CORE
COVERAGE,
OPERATIONAL
REACH, AND
EFFECTIVENESS

Humanitarian Access SCORE Report: Tigray, Ethiopia

Survey on the Coverage, Operational Reach, and Effectiveness of Humanitarian Aid

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SCORE reports

Under the CORE research programme, supported by USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (USAID/BHA), Humanitarian Outcomes is studying how aid is delivered in access-constrained conflict areas. In partnership with GeoPoll, the project conducts remote telephone surveys of crisis-affected people on their perceptions of the effectiveness of the aid response and the access challenges in their areas. Combined with key informant interviews with humanitarian responders and other contextual research, the survey results help to identify the humanitarian providers and practices that have achieved the greatest presence and coverage in difficult environments.

This SCORE report features findings from a survey of 614 people in the Tigray region of Ethiopia (49% men, 51% women) conducted between 17 February and 8 March 2021. Live operators for GeoPoll conducted the survey in the Amharic and Tigrinya languages. Humanitarian Outcomes researchers also conducted anonymous interviews with 25 key informants among the humanitarian organisations attempting to reach affected people in Tigray, as well as donor governments. Not all humanitarian organisations working in Tigray agreed to be named in this report.

More information on the SCORE methodology, including the survey instrument and an interactive dashboard of response data, is available at www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core.

Summary

The conflict that broke out in Ethiopia's Tigray region in November 2020 has sparked a massive humanitarian crisis to which the aid community has been unable to adequately respond. An estimated 4.5 million people, roughly two-thirds of Tigray's population, are currently in need of humanitarian assistance. Violence against civilians has been wide-spread, with credible reports of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by multiple parties to the conflict.[1] Fighting continues, and recent situation reports describe humanitarian conditions as 'extremely concerning'.[2]

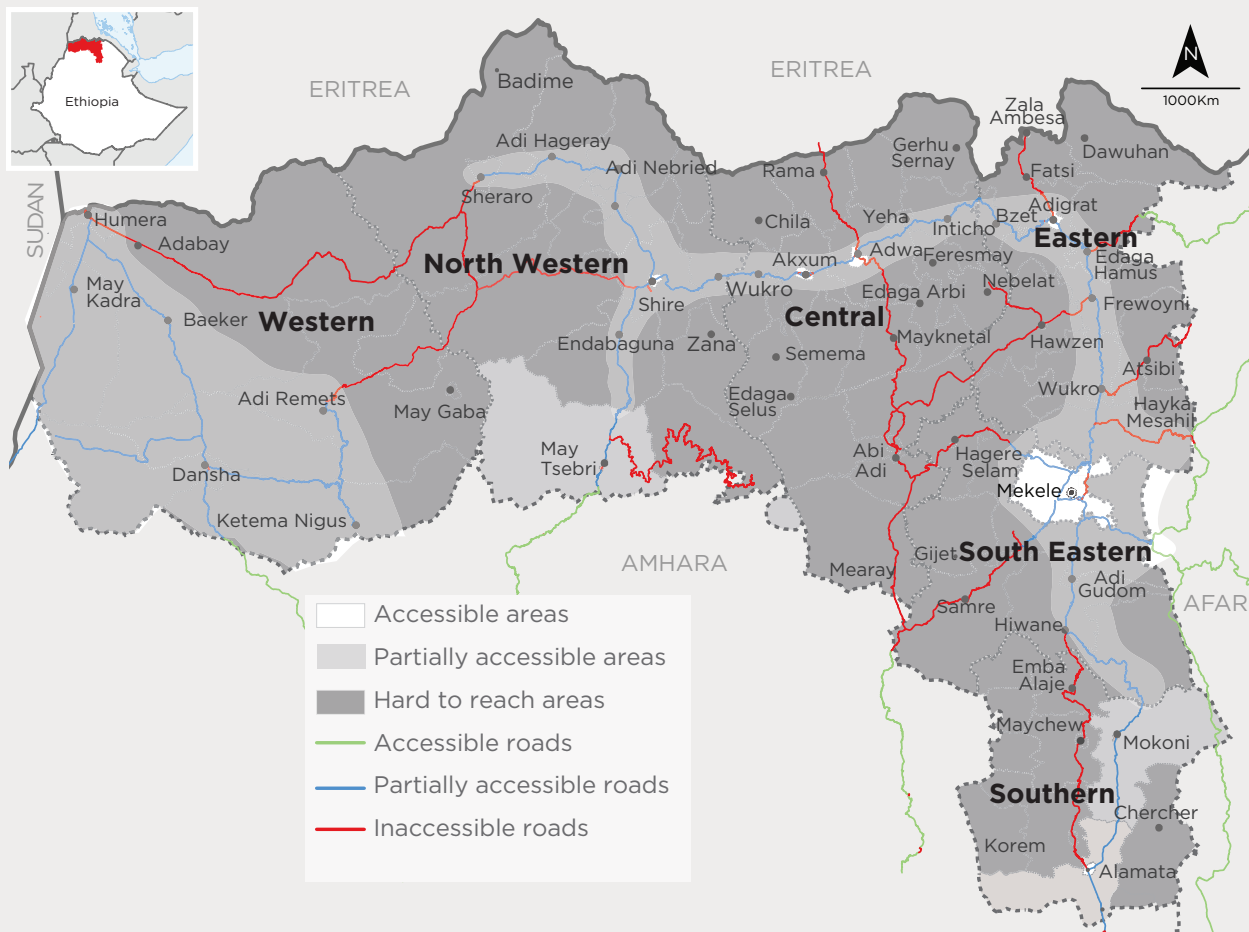Tigrayans surveyed in late February–early March reported that:

- A large majority of the sampled population are in need of humanitarian aid, while a minority have received aid.

- Of those who report having received aid, this was almost entirely in the form of food.

- Most said that their basic needs were not met, and that aid was not reaching the places where it is most needed.

