

Executive Summary

**INTER-AGENCY HUMANITARIAN
EVALUATION OF THE RESPONSE TO
THE CRISIS IN NORTHERN ETHIOPIA**



15 May 2024

Management, funding and implementation of the evaluation

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Disclaimer

The contents and conclusions of this evaluation report reflect the opinion of the authors and not necessarily those of the United Nations, OCHA, donors or other stakeholders.

1 Executive Summary

Introduction and approach

1. This Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHE) is an independent assessment of the collective humanitarian response to the crisis in the three northern regions of Ethiopia, Afar, Amhara and Tigray, from November 2020 until 1 April 2023. The Principals of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) activated the IASC System-Wide Scale-Up Protocols for Northern Ethiopia on 28 April 2021 in response to the outbreak of the armed conflict in Tigray in early November 2020. This Scale-Up activation, which sought to mobilize system-wide capacities and resources beyond standard levels, triggered this IAHE.
2. This IAHE reviewed the System-Wide Scale-Up and assessed the extent to which the collective humanitarian response met the needs of the people affected by the conflict in Northern Ethiopia. Its purpose is to ensure accountability for the extent to which IASC member organizations strategized and worked collectively to maximize the humanitarian outcomes of their work. The findings and recommendations also enable learning for future IASC Scale-Up activations.
3. For the purpose of this evaluation, the evaluation team used documentation and the strategies of the Northern Ethiopia response to reconstruct a theory of change at the beginning of the evaluation. This was based on the objectives and rationale for the Scale-Up and the available Ethiopia and/or Northern Ethiopia Humanitarian Response Plans, and the Ideal Model—Impact Pathway for humanitarian coordinated action, provided in the IAHE terms of reference.
4. The evaluation relied on a mix of primary and secondary data. Primary data collection included direct observation; 186 key informant interviews; 44 focus group discussions with 325 participants, of which 52 per cent were women and 48 per cent were men; and an online survey targeting providers of humanitarian response that 151 people participated in. Secondary data analysis consisted of an extensive document review, including documents identified by the evaluation team through desk review and/or provided directly by the Evaluation Management Group. The documentation included relevant Humanitarian Response Plans, collective strategies and plans, recent IAHEs and previous or ongoing agency-specific or inter-agency evaluations that assessed the Ethiopian/Northern Ethiopia context, such as those undertaken by UN High Commissioner for Refugees and UNICEF, agency meeting minutes, statements and communications. Exceptionally, the review also included audio recordings and related materials of formal and informal meetings.
5. The evaluation team carefully reviewed all primary data and then tagged and catalogued it by theme. The triangulation of the perceptions of stakeholders reflected in interviews, survey responses and documents were key in developing a shared analysis, given that much of the data was qualitative in nature.
6. For each evaluation question, the evaluation team established the strength of evidence available from the main data sources used by this evaluation, i.e., documentation, key informant interviews, focus group discussions and a survey. The survey has mainly been used for triangulation purposes. When evidence is found in multiple sources and the triangulation of the sources shows convergence, evidence is rated as strong. With fewer data sources available, it becomes less strong, and it has been rated as medium or weak.

Background

7. Fighting between the Tigray People's Liberation Front on one side and the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF), the Eritrean Defence Forces and allied regional special forces on the other broke out in Tigray in early November 2020. As of July 2021, Tigrayan forces launched offensives into the Afar and Amhara regions. These continued well into the same year, including an offensive towards Addis Ababa. In

December 2021, Tigrayan forces announced their retreat from both regions, prompting the Federal Government to announce a halt of the ENDF's advance. Despite this, hostilities of varying degrees continued throughout 2022, particularly around the Afar-Tigray and Amhara-Tigray regional borders, with Afar and Amhara regional forces backed by the ENDF. On 24 March 2022, the Federal Government announced an indefinite humanitarian truce, but fighting continued in the other northern regions. In August 2022, however, hostilities in the three regions rapidly escalated. On 2 November 2022, the federal and Tigray authorities declared a cessation of hostilities, which led to a reduction of the armed conflict. Amhara regional authorities were absent from the negotiations, causing unrest in the region that continues in early 2024 and is further heightened by historical tensions between the Amhara and Oromia regions.

