and Emergency Shelter/Non-

Food Item clusters (Interviewee II, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, December 2021, Mekelle).

The local NGOs in the Tigray region had a larger staff than the INGOs. The local NGOs had better contextual understanding and existing ways of working. Hence, they were able to reach remote areas, which were challenging for UN agencies and INGOs due to the security situation and the security protocols they had to follow. Their existing capacity helped them reach many people, as in the case of Relief Society of Tigray, which distributed food for the majority of the Tigray *woredas*, and Emahoy Tsige's local charity organisation, which was feeding more than 20,000 people in Temben (Interviewee YY, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, December 2021, Mekelle). This capacity of NGOs was noticed by INGOs and donors, which tried to utilise it by partnering with the local NGOs (Interviewee YY, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, December 2021, Mekelle). In addition to the formally registered local NGOs, there were several local initiatives, such as End-Thesh Dram crew members together with Keradion local organisation, Kebron (a group of Mekelle youth), and Adey charity local initiative, who were mobilising resources locally and providing daily meals for vulnerable people, especially children and women, in Mekelle (Observation, Kahsay, 11 January 2022, Mekelle,).

However, there was no clear platform for the local NGOs to interact and discuss issues with INGOs and donors, except the 'open for all' cluster approaches and the government-led Emergency Coordination Centre (Interviewee RR, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, December 2021, Mekelle). However, towards the end of December 2021, consultative meetings were arranged that included local charities and civil society organisations, UN agencies and INGOs, as well as government offices, to strengthen the relationship between these three groups, mainly to coordinate and cooperate in the humanitarian response and development work.

NGOs and humanitarian response

IDPs and the conflict affected host community had to wait for humanitarian assistance. There were external factors that delayed the

delivery of aid in the Tigray crisis. Consequently, the support provided by NGOs came months after the crisis began. It was two months after the crisis started that INGOs conducted an Interagency Emergency Response Needs Assessment in Mekelle City, which was their first assessment before delivering any kind of assistance (Interviewee HA, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, December 2021). Many of the NGOs started their formal operations in February 2021, a quarter of a year after the crisis began, although food distribution had started in Mekelle and some *woredas* (districts) in the Southern Zone earlier than this (Interviewee YY, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, December 2021, Mekelle).

Soon after the crisis occurred, preparation to respond to the needs and securing emergency funding or transferring development budgets to relief support had taken months for many of the NGOs. Organisations that did not have a presence in Tigray took even more time to establish an office in Tigray and hire staff. Relatively, the local NGOs that had a strong presence and had stock-piled resources, such as Relief Society of Tigray, were quick to deliver aid, at least to IDPs in Mekelle (Interviewee GB, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, December 2021, Mekelle).

One of the critical external factors that affected the ability of NGOs to deliver effective assistance were the restrictions on reaching locations outside of Mekelle. For the period November 2020 to February 2021, none of the national or international organisations or UN agencies could travel to *woredas* outside of Mekelle, due to the serious security issues due to the ongoing fighting (Interviewee YY, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, December 2021, Mekelle). Later, it was possible to reach *woredas* in the Southern Zone, commuting from Addis Ababa though not from Mekelle (Interviewee YY, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, December 2021, Mekelle).

The response to the humanitarian needs from the national and international NGOs and UN agencies was very challenging to even appraise. Despite some improvement, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs' (OCHA's) situation report published in February 2021 stated that the humanitarian response was inadequate, compared to the needs on the ground particularly in

relation to food and nutrition assistance (OCHA, 2021c). The insufficiency of humanitarian aid continued over the subsequent months. Hence, on 27 May 2021, the UN humanitarian Chief, Mark Lowcock warned of the worsening humanitarian condition in Tigray, stating that there would be a serious risk of famine if required aid was not delivered in June and July 2021 (Lederer, 2021).

Before June 2021, there were some attempts made to respond to the needs of conflict-affected people. During this period, there was relatively better passage of aid carrying trucks, flights to Mekelle City, banks were operational in Mekelle, and communication resumed, although only in major towns in the region. At the end of June, after Mekelle came under the control of Tigray forces, the humanitarian response worsened (Interviewee BW, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, December 2021, Mekelle). For instance, out of the estimated 100 trucks per day of assistance supplies needed, only 12% reached Tigray, which forced relief organisations to decrease and/or suspend life-saving support in Tigray (OCHA, 2021d).

The NGOs found it challenging not only to provide the required humanitarian assistance, but to even pay salaries to their staff (Interviewee YY, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, December 2021, Mekelle). The response was not enough to resolve the humanitarian crisis on the ground. For various reasons, the people in need were not receiving what they should get. For example, food distribution was scheduled to reach its 6th or 7th round by December 2021, but round 2 was not even completed by the end of the year. As a result, many people died due to hunger and put thousands of children and pregnant and lactating women in a malnourished status (Interviewee KC, interview by Kahsay, email, December 2021).