- Of those who were able to answer, most cited government restrictions on aid as the principal access constraint.

- More than usual numbers of SCORE respondents answered 'don't know' to questions about why aid was not forthcoming, suggesting that, due to the communications blackout and internet shutdown, information about the crisis was also in short supply.

Access to the affected population by the aid response, and vice versa, has been extremely constrained in Tigray, and for the first few months of the crisis only a handful of aid organisations had established an operational aid presence. Compared with other hard-to-access crises that the CORE research has covered, Tigray has the highest numbers of people in need as a percentage of the population, the lowest numbers of organisations responding, and the lowest percentage of people in need reached by aid.

Common factors across the small number of aid actors able to establish relief operations were negotiation skills and capacities, a willingness to negotiate at local and national levels, high tolerance of risk, a pre-existing presence, local networks and partnerships, and strong preparedness. Some of the early efforts by the UN to negotiate access at national levels were seen widely by aid actors as being counterproductive, and strong leadership by humanitarian actors was seen as lacking.
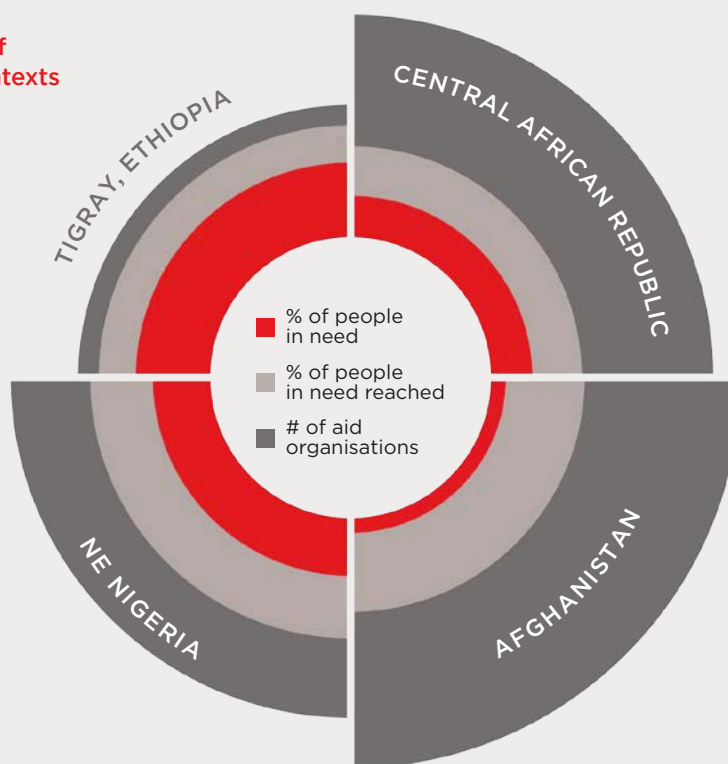
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[1] Human Rights Watch. (2021). *Ethiopia: Eritrean Forces Massacre Tigray Civilians. UN Should Urgently Investigate Atrocities by All Parties.* Retrieved from: https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/05/ethiopia-eritrean-forces-massacre-tigray-civilians

[2] OCHA. (2021). *Ethiopia—Tigray Region Humanitarian Update Situation Report, 13 March 2021.* Retrieved from: https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-tigray-region-humanitarian-update-situation-report-13-march-2021

OCHA Access Snapshot February 2021

Figure 1: Comparison of access-constrained contexts

TIGRAY, ETHIOPIA

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

NE NIGERIA

AFGHANISTAN

% of people in need

% of people in need reached
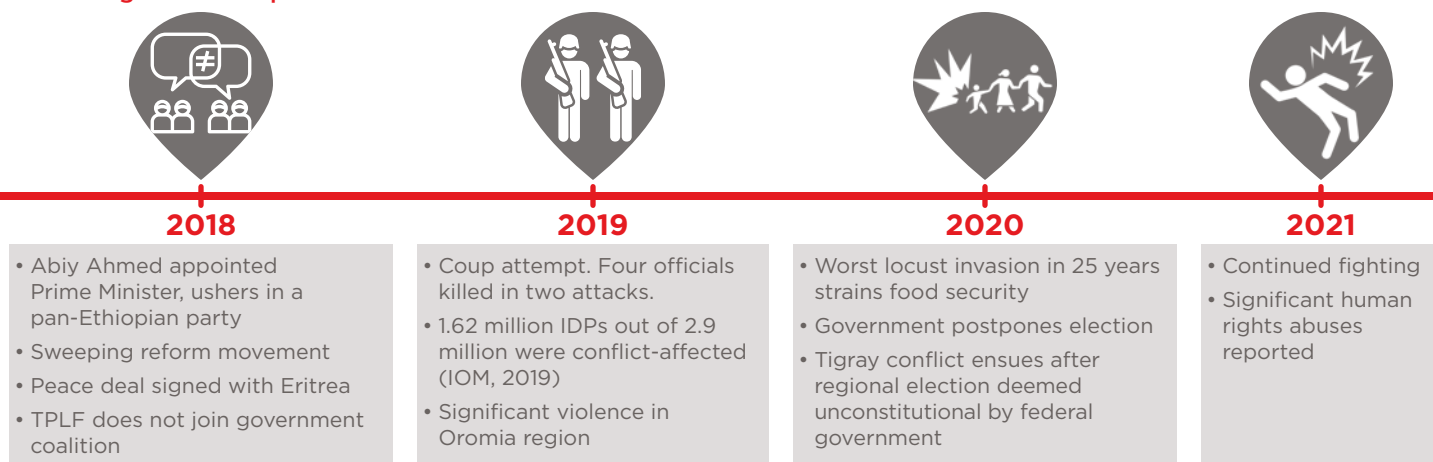
# of aid organisations

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The crisis in Tigray

Tensions between the Ethiopian federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)—which forms the Tigrayan regional government and was previously the ruling party in Ethiopia—erupted into fighting on 4 November 2020 around regional elections that the federal government had deemed illegal. Fighting has escalated since then, with mounting humanitarian needs. Amnesty International has found evidence that Eritrean forces (not officially acknowledged as being present until 23 March 2021) have been responsible for hundreds of execution-style killings of civilians.[3] In addition to the involvement of the national military, the TPLF forces, and Eritrean forces, in Western Tigray Amhara militias working with the federal coalition have captured territory that they consider to be part of Amhara, and have been accused of ethnic cleansing in those areas. There have also been reports of the use of rape as a war tactic, deliberate destruction of two refugee camps, with the fate of many of the refugees unknown, widespread looting with deliberate targeting of health facilities, refoulement, and forced conscription.