8. The armed conflict was marked by mass killings, serious and gross human rights violations, violence against civilians, conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) and starvation as a method of war. These crimes, amounting to war crimes and crimes against humanity, have been documented, including by the specially created International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia. Some have estimated that 600,000 people were killed in the two-year period of this armed conflict.
9. In this context, humanitarian needs surged. On 28 April 2021, the Emergency Relief Coordinator and the IASC Principals activated an IASC System-Wide Scale-Up for Northern Ethiopia. The May 2021 Northern Ethiopia Response Plan estimated some 5.2 million people in need of food aid across the region, with additional reports estimating that 350,000 people were faced with catastrophic famine conditions in Tigray and the neighbouring areas of Amhara and Afar. The Ethiopia 2022 Humanitarian Response Plan does not specify numbers for the Tigray region, but the World Food Programme estimated the number of people requiring food assistance to be 4.8 million in May 2022.
10. Access of humanitarian organizations to Tigray and parts of Afar and Amhara and the freedom of movement of affected people were extremely constrained. For much of the armed conflict, the Government imposed a siege and prevented the unhindered delivery of services and materials. Humanitarian aid was blocked, resulting in a situation when, at times, only 10 per cent of aid needed for the Tigrayan population reached the region. A communication blackout, lack of fuel and significant interruptions in UN Humanitarian Air Service to the region also created major challenges, including regarding duty of care for humanitarian staff. Aid worker security reports for 2020 and 2021 showed a rise in targeted violence directed at humanitarian staff, pushing the country into the ranks of the five most dangerous operational contexts globally. As of August 2023, 36 humanitarian staff had lost their lives in Ethiopia since the outbreak of the conflict.

Findings

Scale-Up

11. When the hostilities started in early November 2020, humanitarian actors were not prepared to provide a response in a situation of armed conflict. This was compounded by an under-estimation of the scale of violence and destruction of essential infrastructure. The Scale-Up declaration, made six months into the armed conflict, was not timely. The benchmarks that the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) developed were not tailored to the context and thus did not move the Scale-Up forward. Though presence and operational capacity improved somewhat, it did not significantly increase, even during times of improved access. The inability to improve and adjust response capacity led to significant levels of dissatisfaction among senior humanitarian leadership, within and beyond Ethiopia. The fact that Scale-Up efforts differed in Afar, Amhara and Tigray and that they focused disproportionately on food insecurity in comparison with massive protection issues, such as CRSV, further compounded the inadequacy of the Scale-Up.

Humanitarian access

12. The blockade of aid imposed by the Government of Ethiopia was among the top defining characteristics of this crisis, yet there was no collective access strategy for Northern Ethiopia. Humanitarian access in armed conflict ties in closely with a principled humanitarian approach founded on the core principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence and in line with international humanitarian law. For example, the access agreement signed in November 2020 by the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) with the Federal Government did not include any references to international humanitarian law, and it ignored the HCT-endorsed “Guiding Principles for Humanitarian Operations in Tigray and border areas of Afar and Amhara regions.” In reality, the agreement became a control mechanism for the Government.
13. There was a lack of agreement about what a principled approach entails. Some felt that with the outbreak of the conflict, a more independent course from the Government was needed, while several others favoured continuing close relations. As part of this disagreement, the HCT did not define red lines, i.e., the threshold at which aid agencies make it clear that they are unable to deliver on their mandates and even the most basic humanitarian aid can no longer be provided. The absence of thresholds meant that the system failed to implement the duty of care towards members of staff, which proved to be a significant issue as humanitarian UN and non-UN agency staff were harassed, arbitrarily arrested, detained and tortured. UN and the HCT did not speak out about these incidents.