Of the 2.2 million IDPs, nearly 70% of them were sheltered in the local community[14]. Hence, they were supported by the local community, even though inconsistent and insufficient aid was provided by NGOs (Interviewee F9, FGD with Kahsay, face-to-face,

[14] About 70% of the IDPs were staying with people they knew, i.e., relatives, friends, people from similar villages living in the towns, etc. This also included IDPs who live in rented houses or are provided shelter by people living in the towns.

December 2021, Mekelle). Only 30% of IDPs were sheltered in the public service centres throughout Tigray. Almost all the NGOs focused on supporting IDPs in these collective centres – some aid was forwarded to those housed in the host community and to the local community itself. Surprisingly, 70% of the humanitarian needs of those IDPs in the collective centres were also covered by the local community. It would be, therefore, unfair to even compare the aid provided by the NGOs with community contributions to support those in need (Interviewee BW, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, December 2021, Mekelle).

Participants of the FGDs conducted among IDPs in Mekelle asserted that the assistance they received from the residents of the city by far outweighed the aid received from NGOs. One FGD participant stated the following:

> *When we [IDPs] first came to Mekelle, we had the hope that the government of Tigray would help us. But days after we arrived [in Mekelle], the government left the city. Then, we did not have anyone to provide food and water; it was the residents of Mekelle city who fed us for months. From the very beginning, we were seeing many UN and NGO cars with nice stickers and flags on them which had boosted our expectation of getting aid from them. But it was months after we started living in schools and other structures that some NGOs came with food and other items. Yet, the aid was significantly insufficient.* (Interviewee F1, FGD with Kahsay, face-to-face, December 2021, Mekelle)

The IDPs in almost all towns were sheltered in schools, with colleagues, clinics, and churches, as there were no emergency shelters constructed for them. The service provision was not at the required level. The State failed to fulfil the required services to the people and contributed to their suffering by blocking the major public services like banking, electricity, and communications, which increased the suffering and trauma of people in need of aid (Interviewee NN, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, December 2021, Mekelle). In some cases, the government of Ethiopia also refused to open access to humanitarian support, thereby violating Article 7 (5-g) of the Kampala Convention. On this, a participant in the FDG in Adigrat stated the following:

> *The NGOs supporting us repeatedly say they could not bring aid items from Addis Ababa. The boundaries of Tigray, through which aid could have entered from any country, were closed, and their rights were denied. This is an absolute denial of our right to be protected by the international community. The closure of services was completely unforeseen. We have the right to use our saved amount, money that we put in the banks, trusting in the government. The government has failed to give us what we need, hindering the NGOs seeking to assist us. […] it also aggravated the humanitarian situation by denying our rights to get basic services including our own resources.* (Interviewee F2, FGD with Kahsay, face-to-face, December 2021, Adigrat)

The number of NGOs supported declined from time to time after June 2021. The restriction made by the Federal Government on NGOs to transport aid resources into Tigray stopped NGOs from being able to provide the assistance that they had procured in Addis Ababa and Samara (Interviewee BW, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, June 2023, Mekelle). The cash transfer using the UN humanitarian air service was also stopped, which affected the NGOs to the point of not paying the salaries of their staff. At the end of 2022, staff of national and international NGOs based in Tigray had to receive food aid for survival, *let alone* support the crisis-affected people (Observation, Kahsay, 15 November 2022, Mekelle).

Cluster approach and working groups

Table 6.2 presents the clusters, lead UN agency, and counterparts from the respective regional government bureaus, along with the total number of implementing partners they had in Tigray. The official arrangement of the clusters was that the government counterparts led the clusters, while the UN agencies served as secretaries. Hence, the cluster approach in the Tigray crisis was a formal, government-led system (Interviewee GG, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, December 2021, Mekelle).

The clusters in Table 6.2 were aimed at coordinating the delivery of services in their specific sectors. The fundamental purpose of the clusters included the mapping of resources from the government and partner NGOs, the assessment of needs, the prioritisation of locations with pressing needs, the allocation of mobilised or mapped resources, post-distribution monitoring, and the preparation of

response plans and generation of reports to OCHA and the government. Unlike clusters that exclusively worked in a specific sector, the Camp coordination and camp management cluster managed multi-sector services in IDP and collective centres (Interviewee TR, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, December 2021). The Logistics and Emergency Telecommunication[15] clusters, led by WFP and OCHA, respectively, also supported the delivery of other sector-based assistance and, hence, did not have implementing partners.

All the above clusters were coordinated under the Inter-Agency Coordination Group (ICCG). In the ICCG weekly meeting, which excluded government bureaus, all cluster leads, and co-leads were expected to raise any specific issues that required a solution from OCHA's senior staff. Usually, issues common to all clusters were entertained in this platform. Specific themes, even being a subject matter of one cluster that required the attention of the humanitarian senior management, was discussed at the ICCG meeting. The ICCG was led by OCHA's sub-office head but had strong support from humanitarian coordinators and deputy humanitarian coordinators. The HCs played a significant role, especially in resource mobilisation, the preparation of response plans and engaging with government authorities (Interviewee GE, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, December 2021).