OCHA situation reports note that the full scope of needs is unknown, as 'humanitarian actors are still unable to measure the full extent of the situation, particularly in rural areas due to limited access'.[4] Most health facilities have been vandalised or destroyed, looting of facilities is continuing, and staff have not been paid and are being threatened by armed actors. Basic services including communications and internet, electricity, and banking remain heavily disrupted, and millions of people have had no power or communications for more than four months. Displacements have been widespread and are continuing, and civilians have been subject to ethnically motivated and gender-based violence. People are in urgent need of protection and basic humanitarian assistance across all sectors.

Displacements have also been fuelled by the inability to deliver aid to wide areas in rural Tigray, as people must travel long distances to reach critical resources. The closure of banks has created major difficulties for people in communicating with relatives to ask for help,

Figure 2: Ethiopia timeline

2018
- Abiy Ahmed appointed Prime Minister, ushers in a pan-Ethiopian party
- Sweeping reform movement
- Peace deal signed with Eritrea
- TPLF does not join government coalition

2019
- Coup attempt. Four officials killed in two attacks.
- 1.62 million IDPs out of 2.9 million were conflict-affected (IOM, 2019)
- Significant violence in Oromia region

2020
- Worst locust invasion in 25 years strains food security
- Government postpones election
- Tigray conflict ensues after regional election deemed unconstitutional by federal government

2021
- Continued fighting
- Significant human rights abuses reported

[3] Amnesty International. (2021). *Ethiopia: Eritrean troops' massacre of hundreds of Axum civilians may amount to crime against humanity.* Retrieved from: https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/02/ethiopia-eritrean-troops-massacre-of-hundreds-of-axum-civilians-may-amount-to-crime-against-humanity/

[4] OCHA. (2021). *Ethiopia—Tigray Region Humanitarian Update Situation Report, 13 March 2021,* op. cit.

receiving remittances, getting paid, and buying necessities. It has also, thus far, prevented aid agencies from being able to start cash- or voucher-based support. However, the reopening of some banks and the re-establishment of some markets has meant that discussions with banks and assessments of the feasibility of cash support are under way.

In addition to protection from violence and basic needs for food, health/medical assistance, and clean water, Tigrayans face an information crisis. The government has shut down cell service and internet connectivity in most of the region for extended periods. Long periods of electricity blackouts have reinforced the blackout on important news, keeping people literally and physically in the dark.

The humanitarian presence

Access for humanitarian actors since the start of the conflict has been and remains extremely constrained—principally by the Ethiopian government and, secondarily, due to insecurity from armed groups on road routes. The humanitarian response continues to gear up slowly, but it has been far slower than is needed and is still unable to reach large parts of Tigray. At this writing, only 22 organisations (including 10 INGOs, 3 national NGOs, 5 UN agencies, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and two donor entities) were operational inside Tigray, a very small presence relative to the need (see Figure 1).

Not surprisingly, the large majority (94%) of Tigrayans surveyed for this report stated that they have been in need of aid since the onset of the conflict, but a minority (43%) reported receiving any (Figure 3). Given the likelihood that the survey was skewed toward the relatively less needy areas of Tigray (i.e. those with open telephone lines and power, at least at the time of the survey), the 43% of survey respondents should not be read as the percentage of Tigrayans in need covered by the aid response. As depicted in Figure 1, no more than 39% of people in need had been reached by any aid.
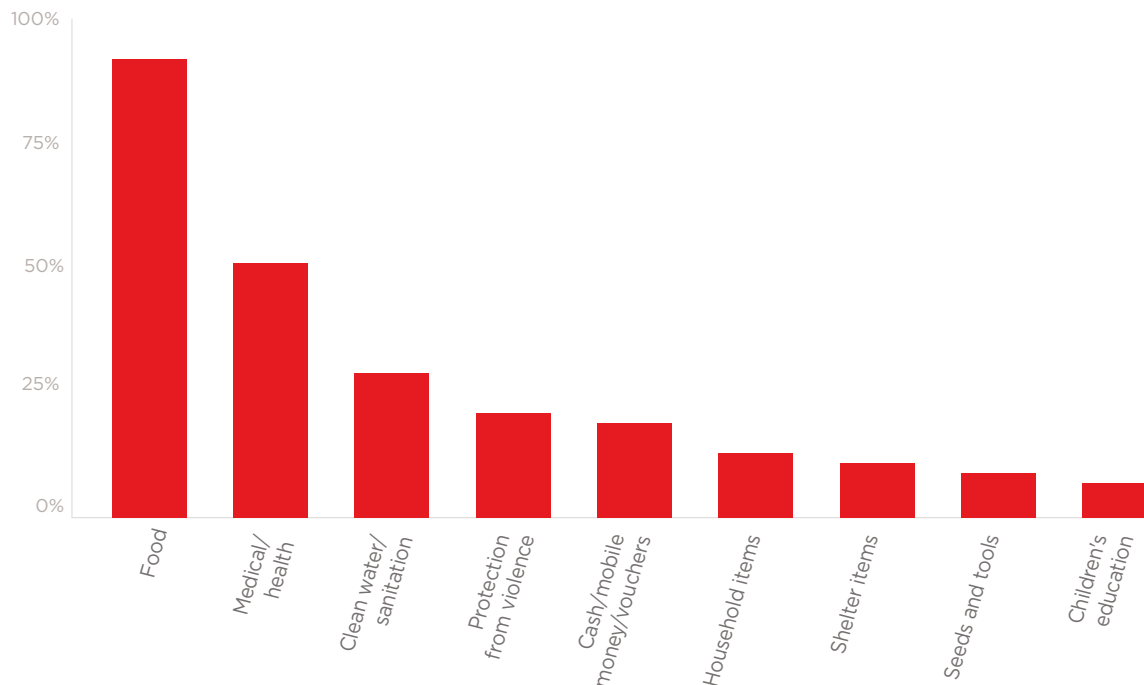
Figure 3: Did you receive aid in the past 3 months? Did you need aid?
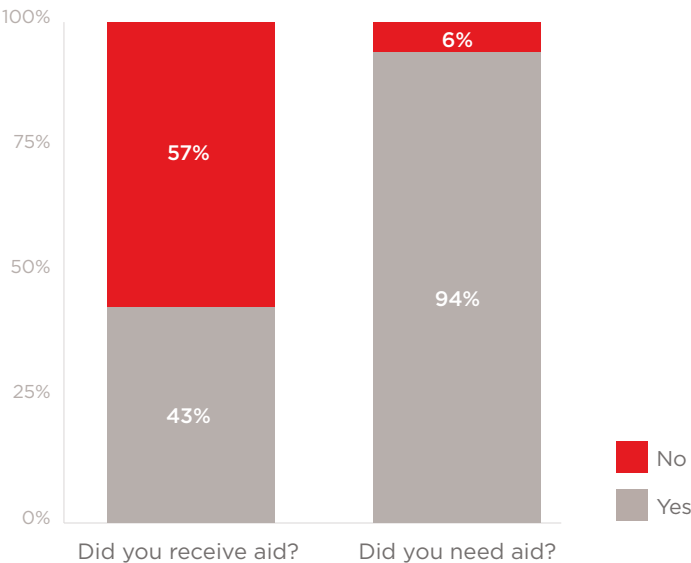
Survey on Coverage, Operational Reach, and Effectiveness (humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core)