Coordination and working collectively

14. The disagreements within the HCT on access and advocacy caused tensions and contributed to the lack of collective strategies more broadly. HCT-endorsed documents carried little to no weight, and there was a total lack of accountability. Moreover, two shocks affecting the humanitarian community had far-reaching implications for working collectively. The first shock came in September 2021 when the Federal Government declared seven UN officials as persona non grata and expelled them. Many of the seven officials were known for their advocacy for a principled approach. Ten days later, two UN agency chiefs were removed from their positions by their superiors because they were implicated in conversations expressing opinions that did not correspond to the principles and values of their agencies. More specifically, in the leaked recordings, they can be heard expressing doubt in early evidence of widescale CRSV, calling it anecdotal, and speaking against some of their UN colleagues who favoured the principled stance. The second shock came in May 2023, when a donor government and the World Food Programme paused their food assistance following initial results of an audit pointing to widespread aid theft on an “industrial scale.” The misuse of food aid included beneficiary lists that had not undergone independent verification.
15. The Humanitarian Country Team failed in its function to provide a forum for policy dialogue and strategic decisions. There was a high turnover of participants. A tally for the 28 months that this evaluation covers showed that nearly 350 different agency representatives attended HCT meetings. Further to this, as the HCT is a body that depends on collective leadership, it requires all participants to take responsibility for the mechanism’s success or failure. In this case, however, OCHA-led efforts to produce common plans, positions on key policy issues or strategic advocacy messages yielded no results. When there was agreement on a policy, the follow-up was little to none, resulting in a lack of mutual accountability. As the chair of the HCT, the Humanitarian Coordinator/Resident Coordinator did not make efforts to improve the functioning of the HCT. In late 2021, a Regional Humanitarian Coordinator was deployed. While this role had a positive impact on inter-agency relations and exchanges, it was a compensatory measure without sufficient transparency and accountability in terms of reporting lines.
16. The early appointment and presence of a Deputy Humanitarian Coordinator for Tigray had a positive impact on inter-agency coordination at the subnational level where structures were put in place, including an Area Humanitarian Team. The Area Humanitarian Team contributed to a spirit of working collectively, although

some clusters were more advanced in their work than others. Protection, and in particular the area of responsibility covering gender-based violence, lacked a meaningful presence and strategy. Three agencies shared leadership of this area of responsibility, which contributed to confusion and a lack of accountability. Overall, the collective response lacked coherence and coordination between the global, regional and country levels was weak.

Needs and data

17. It is necessary to preface these findings with an acknowledgement of the fact that flaws in publicly available humanitarian data in Ethiopia are far from new. The IAHE of the 2015–2018 drought responses found that much of the data at the time was unreliable, to the extent that it recommended accountability measures such as verifying the data against the views of drought-affected communities. This recommendation was not implemented by the IASC or HCT.
18. Independently collected key humanitarian data, especially on mortality and malnutrition, was not available for this response. There were few efforts to keep track of certain key statistics: in one instance, the World Health Organization published but then withdrew a report on functioning medical facilities following complaints from the Federal Government. This episode does not stand on its own. When the authorities did not agree with the data collected, humanitarian actors were instructed to use different figures and/or to use beneficiary lists that they could not verify. In addition, government-provided data typically lacks detailed breakdowns by gender, age or special needs, making it challenging to analyse and address specific humanitarian concerns.
19. In general, humanitarian data in Ethiopia can only be published following the Government's approval. As this vetting led to delays and risks of undue interference, agencies preferred using unvetted data, which was more up to date. Different data collection efforts and databases on numbers of people displaced created a degree of confusion and tensions, however.
20. In terms of needs, there was a tendency to frame food insecurity as this conflict's main narrative. Food aid has traditionally dominated the humanitarian response in Ethiopia. The number of people in need of protection was about half the total number of those identified needing food aid. Nonetheless, much of the three northern regions was an active combat zone where protection needs were acute, marked by mass killings, serious and gross human rights violations, violence against civilians and conflict-related sexual violence.
21. The lack of humanitarian access, coupled with a communication blackout, made establishing a consolidated picture of needs and the response highly challenging. For a significant period, OCHA's Situation Reports (SitReps) were the main collective source of data. Further to these SitReps, OCHA also published overviews of available operational humanitarian capacity with regard to cash to pay staff salaries, fuel and supplies, which served as an important advocacy tool. These overviews were disallowed by the Federal Government. The data made available to the evaluation team do not, on their own, allow for meaningful analysis in terms of coverage and delivery. The picture of who received what and where is incomplete.