[15] The Emergency Telecommunication Cluster was established in around May 2021, but has not continued functioning

Table 6.2. Clusters, lead agencies, and government counterpart

Cluster	Lead agency[16]	Government counterpart	No. of Implementing partners[17]
Shelter and Non-Food Items	IOM	Bureau of Agriculture and Rural Development[18]	31
Food	WFP	Bureau of Agriculture and Rural Development	7[19]
Health	World Health Organization (WHO)	Bureau of Health	30
Water, Sanitation and Hygiene	UNICEF	Bureau of Water Development	49
Agriculture	FAO	Bureau of Agriculture	14
Education	UNICEF	Bureau of Education	13
Nutrition	UNICEF	Bureau of	14

[16] The assignment of the lead agencies is based on the cluster approach endorsed by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC).

[17] The number of implementing partners refers to the sum of UN agencies, INGOs, and national NGOs operated in the implementation of the project related to the specify cluster. It is also possible for one organisation to work in multiple clusters. The partners might have supported once or continued to work through the year, depending on their level of funding.

[18] The Bureau of Agriculture and Rural Development participated through its Early Warning Response and Food-Security Coordination Directorate. The government counterpart for this cluster was assigned from this specific office.

[19] The food aid was donated by WFP and the Joint Emergency Operations Program of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). WFP, in addition to its direct implementation, had three implementing partners. The Joint Emergency Operations Program was channelled by the Catholic Relief Service and had four implementing partners, of which two were partners of WFP at the same time.

Cluster	Lead agency[16]	Government counterpart	No. of Implementing partners[17]
		Health	
Protection in Conflict Situations	UNHCR	Bureau of Labor and Social Affair	22
Camp Coordination Camp Management	IOM and UNHCR	Bureau of Agriculture and Bureau of Rural Development[20]	5
Logistics	WFP	N/A	N/A
Emergency Telecommunication	OCHA	N/A	N/A

Source: Interviews with cluster leads and government experts, December 2021

In addition to clusters, there were working groups aimed at smoothing humanitarian assistance. The Access Working Group, led by OCHA, functioned since the beginning of the crisis to inform the humanitarian partners about the situation of access in the Tigray region. The fundamental role of this working group was to gather information from humanitarian partners and share it (Interviewee GE, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, December 2021). The Cash Working Group coordinated cash-based interventions. Among others, the Cash Working Group determined cash transfer values for different services, led cash related assessments, and mapped the cash assistance resources of humanitarian partners. This working group did not have a designated lead but was led by different partners on a rotational basis.

The Information Management Working Group, led by OCHA, consisted of experts on information management from all clusters involved. The main mandates of this working group included

[20] Like the ES/NFI cluster, this cluster was also led by the Bureau of Agriculture and Rural Development through its Early Warning Response and Food-Security Coordination Directorate.

gathering information from the clusters based on standard templates, creating common data sets, and endorsing data for publication. It adopted tools for information sharing platforms and documented segregated figurative data and map supported information. It strengthened the information management procedures of the clusters (Interviewee HA, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, December 2021, Mekelle).

There were working groups focused on ensuring the accountability of the humanitarian assistance, namely, the Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) and Accountability to Affected Population working groups. The PSEA Working Group, run by OCHA, requested all staff of NGOs and UN agencies to sign a PSEA code of conduct and train focal persons in each organisation to mainstream the concept. The Accountability to Affected Population Working Group aimed at strengthening feedback and complaint mechanisms; ensuring that they were functional and accessible to the affected population; that information was shared with the affected population effectively and in a timely manner; that community members were fully engaged and involved in decisions and representation; and that project activities were designed and monitored through a participatory process (Interviewee MT, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, September 2021, Mekelle). A Gender-Based Violence Working Group run by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) was another platform that worked exclusively on gender-based violence (GBV) case management.

The NGOs in Tigray, in addition to the cluster approach, had a separate coordination forum called the Tigray Region Humanitarian International Non-Governmental Organizations Forum, which is a sub-set of the national Humanitarian International Non-Governmental Organisation forum. The forum helps its members to receive major operational updates and serves as a platform for entertaining shared challenges. For an organisation to be a member of this forum, membership of the Humanitarian International Non-Governmental Organisation at the national level is a precondition (Interviewee GB, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, December 2021, Mekelle). The local NGOs also had a separate platform called the

Alliance of Civil Society Organizations of Tigray. This association had about 64 organisations registered as members in the Tigray region, but only half (34) were active. From this list, about 20 were engaged in the emergency response (Interviewee FK, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, December 2021, Mekelle).

Rapid response mechanism

The Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM) approach was adopted as one of the aid delivery methods to ensure an effective and timely frontline response in the hard-to-reach areas that were inaccessible to most humanitarian partners operating in Tigray, targeting IDPs and vulnerable communities. According to the Operational Concept Note (OCHA, 2021i), this approach aimed to provide lifesaving multi-sectoral assistance to the most vulnerable populations within 96 hours of activation, continuing for up to seven days as a rapid response, then for 3 days as emergency assistance, until a full cluster response could be mobilised, and operations merged into a revised humanitarian response plan.