According to respondents, the most urgent need was for food. This was followed by medicines and health care, the second most needed category of aid expressed by respondents (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Types of aid most needed

Survey on Coverage, Operational Reach, and Effectiveness (humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core)

Survey responses supported OCHA's reporting that the bulk of the assistance being delivered in Tigray has been food aid, with 0.9 million people receiving a 'complete food basket', and much smaller numbers receiving clean water and shelter assistance (Figure 5).[5]
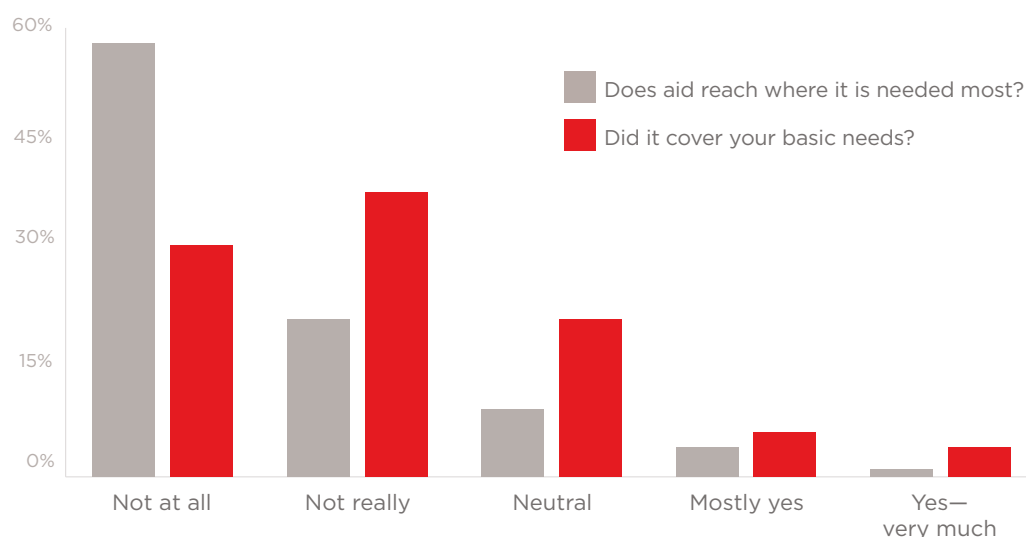
Figure 5: Types of aid received
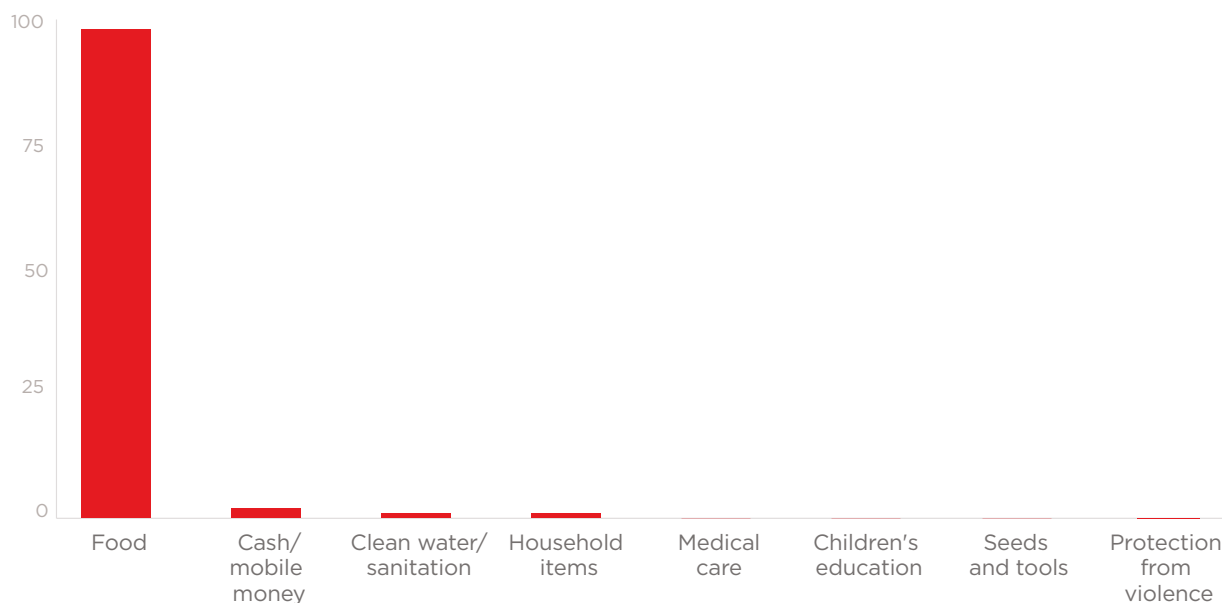
Survey on Coverage, Operational Reach, and Effectiveness (humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core)

