

## Humanitarian Response to the Crisis during Tigray war & The Role of NGOs<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

In numerous conflict-affected areas worldwide, limitations on humanitarian access persistently hinder the capacity of impacted communities to obtain sufficient aid from both UN agencies and national and international NGOs. This was also seen during Tigray war in Ethiopia. Reports have highlighted a dire humanitarian situation, with millions in urgent need of support. By mid-2021, the number of people requiring assistance had risen to 5.2 million, and by 2022, it was estimated that over 6.5 million people needed relief. The Ethiopian government's actions, including blocking aid, further intensified the crisis. This study highlighted the critical role of local NGOs, which have proven to be more effective in addressing the immediate needs of the population due to their established presence and relationships within the community.

### Research summary

- **Humanitarian needs**

The humanitarian crisis in Tigray escalated due to multiple shocks, including agricultural failures, market collapse, and internal displacement, leaving approximately 91% of the population in urgent need of food assistance and basic services. The conflict has severely damaged infrastructure, health facilities, and educational institutions, resulting in millions of people lacking access to essential resources, with over 2.2 million displaced and widespread malnutrition reported among vulnerable groups.

- **Coordination mechanisms**

The cluster approach, endorsed by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, was implemented to ensure a coherent response and address humanitarian gaps. A total of 11 clusters were active, with

### Executive Summary

This study examines the humanitarian crisis in Tigray, highlighting the severe shortages of food, water, shelter, and healthcare caused by the siege and communication blackout during the conflict. Despite the efforts of NGOs and UN agencies, significant barriers such as access restrictions, funding shortages, and political tensions impeded effective aid delivery, with the Ethiopian government further complicating the situation by blocking assistance. The findings emphasize the importance of local NGOs in addressing urgent needs and suggest that collaboration between larger humanitarian organizations and local entities is essential for a successful response and long-term recovery in the region.

---

<sup>1</sup> The policy brief has been compiled on the basis of research by Kahsay, B. G. (2024). Humanitarian Crisis and Response of Non Governmental Organisations in the Tigray War. In: Van Reisen, M. & Mawere, M. (eds.) Tigray. War in a Digital Black Hole, Volume 1. Langaa, Bamenda. Pp. 227-277. Book URL: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/385402687\\_Tigray\\_War\\_in\\_a\\_Digital\\_Black\\_Hole\\_Book\\_3](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/385402687_Tigray_War_in_a_Digital_Black_Hole_Book_3)

designated UN agencies coordinating weekly meetings with partners. Despite large efforts the humanitarian needs of the people of Tigray were not met during the war period due to large gaps and external challenges affecting the mechanisms put in place.

- **Governmental role**

The Ethiopian federal government created barriers to aid delivery, violating the rights of displaced individuals. The government's actions contributed to the humanitarian crisis, undermining the state's responsibility to protect its citizens.

- **Impact on civilians**

Ordinary citizens in Tigray faced significant barriers to accessing public services, resulting in unmet basic needs such as education, healthcare, and nutrition. The state's failure to provide essential support left many vulnerable.

- **NGO response**

Despite the challenges, NGOs and UN agencies tried to mobilize resources to respond to the crisis. However, the coordination of aid delivery did not meet the urgent needs of the population, highlighting a gap between humanitarian requirements and the response provided.

The findings suggest that local NGOs were better positioned to respond effectively to the humanitarian needs in Tigray as oppose to their INGOs counterparts. Their established presence and understanding of local dynamics enable them to navigate the complexities of the crisis more effectively than larger organizations of international character.

- **Protection issues**

Serious protection concerns emerged during the crisis, including family separations, gender-based violence, and civilian casualties. The study calls for further research on the protection needs of conflict-affected populations and the role of NGOs in addressing these needs.

## Recommendations for International Policymakers:

- 1. Strengthen humanitarian access:** Advocate for the removal of barriers to humanitarian access in conflict zones, ensuring that aid can reach those in need without obstruction from state or non-state actors. Investigate the deliberate denial of humanitarian aid as a crime against humanity and a war crime.
- 2. Enhance coordination mechanisms:** Improve coordination among humanitarian agencies by refining the cluster approach to ensure that it effectively addresses the unique needs of conflict-affected populations, particularly in complex emergencies like was witnessed in Tigray.
- 3. Prioritize protection needs:** Integrate protection needs into all humanitarian responses, ensuring that issues such as gender-based violence, family separation, and civilian safety are addressed as part of the aid delivery process.
- 4. Support local NGOs:** Recognize and empower local NGOs as key players in humanitarian responses, providing them with the necessary resources and support to effectively address the needs of their communities. Integrate the good practices of local NGOs into the mechanisms put in place by international NGOs.
- 5. Implement accountability measures:** Establish all possible mechanisms to hold governments accountable for violations of humanitarian law and the rights of civilians, ensuring that those responsible for obstructing aid delivery face consequences.

## Recommendations for NGOs:

- 1. Enhance local engagement:** Foster partnerships with local NGOs and community-based organizations to leverage their knowledge and networks, ensuring that humanitarian responses are culturally appropriate and context-specific.
- 2. Conduct needs assessments:** Regularly conduct needs assessments that involve conflict-affected populations in decision-making processes, ensuring that their voices are heard and their needs are prioritized.
- 3. Build capacity for local NGOs:** Invest in capacity-building initiatives for local NGOs, equipping them with the skills and resources needed to effectively respond to humanitarian crises and advocate for their communities.
- 4. Document and report violations:** Systematically document human rights violations and barriers to aid delivery, using this information to advocate for accountability and improved humanitarian access.

## Recommendations for EU Policymakers:

- 1. Increase funding for humanitarian aid:** Allocate additional resources to humanitarian efforts in Tigray and areas affected by war crises, ensuring that funding is monitored, flexible and responsive to the evolving needs of affected populations.
- 2. Facilitate safe humanitarian corridors:** Work with international partners to establish safe humanitarian corridors that allow for the secure delivery of aid and protection services to conflict-affected areas.
- 3. Promote human rights-based approaches:** Encourage the adoption of rights-based approaches in humanitarian programming, ensuring that affected populations are treated as rights-holders rather than simply beneficiaries.
- 4. Engage in diplomatic efforts:** Use diplomatic channels to pressure the Ethiopian government to uphold its responsibilities to protect its citizens and facilitate humanitarian access, while also addressing regional stability.
- 5. Support research on protection needs:** Fund and promote research initiatives that focus on the protection needs of conflict-affected populations, particularly in relation to the role of local NGOs in addressing these needs.