The RRM approach in Tigray started in mid-June 2021, eight months after the crisis occurred, and only lasted for a few weeks. According to the intended scope of operation, only two locations – Wajrat and Yechila – were provided with humanitarian assistance using this approach. The approach was evaluated to be a less effective, less coordinated, and a less funded approach in the context, hence it failed to last long (Interviewee RN, interview, face-to-face, 10 December 2021, Mekelle). In Wajrat, for example, 600 households were selected by partners that had an operational presence in that area. The selected households were assumed to be in need of urgent humanitarian assistance. However, it was later learnt that the 600 households did not have equal need for services in all sectors (Interviewee RN, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, 10 December 2021, Mekelle). Hence, the RRM approach did not continue as an approach to aid delivery in 2022 and 2023, although some rounds were made towards the end of 2023 to support IDPs in Temben and Maichew towns.

Context-based approaches

The cluster approach served as a system in which any national or international NGO could provide an update about the resources available on hand, secured funding and opportunities in pipelines. The cluster lead provided prioritised locations for assistance. As in the case of the Emergency Shelter/Non-Food Item cluster, the cluster lead organisations had the chance to select implementing partners from NGOs working in Tigray, using selection criteria like project implementation capacity and operational presence in the identified locations (Interviewee GB, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, December 2021, Mekelle).

Usually, the NGOs identify locations with high humanitarian needs for their specialised sectors and chose a location where they can implement from their coordination offices. Depending on the funding level, the NGOs opened new offices in locations where the humanitarian needs were observed to be high and pressing. The zonal capitals, namely, Mekelle (both for the city and Southern-Eastern Zone), Adigrat (Eastern Zone), Maichew (Southern Zone), Aksum (Central Zone) and Shire (North Western Zone) had served as major aid coordination centres for many of the NGOs and UN agencies; the Western Zone was inaccessible from Tigray until after this study was completed (Interviewee TG, interview by Kahsay, email, November 2021).

Capacitating the potential of the services in the host communities, as in the case of water, sanitation and hygiene, was used as an aid delivery approach to the IDPs and conflict-affected local communities residing in the major towns. The shortage of safe water in Mekelle city, for example, would not have been minimised using the water trucking method, because water trucks require fuel and cash to fully serve people in need. As a solution, existing boreholes were rehabilitated, and new ones dug and fitted with necessary equipment and powered by electricity to increase their production capacity. The solution was preferred both in terms of the quality and amount of water added to the system, cost-effectiveness, and sustainability. Of course, in times of power blackout or during which the shortage of clean water became critical, water trucks were used to fill the gap

(Interviewee YG, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, November 2021, Mekelle).

The utilisation of public service centres, mainly schools, health centres, college and university compounds, and unfinished buildings, was another aid delivery approach applied in the Tigray crisis, as constructing emergency shelter for more than 2.2 million IDP was not manageable (Interviewee SE, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, December 2021, Mekelle).

Coordination platforms and power dynamics

Throughout the crisis, there was an Emergency Coordination Centre. The Centre was established before the start of the war in response to other disasters, mainly drought and a desert locust swarm. The Tigray Regional Bureau of Agriculture and Rural Development was the lead for this coordination platform. This role of the Bureau was further strengthened soon after the crisis occurred. It looked after the displacement situation and coordinated humanitarian partners to deliver urgent assistance to conflict-affected people. The Bureau requested all NGOs that had development projects in the region to shift their budget to emergency response. It issued a formal letter to the NGOs to help them with discussions with their respective donors (Interviewee SE, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, December 2021, Mekelle).

The Emergency Coordination Centre, under the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)-led regional government, did not last long, as the government structure collapsed when the TPLF-led government left Mekelle city. There was a gap for weeks before a new Emergency Coordination Centre could be re-established. OCHA played a key role in contacting the new interim administration and re-establishing the Emergency Coordination Centre. Former experts from the previous government were assigned to continue facilitating coordination, although politically assigned people from the interim administration had to lead the coordination platform (Interviewee AA, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, December 2021, Mekelle). The heads of the government bureaus assigned to lead the clusters were not consistent over the period of the interim administration, except for a couple of bureaux. This turnover and firing of the bureau

heads affected the coordination process, as it weakened responsibility and accountability (Interviewee AB, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, December 2021, Mekelle). Concerning the coordination procedures of the period from January to June 2021, one of the key informants stated as follows:

> *An attempt has been, and is being, made to map available resources among humanitarian organisations. The cluster-based arrangements played a significant role in aid coordination. However, the public sector, which was expected to play a role in beneficiary selection and prioritisation, was not promising. Different assessments were done by different parties to define the needs in all sectors. But the cluster approach in charge of analysing the data and building a case for prioritised intervention has not equipped itself to that level in some sectors. That was why, almost eight months into the war, we were struggling to figure out, for example, how and who to manage facilities at IDP centres and ensure the quality of services communities require in an emergency. We also noticed that the intervention of NGOs in Mekelle and its surrounding areas was much more than other places where the emergency need was so high.* (Interviewee YG, interview by Kahsay, email, November 2021)

The interim administration did not have a strong structure at all levels, except at the regional and zonal levels. This was why the administrator of the transitional government handed his letter of resignation at the end of January 2021, citing that the interim administration had no power to respond to the needs of the people of Tigray who were starving to death and sexually harassed by external forces (EEPA, 2021, SR 66).