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5   OCHA. (2021). *Ethiopia—Tigray Region Humanitarian Update Situation Report, 22 March 2021.* Retrieved from: https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/ethiopia/

Aid agencies that had a presence in Tigray prior to the conflict generally have been best placed to respond. The Joint Emergency Operation for Food Assistance in Ethiopia (JEOP) consortium of INGOs led by Catholic Relief Services (CRS), and working with the Tigrayan national NGO Relief Society of Tigray (REST), started partial food aid distributions in early January,[6] while the ICRC and a very small number of international NGOs have been able to provide some health care and essential services assistance.[7] The Government of Ethiopia, through the National Disaster Risk Management Commission (NDMRC), has also provided some food assistance.[8]

Three months into the crisis, a larger number of aid organisations are just beginning to scale up operations as the government has begun to ease access constraints. Aid operations have remained largely limited to the bigger towns and to locations near main roads and until now there has been much less aid reaching rural areas, where needs are assumed to be greatest. Majorities of people surveyed also affirmed that aid was largely not reaching the places where it was needed most, and that what was received was insufficient to cover people's basic needs (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Reach and relevance of aid relative to needs

Survey on Coverage, Operational Reach, and Effectiveness (humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core)

6   CRS. (2020). *Catholic Relief Services (CRS) Tigray IDP Assessment and Response Update.* Retrieved from: https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/assessments/crs_tigray_idp_ assessment_and_response_updaet_.pdf

7   ICRC. (2021). *Violence in Tigray—Response Plan; World Vision Ethiopia.* (2021). *Tigray Crisis Response Situation Reports #1 to 7;* UNICEF. (2021). *Ethiopia Humanitarian Situation Tigray Crisis, Situation Reports No 1 and No 2;* MSF. (2021). *Providing assistance to people in Ethiopia and Sudan in wake of Tigray violence, project update 12 January 2021.*

8   OCHA. (2021). *Ethiopia—Tigray Region Humanitarian Update Situation Report, 13 March 2021,* op. cit.

Obstacles to access

Affected people and the aid organisations trying to reach them agree that the principal impediment to humanitarian access has been the government's reluctance to allow free travel and communications in the region, followed by volatility in security risks. In the survey, most respondents did not have an answer as to why aid was not able to reach the places where it was needed most, but those who did blamed government restrictions primarily, followed by insecurity (Figure 7). This generally echoes what agency representatives said in interviews about what was keeping them from scaling up operations quickly.
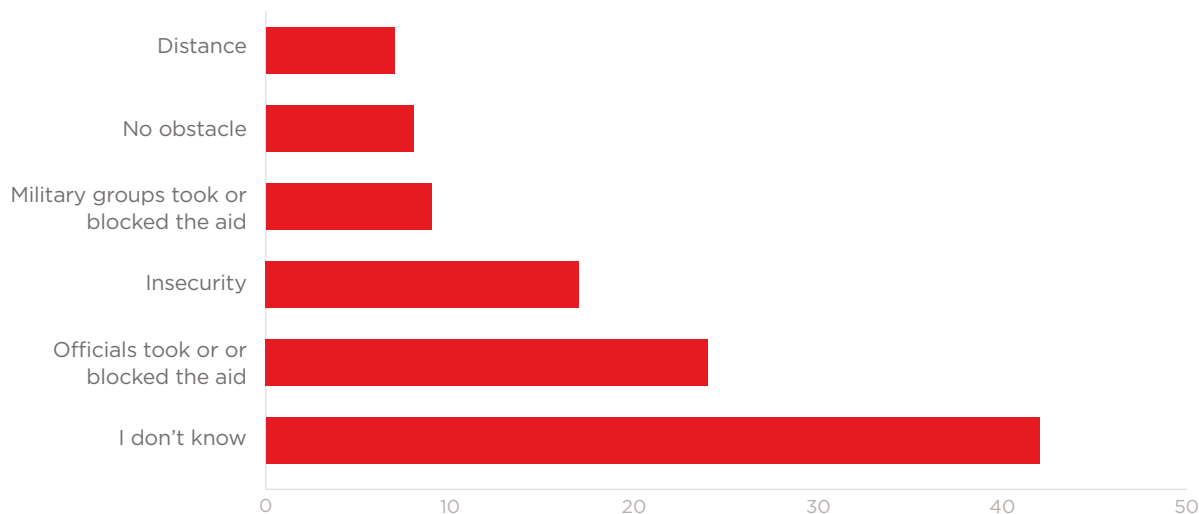
Figure 7: What prevents aid from reaching where it is needed most?
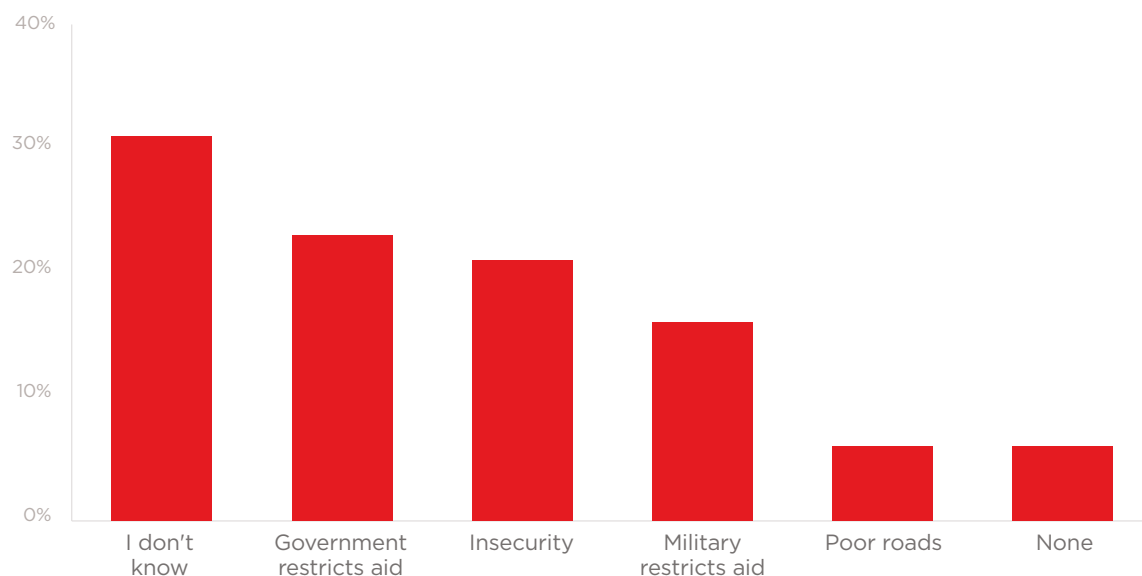
Survey on Coverage, Operational Reach, and Effectiveness (humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core)