Coverage and delivery

22. Due to the extreme conditions under which the response was carried out, it was clear from the outset of this evaluation that for much of the two-year armed conflict and the months thereafter, people in need in the three regions did not receive the quantities and quality of humanitarian services they were entitled to.
23. Despite the many challenges, UN and non-UN aid agencies made strenuous efforts to increase their presence and programmes. Participants in focus group discussions for this IAHE were near-unanimous: the little aid that they received helped them to survive and presented a lifeline. To overcome the challenges

and to make best use of time in communities outside the main cities, needs assessment, service delivery and monitoring were often done simultaneously. Nonetheless, evidence shows differences between sectors, between organizations within sectors and between regions in terms of the level of success. Tigray was perceived as receiving more attention than Afar and Amhara. Even after the response there was increased, communities in Afar expressed frustrations as they felt left behind.

24. As for the quality aspects of the humanitarian response, consideration was given to protection and accountability to affected people but not to the scale needed. The protection cluster at the national level designed a protection strategy that was too general to be meaningful. Limited capacity further hindered its ability to respond to the enormous challenges. The response to gender-based/conflict-related sexual violence was particularly inadequate and did not consider the need for justice felt by survivors of sexual violence. Limited alternative approaches were developed for engagement with affected communities, given the communication blackout.
25. The evaluation has found various examples that the integration of local capacities in the collective response was valuable. The Ethiopia Humanitarian Fund allocated an increasing percentage of funding to local/national organizations, while the organizations remained frustrated by obstacles to access funding. In general, local NGOs and local staff felt abandoned or isolated in the response and did not feel recognized for the lifeline they kept in place when many international staff had been evacuated at the beginning of the conflict.

Conclusions

26. The brutal non-international armed conflict in Northern Ethiopia saw extreme levels of violence against civilians and grave and systematic violations of international law amounting to crimes against humanity and war crimes.¹ In this context, the UN and humanitarian partners had extremely little room to deliver effective humanitarian response in the three northern regions. It is more than commendable, therefore, that humanitarian organizations **stayed and delivered services to communities in dire need under challenging circumstances**. Especially (but not only) in the first months of the conflict, it was mainly national staff and local NGOs, many of whom were experiencing the trauma of the armed conflict first-hand, who kept a lifeline in place where they could.
27. The quality and appropriateness of the limited aid that reached communities, particularly concerning gender-based violence responses, did not align with the actual scale and nature of CRSV experienced in the three regions. The data environment in Ethiopia is complicated, with serious shortcomings found in collecting and processing humanitarian data. This existed prior to this conflict, including the way in which food aid and beneficiary data have been handled. **Public data on humanitarian needs lack the necessary degree of independence**. The dominance of food aid in Ethiopia has overshadowed other sectors, particularly protection. Ironically, the changes in the distribution of food aid following the allegations of the diversion of food in May 2023 could have a positive influence on the way in which all humanitarian data was handled in Ethiopia and the principle of independence was operationalized. This change could also further strengthen a humanitarian mindset in the country.
28. While humanitarian organizations strove to deliver assistance and protection within their capacity, the collective response was subject to several crucially important systemic flaws. Two flaws stand out. First, while agencies' interventions contributed to humanitarian outcomes, **a collective response underpinned by joint strategy and planning was missing**. Put in simple terms, agencies were doing their own thing.