The decision-making power of bureau heads in their respective sectors was very limited, as they did not have an allocated budget to address the systems that had been destroyed. There was no clarity on the assessments they were given by some of the bureau heads, and there was a high turnover of the bureau heads. Hence, the role of the interim administration in leading the emergency response process was not at the level required.

For the period before June 2021, NGOs had relatively better access to the region, which enabled them to bring aid supplies into Tigray. After June 2021, when the TPLF-led government came to power, the situation changed. The coordination platform was relatively

strengthened from regional to *woreda* (district) level, as the former government structure resumed its position. Most former bureau heads regained their previous positions with some changes (Interviewee GB, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, December 2021, Mekelle). This governing structure continued until the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, after which the elected government of Tigray had to be dissolved and the Interim Regional Administration of Tigray Region was formed. The aid coordination platform has continued with the preceding form (Interviewee BW, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, June 2023, Mekelle).

For the period June 2021 to the beginning of 2022, the government of Tigray had to support NGOs and UN agencies by supplying fuel, in addition to its coordination role, as NGOs were challenged to bring resources into Tigray because of the siege imposed in June 2021. It also gave clear instruction to the banks in Tigray to give the NGOs access to cash for humanitarian aid, however, the banks did not make cash accessible at their branches in Tigray (Interviewee GB, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, December 2021, Mekelle). However, the access to fuel and cash within Tigray did not last long; the siege affected the cash and fuel flow during the second half of 2021 and almost the whole year of 2022.

Major challenges encountered by NGOs in Tigray

As clearly stated by OCHA, the ability of humanitarian partners to deliver assistance was heavily hindered by the inadequate volume of both humanitarian and commercial supplies reaching the Tigray region, insufficient fuel to transport the aid and offer services, limited telecommunications, and a shortage of cash (OCHA, 2021b). For the first eight months of the crisis, access and the security situation in the region played a significant role in hindering humanitarian assistance. How the challenges affected the operations of NGOs to effectively provide the aid are discussed in detail as follows.

Access and security situation

There were operational challenges that affected the humanitarian assistance for the period before June 2021. Constraints on access was the main one. Accessing Tigray from central Ethiopia was very

challenging for all NGOs and UN agencies. Application to federal entities and approval was required for any media and NGO personnel to visit Tigray. The movement of food and non-food aid was also denied for some months. Later, the movement of people and aid was allowed. However, within Tigray, the security situation continued to be challenging in terms of access conditions for humanitarian assistance. Humanitarian access was very dynamic and hindered, although governments, the UN, and NGOs called for unrestrained humanitarian access (Kahsay, 2021).

From November 2020 to June 2021, "the ongoing hostilities, with clashes and ambushes reported in most parts of the region, not only impact[ed] safety and the wellbeing of millions of civilians but also constrain[ed] humanitarian actors' ability to operate and support people affected" (OCHA, 2021a). Because the fighting was back and forth, the security situation in Tigray, especially for the period before June 2021, seriously affected the aid delivery process. There were several locations assumed to have live fighting, which made reaching out being impossible and aid never reached these places. The severity of the security situation was highlighted by the killing of 23 humanitarian workers from different NGOs, most from Relief Society of Tigray, an NGO based in Tigray. The escalation of fighting towards the end of 2022 has again affected the security situation of the region.

For the period from June 2021 to the end of 2023, there were several areas that were not accessible to Tigray Administration, including the whole Western Zone, part of the Southern Zone, part of the North Western Zone, which were occupied by Amhara forces, and the northern periphery of the Central and Eastern zones, where they were controlled by Eritrean troops. Delivering aid to those areas from the Tigray Emergency Coordination Centre was not possible (Interviewee GB, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, June 2023, Mekelle).

Humanitarian partners relationship with conflict actors and aid diversion

The humanitarian partners in the Tigray region had to engage with multiple actors in the war including the Ethiopian National Defence

Force, Eritrean Military, Tigray Defence Force,[21] and Amhara Forces. Based on their engagement with these actors, these humanitarian partners were accused by the state of wrongdoing. The Ethiopian Government accused foreign aid organisations of sending weapons and equipment to rebel groups and an official from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs once said that unnamed UN agencies were "fabricating facts and figures" in a campaign aimed at "disrespecting and defaming Ethiopia" (Kleinfeld, 2021).

The Government of Ethiopia continuously accused humanitarian organisations of supporting the Tigray forces – however, the specific NGOs and the kind of support given was not specified (Interviewee GB, head of INGO in Tigray, interview, face-to-face, 11 December 2021, Mekelle). In response, Martin Griffiths, the United Nation's humanitarian chief during that period, said to reporters that "blanket accusations [against] humanitarian aid workers need to stop … they need to be backed up by evidence if there is any and, frankly, it's dangerous" (Jerving, 2021).