When it comes to their ability to reach aid, most people who offered an answer again cited government blockages (Figure 8).

Figure 8: What are the main obstacles preventing you from accessing aid?

Survey on Coverage, Operational Reach, and Effectiveness (humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core)

Political constraints and coordination issues

At the federal level, the UN signed an agreement in November 2020 with the Government of Ethiopia that involved getting clearance for access for goods and personnel from the Ministry of Peace. In practice, in the initial weeks of the crisis this became a tool which the government effectively used to block access by not granting any clearances. Some international organisations managed to bypass this system and to negotiate access at the local level, but many more were blocked by it.

At the local level, agencies have faced insecurity and access restrictions imposed by local authorities and different parties to the conflict. The organisations that were able to gain access or return to resume work in the early months did so by continually negotiating at the local level and from checkpoint to checkpoint. Aid actors have had to negotiate with multiple parties to the conflict, including different armed actors, civilian authorities, and multiple levels of government. OCHA's access snapshot as of 19 January 2021 noted active hostilities in all regions with shelling, armed confrontations, ambushes, and hit-and-run attacks by parties to the conflict, all of whom have contributed to restricting aid operations.[9]

The federal-level discussions on authorising humanitarian personnel and supplies to enter Tigray went on for more than two months, delaying the start and scale-up of operations, and the authorisation process continues to act as a bottleneck. Strong leadership at senior levels of the humanitarian system (both within Ethiopia and in agency headquarters) was lacking, interviewees said. The original access agreement negotiated by the UN on behalf of the humanitarian community (but without consulting the humanitarian INGO forum), required individual authorisations for all staff and cargo movements into Tigray. This was widely seen as having significantly constrained access, rather than enabling it. More generally, strong leadership, a willingness to take measured risks, and effective advocacy with government are factors that have been seen as being absent, and this is understood to mean that large-scale humanitarian operations have been slower to get under way than they should have been.

Although a series of high-level visits to Ethiopia have explicitly focused on the problem of access, some of these were arguably counterproductive. Senior figures have been too ready to accept government narratives that obstacles to access have been resolved. In particular, the statements of David Beasley, the Executive Director of the United Nations World Food Programme, after his visit were widely seen as problematic and as letting the government off the hook by implying that access had improved more than was actually the case.

Insecurity

Although the onset of armed conflict in Tigray has brought with it new incidents of violence against aid workers (and many incidents of looting and harassment), the humanitarian response is not yet facing a situation of widespread and deliberate attacks on aid operations, such as has occurred in other settings.

Historical security data from the Aid Worker Security Database (AWSD) and the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) show that since 2015, where known, the primary perpetrators of violence against aid workers in Ethiopia have been unidentified armed groups (UAGs) and federal security forces. In instances of violence against civilians (not including aid workers), the federal military and police forces of Ethiopia, including their regional forces, have each been involved in well over 200 events between 2015 and the present day. UAGs were involved in approximately 117 instances of violence against civilians over the same period and, collectively, ethnic militias accounted for over 100 events against civilians.

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[9]   OCHA. (2021). *Ethiopia—Access Snapshot—Tigray Region (As of 19 January 2021).* Retrieved from: https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-access-snapshot-tigray-region-19-january-2021

Of all the ethnic groups identified, Oromo ethnic militias were responsible for the highest number of attacks (24) between 2015 and the present day, with other militias being responsible for half as many or less. This includes the TPLF, which was involved in six attacks affecting civilians.

Between 2019 and the first quarter of 2021, the AWSD records five incidents of major violence affecting aid workers in Tigray, in which six aid workers were killed and two wounded. While still small, the numbers show an upward trend.

Operational security has also been made more difficult by government restrictions on communications. Mobile phone access has been gradually restored but remains problematic, and the government has granted very limited authorisations for satellite phone or radio communication networks. Internet access also remains very restricted. The lack of communications has made it harder for organisations to communicate with staff in Tigray and staff moving between towns or doing distributions and assessments, which has severely inhibited their management of security risks. This has meant that aid organisations that have negotiated access locally have had to accept a high risk threshold and be willing to delegate authority and responsibility to staff at local levels.