¹ International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia, 'Report of the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia (A/HRC/54/55)', Human Rights Council, 14 September 2023.

Second, **the response was not underpinned by the humanitarian principles** and the UN failed to reframe the relationship with the Federal Government in line with international humanitarian law, at the outset of the conflict. These omissions were caused by strong disagreements about the relationship with the Federal Government among country-based senior UN humanitarian leaders.

29. The consequence of the deep division was **a dysfunctional Humanitarian Country Team and a lack of accountability**. Agencies who fell behind in their scaling-up efforts or Cluster Lead Agency responsibilities were neither held responsible nor replaced. Furthermore, HCT members did not hold each other accountable, and there was a gap in oversight from the global level. The extent to which performance appraisals of the Humanitarian Coordinator raised questions such as to the functioning of the HCT, including efforts to establish mutual accountability, is unknown to the evaluation. Efforts of non-UN representatives at the HCT, including NGO and donor representatives, to make the HCT a meaningful leadership forum were insufficient. The Area Humanitarian Team in Mekelle (Tigray) provided a valuable alternative coordination arrangement but was, ultimately, dependent on the leadership of the HCT at the national level.
30. Leadership of the humanitarian response to Northern Ethiopia was impacted by the **absence of consistency and coherence in the UN's wide-ranging agenda** in the country. Many of the 28 UN funds and programmes and specialized agencies present in Ethiopia have little or no mandate in humanitarian response. However, the absence of a mandate is not a reason for not being concerned with a large-scale humanitarian crisis and gross violations of rights. On the contrary, the UN Charter establishes as one of the purposes "to achieve international co-operation in solving international problems of a [...] humanitarian character, and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all."
31. The response made **few, if any, collective statements** against the blockade imposed against Tigray, the harassment, arbitrary arrests and detentions or torture of UN and non-UN humanitarian staff or the practice of starvation as a weapon of war. The centrality of protection, a key humanitarian commitment, does not only mean to keep people in need safe when providing assistance but also to speak out loudly and clearly, in private or public, on gross abuses of human rights and grave breaches of humanitarian law. Protection was not prioritized in the development of strategies and in implementing operations. Instead, the HCT followed an approach that was out of sync with the reality on the ground.
32. Given the weaknesses in scaling up, working collectively and negotiating access, it was inevitable that the delivery of the response was far from optimal. In essence, the framework and conditions to deliver effective humanitarian services during an armed conflict were missing. The serious mistakes made in responding to the needs of the people of Afar, Amhara and Tigray amount to a system failure. The system should have been in a better position to meet the many challenges imposed by the context.

Recommendations

33. The recommendations stem from the findings and conclusions of this evaluation. The recommendations were developed by the evaluation team in consultation with the in-country reference group, the Humanitarian Coordinator and IASC Operational and Advocacy Group (OPAG) and Emergency Directors Group (EDG). The entity responsible for leading the implementation of each recommendation is indicated, but it should be noted that recommendations categorized as “Ethiopia-specific” are also relevant to the system.