The activities of three organisations – Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) Holland (Doctors without Borders), the Norwegian Refugee Council, and Al Maktoume Foundation – were suspended for three months for breach of rules[22] (Addis Standard, 2021). The first two had operations in Tigray and were kept way for what the government called 'misrepresentations' on social media and other platforms that were deemed to be beyond their mandate and the purpose for which these organisations were allowed to function (Addis Standard, 2021).

The Government of Ethiopia also accused the UN agencies and USAID of having connections with Tigray forces and the TPLF

[21] The Tigray Defence Forces were also called TPLF Forces, Tigray Rebel Groups, and Tigray Armey depending on who calls them.

[22] According to the Ethiopian Agency for Civil Society Organizations, there were four reasons for such an action: MSF Holland and Norwegian Refugee Council have been disseminating misinformation assumed to be out of their mandate; all of three organisations hired foreign nationals without the required work permit from the Ethiopian government for more than six months; MSF Holland unlawfully imported and used satellite radio equipment that was not authorised by the relevant government authority; and Al Maktoume Foundation failed to fulfil COVID-19 Procedure, and misused the budget.

party, a political party labelled as a terrorist group by the House of Peoples' Representatives of Ethiopia and, hence, the government claimed that it was inappropriate for them to have relations with these groups (Interviewee GB, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, December 2021). On 30 September 2021, a letter was issued declaring a *persona non grata* status for seven UN staff, requiring them to leave the country within 71 hours, as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia said that they had meddled in the internal matters of the country (Addis Standard, 2021).

The other actors in the conflict, namely, the Tigray allied forces, Amhara forces, and Eritrean military have affected the aid delivery process differently. The Tigray forces supported humanitarian assistance in the areas they controlled (Interviewee LP, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, December 2021, Mekelle). The Amhara forces, because they had controlled some areas in Southern Zone, part of North Western Zone, the whole Western Zone, did not allow the passage of assistance from the Tigray side (Interviewee ZV, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, December 2021, Mekelle). The Eritrean forces in Tigray were strong at the checkpoints, and were not against the distribution of aid, but took some of the distributed assistance, especially food, for themselves (Interviewee LP, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, December 2021, Mekelle).

The State accused NGOs and donor agencies of diverting aid to the 'non-state' actors, such as the Tigray allied forces. For example, in one of the Emergency Coordination Centre sessions, a military general from the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) said they had found high energy biscuits meant to be given to malnutrition children in the fighting bases of the Tigray forces (Interviewee EE, head of national NGO in Tigray, interview, face-to-face, 8 December 2021, Mekelle). For many of the humanitarian partners, however, these allegations were false accusations (Interviewee EE, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, December 2021, Mekelle).

Another incident is the WFP and USAID announcement to stop food distribution in May 2023, stating that it was discovered that food intended for people in Tigray, millions of whom are in desperate need of aid, was being diverted and sold. The interim government of Tigray

then announced, calling the reported theft a crime against children, the elderly, and the disabled, that it had established a task force to investigate the matter (Reuters, 2023). At the beginning of June 2023, both USAID and WFP accused Ethiopia of diverting aid, evidenced by massive government theft throughout the country, after which both organisations had to cut food aid supporting millions of Ethiopians (Houreld, 2023). Moreover, the senior leadership of the World Food Programme in Ethiopia had resigned since the findings of a probe into the misappropriation of food aid in the country were due to be made public (Anyadike, 2023).

Blockage of public services

Throughout 2021, the blockage of basic utilities, mainly banking services, communication, electricity, fuel, and transportation severely affected aid delivery. The obstruction of these services continued throughout the year but was severe for the period June to December 2021. In November 2021, the weekly requirement of cash, fuel, and aid supplies was Ethiopian birr 300 million, 200,000 litres, and 100 trucks, respectively (OCHA, 2021g). However, the maximum cash transfer allowed per organisation per week was only 2 million Ethiopian birr through the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) flight. For the period July to December, a total of 525 million Ethiopian birr (USD 11.4 million) cash was transferred to Tigray using the UNHAS flight (OCHA, 2021h).

There was no fuel coming into Tigray for almost four months (August to November 2021). From July to December 2021, 1,317 trucks arrived, accounting for 54% of the requirement (Interviewee GE, interview, face-to-face, 8 December 2021). About 10 INGOs and almost all national NGOs, especially local NGOs that had an operational presence only in Tigray before the occurrence of the war, could not bring cash to Tigray for almost six months (from June to December 2021). This meant that some organisations, such as the Relief Society of Tigray, which carried 50% of the food distribution caseload, could not access cash from June to December 2021 (Interviewee EE, interview by Kahsay, face-to-face, December 2021, Mekelle). While the passage of fuel along with other relief items and cash transfers using the UNHAS flights was blocked towards the end

of 2022 until the Pretoria peace deal was agreed, the blockage of the public service continued throughout 2022 and the beginning of 2023. This severely affected the aid delivery process.