Other security-related constraints involve the unwillingness of private sector contractors to operate in parts of the region. Fears of insecurity and of looting have undermined the food aid response in particular, with private truck operators reluctant to operate in some areas.

Figure 9: Attacks on aid workers in Tigray
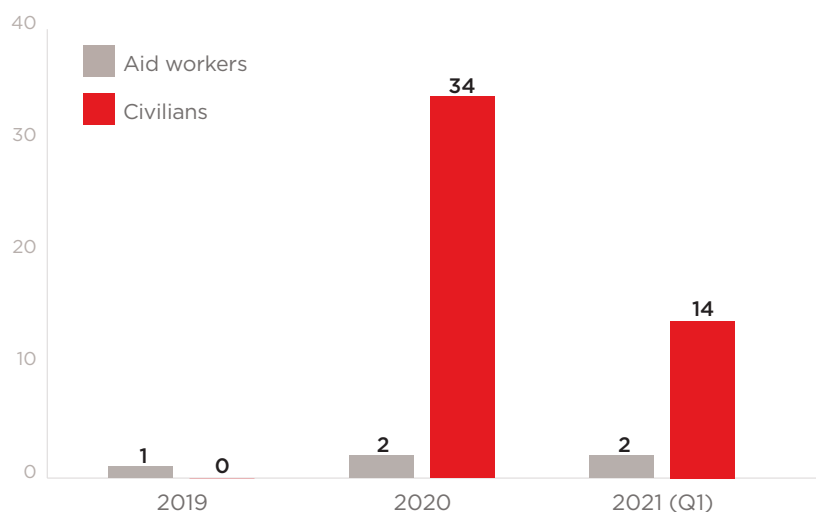
Source: Deliberate attacks on civilians data from Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), (www.acleddata.com)

Operational and organisational constraints

Adequate funding was an issue for some organisations, with interviewees noting that they could have significantly expanded operations even within existing constraints if greater funding had been available more quickly. The early response was very much led by NGOs, with the UN more constrained by federal-level obstacles, but rapid funding directly to NGOs has become less possible for some donors.

Interviewees also spoke of an aversion to risk among much of the aid community that was problematic in the face of urgent and acute humanitarian needs. The organisations that were able to start operations earlier were those that were willing to accept greater risks, both in terms of security and the political risks of compromising their future access. The UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) was criticised for being under-equipped and risk-averse, and

other bureaucratic obstacles in the UN system were also seen as a problem within aid agency procedures. This was particularly the case within the UN, with the relocation status of staff who had previously been working in Tigray proving problematic and delays in getting even Ethiopian staff deployed back into Tigray.

There is a complex emerging story around the role of surge staffing and international staff. On the one hand, some organisations have been able to deploy international personnel, and they attest to their importance in facilitating negotiations on access and playing a protective role for Ethiopian staff. However, obtaining visas, clearances, and permissions for international staff to come to Ethiopia or to be deployed to Tigray has been difficult. Organisations, therefore, that relied on bringing in additional experienced humanitarian staff in order to scale up operations were left struggling when that proved not to be possible. Some organisations are now looking at investing more in-country surge capacity. More fundamentally, this raises questions about divisions in terms of skills and attitudes between development and humanitarian staff. If current staff in-country have development skills and a reluctance to pivot to a humanitarian response, and organisations cannot bring in other staff to remedy that problem, then they risk being stuck. What is required is to have staff better able to work across development and humanitarian divides, to work both in support of and independently of government, and to work within national systems but to be critical of the government when needed—but such staff seem to be in short supply.

Finally, some of the aid actors interviewed for this study pointed to the overall 'development mindset' of the aid community in Ethiopia as a further constraint. Aid organisations in the country have been structured and staffed to support development-focused programming and had in place strategies and processes designed to work with and through government. Pivoting to a neutral and impartial humanitarian operation that is independent of government is predictably proving difficult. There have been challenges in terms of the skills of staff, but more fundamentally in terms of attitudes and a willingness to be critical of government. Observers have noted the tendency of some UN organisations to be 'reflexively deferential to governments',[10] and parallels are starting to be drawn with the UN's role in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, where reviews have highlighted the organisation's reluctance to criticise governments even in the face of grave human rights violations.[11] Concerns highlighted by the ICRC about the potential for a 'protection gap, an emergency gap, and perception risks' seem to be very well founded.[12]

People's access to services, help, and information

The shutdown in communications and the closure of banks and other services have made humanitarian efforts extremely difficult, but more significantly these disruptions have impeded people's general coping strategies, such as local networks of support and remittances from the large diaspora community.[13] The fact that professionals and business people have not been able to access funds or receive salaries has meant that better-off people who would normally be able to support other people in need have not been able to do so, and are themselves

[10] C. Lynch and R. Gramer. (2021). *UNDP Memo Echoes Ethiopian Talking Points on Tigray.* Foreign Policy. Retrieved from: https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/09/ethiopia-tigray-conflict-united-nations-undp-memo-atrocities-ethnic-cleansing-allegations/

[11] United Nations. (2012). *Report of the Secretary-General's Internal Review Panel on United Nations Action in Sri Lanka.* Retrieved from: https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/737299?ln=en; and G. Rosenthal. (2019). *A Brief and Independent Inquiry into the Involvement of the United Nations in Myanmar from 2010 to 2018.* Retrieved from: https://www.un.org/sg/sites/www.un.org.sg/files/atoms/files/Myanmar Report - May 2019.pdf

[12] ICRC. (2019). *Q&A: The ICRC and the "humanitarian – development – peace nexus" discussion.* International Review of the Red Cross. Retrieved from: https://international-review.icrc.org/articles/qa-icrc-and-the-humanitarian-development-peace-nexus-discussion-ir912

[13] S. Solomon. (2020). *For Ethiopia's Diaspora, Seeking News Amid Communication Blackout is a Challenge.* VOA News. Retrieved from: https://www.voanews.com/africa/ethiopias-diaspora-seeking-news-amid-communication-blackout-challenge

struggling. The lack of electricity and 'network' (telecoms and internet) has effectively blocked people from obtaining critical information and means of self-help. These issues came up repeatedly when Tigrayan survey respondents were asked about their principal 'other' needs, apart from humanitarian aid (Figure 10).