Recommendations	Responsible entity
System-wide recommendations²	
<p>1. Provide guidance to HCT/UNCTs for developing a coherent UN system-wide country strategy. This is essential to fostering clear and effective dialogue with all parties to a conflict and ensuring a common approach leveraging the collective weight and authority of the system. Key to this approach is the alignment of pre-existing UN programs with core humanitarian principles and protection <u>standards</u> regardless of mandates. The strategy should include clear thresholds (red lines) for a principled response.</p>	ERC, IASC Principals, EDG
<p>2. Ensure real-time monitoring of HC/HCT performance in rapidly evolving and/or complex contexts such as non-international armed conflicts. This is essential for the timely identification and resolution of any emergent leadership or coordination deficits. Furthermore, consider the appointment of a dedicated Humanitarian Coordinator early in the response when the Resident Coordinator may not be optimally positioned to lead the humanitarian response. The 2009 HC Terms of Reference should be updated to include leadership responsibilities in chairing the HCT and establishing mutual accountability.</p>	ERC, IASC Principals, EDG
<p>3. Ensure a connection between political-level negotiations on issues related to humanitarian access and the response at the operational level. Ensure that agreements made at senior political levels are transparent, consistent with humanitarian norms and known at the operational level.</p>	ERC and IASC Principals, HC/RC and HCT
Ethiopia-specific recommendations	
<p>4. Enhance the effectiveness of the Humanitarian Country Team. Consider implementing structural changes, such as reducing the HCT’s size or forming a more strategic core group. This can increase focus and decision-making efficiency. Consider reviewing the format and procedures of the HCT meetings to ensure focus on concrete outcomes and the implementation of agreements to promote accountability.</p>	HC/RC, HCT members
<p>5. Ensure responses to crises prioritize the centrality of protection, including support to affected communities facing serious rights violations, such as CRSV. Consider establishing and using cross-cluster analysis to ensure a coherent, balanced response and to identify gaps and discrepancies in data reported by each cluster.</p>	HC/RC, HCT, ICCG
<p>6. Enhance the approaches to gathering, processing and disseminating humanitarian data to improve the accuracy and relevance of the information used in humanitarian programming. These approaches should focus on adopting independent methods by humanitarian agencies to collect and analyse disaggregated data, ensuring that the insights gained are accurate and tailored to the specific needs and circumstances of the communities affected by crises.</p>	HC/RC, HCT, ICCG

² For detailed recommendations on System Wide Scale-Up Activations, please refer to the areas for consideration in the IASC paper ‘From Protocol to Reality: Lessons for Scaling up Humanitarian Responses,’ 2024.

Recommendations	Responsible entity
<p>7. Develop a comprehensive advocacy strategy for principled humanitarian action that goes beyond the binary choice between public messaging and discreet diplomacy. It should promote the centrality of protection and target all parties to the conflict to increase awareness of respect for humanitarian norms and principles.</p>	<p>HC/RC, HCT, ICCG</p>
<p>8. Enhance preparedness and the implementation of a principled response during the armed conflict in Ethiopia through the following steps:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Routinely engage in independent, systematic conflict analysis and connect political/conflict scenarios with preparedness and planning. • (Re)assigning cluster leadership responsibilities to ensure accountability for cluster leadership and delivering on commitments.³ And elevating sub-clusters or areas of responsibilities if they require a large-scale response corresponding to the prevailing context. • Activate the Surveillance System for Attacks on Health Care as a standard feature and use the data analysis to underpin advocacy and operations. • Ensure that any collective agreement signed with parties to the conflict undergoes a legal review to appropriately account for relevant norms of international human rights and international humanitarian law. • Ensure that as part of the duty of care, staff security arrangements and coordination correspond to the scale, urgency and level of incidents and consider the specific vulnerabilities of local staff in armed conflict. The position of designated official should be held by a UN representative who is directly involved in or overseeing the humanitarian response. Ensure appropriate oversight of these security arrangements at the global level. 	<p>IASC, HC/RC, HCT</p> <p>HC/RC, HCT</p> <p>HC/RC, HCT, CLAs</p> <p>HCT/WHO</p> <p>HC/RC, OCHA</p> <p>HC/RC, ERC, UNSMS</p>

³ This recommendation matches recommendation #4a of the independent review of the humanitarian response to internal displacement, which recommends that “the national or subnational level enabling best-placed operational organizations to lead clusters, or alternative coordination models, rather than global leads automatically and without regard to capacity.” Lewis Sida et al., ‘Independent Review of the Humanitarian Response to Internal Displacement’, 2024.