Limitation of resources

Another fundamental challenge that affected the NGOs in their response to the humanitarian needs in Tigray region was the limitation of resources. All clusters had funding gaps to fully reach the people in need. The Northern Ethiopia Response Plan identified a funding requirement of USD 853 million, with a funding gap of 55.6%, of which the gap for the period May to July 2021 was USD 197 million (Kahsay, 2021).

Although NGOs had resources that they were unable to fully utilise to provide the assistance they planned, there was a major resource shortfall for the overall operation. The revised Northern Ethiopia Response Plan for the period May to December 2021 identified and targeted 5.2 million people in need of humanitarian assistance. The financial requirement was calculated to be USD 957.0 million, with a funding gap of USD 373.6 million (OCHA, 2021e).

In addition to the above-described major constraints, a lack of clarity about relief and recovery interventions also hindered humanitarian support. More than half of the INGOs in Tigray were development project implementers. Some of them had to change their development projects to emergency relief, while some had to continue with the pre-planned activities. In the sectorial discussions and coordination platforms, and especially while developing response plans, there has always been confusion about the intersection of relief with development. Some sectors, such as agriculture and education, had prepared resource requirements for the whole service delivery, not specific to emergency needs.

Discussion

This study was conducted in the Tigray region during the humanitarian crisis that started at the end of 2020. The primary data was collected at the end of 2021 and the start of 2022. In addition, a second phase of the primary data collection was collected in June

2022, and the major humanitarian assistance-related events have been reflected from secondary sources up until June 2023. The primary data sources had two dimensions: one from the assistance-provider and coordination agencies perspective and the other from the conflict-affected people's perspective.

Many of the interviews with assistance-providing and coordination agencies and with government offices were conducted in Mekelle. In addition, the data was collected from IDPs at selected major IDP hosting locations, namely Mekelle, Shire, and Adigrat; hence, it did not cover every location where people in need of humanitarian assistance stayed. The interviews with humanitarian assistance-provider agencies covered UN agencies and international and national non-governmental organisations. Donor agencies, including the major humanitarian assistance-provider organisations like WFP and USAID, were not directly contacted, but rather their implementing partners.

The humanitarian crisis in Tigray had a wide range of effects on the people. The humanitarian needs of all sectors have extremely worsened throughout the crisis period, from the end of 2022 to mid-2023, as the siege has affected the aid delivery process. In March 2022, a cessation of hostilities was agreed by the conflicting parties, which resulted in the passage of humanitarian convoys into Tigray. Although there has never been an easy way for humanitarian aid to come into Tigray, the process became extremely tight from August 2022 until the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement was signed on 2 November 2022. Basic public services like banking and telecommunications continued to be closed until the beginning of 2023.

To assist the crisis affected people of Tigray, 11 UN agencies, 55 INGOs as well as 34 local NGOs were found to have operational presence with varied capacity. These humanitarian organisations tried to respond to the crisis. Although there were funding gaps, they had resources that could have assisted millions of people who required urgent assistance. However, because of operational challenges, NGOs and UN agencies were hindered in providing the planned services for which they had the resources.

Using the opportunities and addressing the operational challenges in the Tigray humanitarian crisis, the cluster approach, rapid response mechanism, and other context-based aid delivery approaches were pursued by NGOs. The cluster approach was endorsed by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee in 2005 and began with eight 8 clusters, later increased to 11 (Ferris, 2011). The approach aimed to ensure a predictable coherent method and address any humanitarian gaps that were beyond the capacity of any one agency (Ferris, 2011). A total of 11 clusters were operational in the Tigray crisis. Their activities and time of establishment varies from cluster to cluster. As in other humanitarian situations, the designated UN agencies had the coordination role of holding weekly meetings with all their partners. The RRM approach was less effective as it was not suitable for reaching people in need, especially in a conflict-torn situation, and entailed the duplication of resources. This was fundamental because the humanitarian needs of groups of people residing in specific locations varies.

In principle, the state is responsible for protecting those who are displaced and support disaster-affected people. In the Tigray context, however, the federal government created obstacles to the delivery of aid, and this contributed to the violation of the rights of its citizens. The rights of IDPs were violated as they did not receive the assistance needed for their survival. Hence, the Kampala Convention was violated in the Tigray humanitarian context.

The ordinary people of Tigray were denied access to public services; hence, they could not exercise their rights and children were left without their basic needs being met, including the right to a safe education, medical supplies, and food and nutrition items. The State failed to provide necessary inputs for the survival of the people, and NGOs could not realise the rights-based approach as they were severely challenged even to protect their own staff.

When designing programmes and projects that affirm local engagement and construct and reinforce systems that minimise prejudice against marginalised groups, the human rights approach should be taken into consideration. It implies that any violation or obstruction in the exercise of rights must be outlawed, prevented, and

removed, and that those who are most at risk of experiencing serious hindrance in exercising their rights should receive precedence. In any development or emergency intervention, people are viewed as having rights and privileges, rather than as 'beneficiaries' of help and support. In the Tigray context, the human rights approach was not realised to the required extent. In this situation, eliminating, prohibiting, or preventing all forms of impediments in the realisation of rights was not possible. Despite the hindrances, the INGOS and NGOs endeavoured to uphold the rights of people in Tigray.

The humanitarian intervention faced several challenges including access and the security situation, blockage of public services, and funding limitations, which were aggravated by the Ukraine war. In addition, administrative restrictions on the use of secured funding, such as cash transfer restrictions, and the blockage of humanitarian corridors for the transportation of humanitarian items including fuel severely affected the humanitarian operation from reaching the affected population. Although improvement was seen after the signing of the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, the funding gap for 2022 was even greater because of the Ukraine war, which shifted the global funding environment and influenced the priorities of the donors.

Conclusion

The humanitarian crisis in Tigray resulted from a combination of multiple shocks, mainly caused by the war that broke out in November 2020 (ICHREE, 2023). In addition to the displacement of millions due to the conflict, the siege of Tigray and the closing of borders, dire humanitarian conditions emerged. The siege, the communication blackout, lack of electricity, lack of cash, shortage of fuel, restrictions on ground and air transport, and decreasing supplies of basic commodities in local markets due to broken supply-chains, all contributed to the crisis (Gebreslassie *et al.*, 2024).

The people of Tigray have suffered greatly, and many have died from starvation and due to the lack of medical supplies. The humanitarian needs in the Tigray crisis concerned almost every aspect of survival, including food, water, sanitation and hygiene services, medicine,

nutrition, emergency shelter, non-food items, education, and agricultural inputs. Humanitarian needs around protection in the conflict situation were also acute. Access to emergency telecommunications, camp coordination and camp management, and logistics were also severely affected, contributing to the delay in addressing the urgent humanitarian needs in the region.

National and international NGOs, together with the UN agencies, mobilised resources to respond to the humanitarian crisis in Tigray. NGOs had an advantage over international organisations (in terms of access and relationship with local actors) and were motivated to play their part in responding to the crisis. To coordinate the aid delivery process, the humanitarian partners adopted a rapid response mechanism and employed a cluster approach. The cluster approach was the main coordination mechanism, in which needs were prioritised, locations identified, and available resources mapped and allocated. However, the goal of the coordination process – delivering well-coordinated, efficient, and sufficient lifesaving services – was not achieved at the required level. Despite all these efforts, the humanitarian needs of the people of Tigray were not met throughout the crisis years. The humanitarian work was affected by several external challenges.

The fundamental challenges that hindered the delivery of humanitarian aid included, but were not limited to, access and security issues, administrative challenges regarding movement of staff, cash and other aid items, and the failure to clearly distinguish between development and emergency interventions. Lack of cash and fuel were reported to be among the greatest obstacles to aid delivery. The findings of the study support other research on a similar subject in relation to the challenges faced by humanitarian interventions. Insecurity and restrictions, aid blockage and denial of access to humanitarian assistance, the intersection of development and relief interventions, and resistance to NGO/UN agencies' relationships with state and non-state actors/armed groups were the main challenges in the aid delivery process in Tigray. Moreover, the independence and neutrality of NGOs and UN agencies was seriously threatened with the state accusing humanitarian actors of supporting

the armed struggle, culminating in the expulsion of seven UN high officials from the country.

Some organisations used the rights-based approach in programming, mainly the UN agencies and INGOs. Several needs assessments and consultations with people in need were conducted to ensure that conflict-affected people had a say in the decisions made about them. However, typically, the responses plans and the aid delivery approaches were determined by humanitarian professionals, rather than initiated by rights-holders. Resource constraints had a severe impact on the rights-based approach, as almost all conflict-affected people were unable to obtain essential protection or have their needs for food and basic services met. This continued, even though the violation of their human rights was reported by media and several concerned organisations.

Overall, the international community has, to some extent, provided aid to meet the requirements of conflict affected people in Tigray. The international community has international instruments and conventions in place to protect mankind against suffering and human rights abuses in humanitarian crises. However, in Tigray, it failed to take effective action, other than publishing media reports and announcing repeated concerns about the situation. The government of Ethiopia did not play its role to protect its citizens, but instead escalated the humanitarian situation by imposing a siege on Tigray, with the support of its allied forces, and blocking aid delivery.

The major shortcoming of the humanitarian response in Tigray was the gap between the urgent humanitarian needs related to the protection of civilians and the response of the I/NGOs in each cluster. There were several serious protection issues reported in the Tigray crisis, including, but not limited to, the separation of families, gender-based violence, and the killing of civilians. Further research on the protection needs of conflict-affected people is needed, including on the role of NGOs in responding to such needs.

This makes the conclusion of this study even more relevant, namely, that local NGOs may be in a better position to respond to such needs. The humanitarian sector may be better able to respond to protecting

civilians if the sector acknowledges the role that local NGOs can play in this regard. In Tigray, local NGOs were in a position and had the capacity to respond to the difficult situations on the ground in the complex situation of war under a siege. This research suggests that in humanitarian crises like the Tigray war, UN agencies and INGOs work closely with local NGOs in providing humanitarian assistance, as well as in peace building and reconstruction and rehabilitation activities.

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Ethical clearance

This chapter should be read in conjunction with the 'Note on Content and Editorial Decisions'.

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