Even when assistance is being provided, people face serious obstacles in reaching places where they can get help. The latest OCHA situation report notes internal displacement across Tigray, 'including people trying to reach towns where assistance is being delivered'. Health facilities have been damaged and looted across the region, water points damaged, and schools closed, severely limiting people's access to basic services.

Although humanitarian organisations are doing their best to monitor distributions, some are worried about possible discrimination and exclusion in deciding who gets aid, and about the degree of control that authorities and armed actors are exerting over processes of targeting and distribution.

Figure 10: What else is most needed?

Survey on Coverage, Operational Reach, and Effectiveness (humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core)

According to evidence from the interviews, the survey of the affected population, and operational data from OCHA, the most present and effective actors in the early months of the Tigray crisis were the organisations that had a prior operational presence and that possessed either a strong mandate (the ICRC and the Ethiopian Red Cross), a high degree of risk tolerance and a willingness to negotiate access locally at the same time as seeking permissions at federal level, or the logistical capacity and/or established networks to scale up operations (International Rescue Committee, Norwegian Refugee Council, World Vision International, Catholic Relief Services, Relief Society of Tigray (REST), among others that asked not to be named.)

People interviewed in Tigray who were able to offer an opinion on the most present and effective aid groups gave the ICRC and the international agencies high marks (Figure 11), and with international organisations outnumbering local organisations in the humanitarian response by a factor of five to one, this may not seem surprising. However, it may obscure the extent to which the INGOs working within the JEOP food aid consortium rely on REST: when asked to name individual groups that they had witnessed providing aid since the conflict began, as many people named REST as named the ICRC.

REST (also known as Maret) is the largest humanitarian actor in Tigray. Originating in 1978 as the civilian relief arm of the TPLF, REST was the key agency in the JEOP consortium with the main responsibility for food aid in the region prior to the crisis.[14] At the start of the crisis, some of the senior leadership of REST was removed, but its huge operational capacities remained in place and, with the support of CRS, it has been able to deliver significant volumes of food assistance despite the political complexities.

In terms of UN agency actors, UNICEF was cited by the largest number of survey respondents (particularly women) as being present and operational.

Figure 11: Aid provider type most able to reach people in need
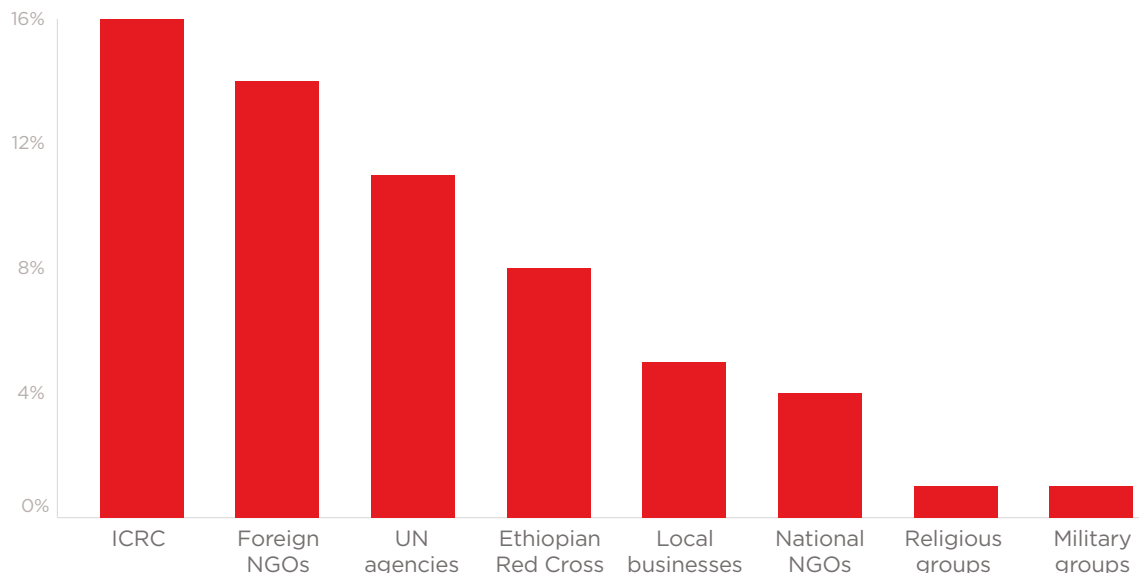
Survey on Coverage, Operational Reach, and Effectiveness (humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core)

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[14]   USAID. (2020). *Office of Food for Peace Ethiopia. Development Food Security Activities, Updated April 2020.*

Information from the survey and interviews revealed some examples of good practice, as well as areas of weakness, in the Tigray response.

Strengths and advantages

- **Having aid in hand facilitates access.** Rather than seeking entry for an assessment mission only, the organisations that were most successful in negotiating access locally came equipped with supplies, emergency health kits, or food aid for immediate distribution and found that authorities were more amenable to saying yes when it meant some people getting help straight away as a result.

- **International personnel can enhance protection for nationals.** Though it is not always the case, the ethnic dimensions of the Tigray conflict have created security risks that can be partly mitigated by having international staff at negotiation points.

- **Existing networks of local actors.** As is almost always the case, the skills and capacities of local actors have been critical to the initial response and will be critical going forward. REST, the Ethiopian Red Cross, and local church networks were amongst those cited as being particularly important. Partnerships between international and local actors, such as CRS and WVI partnerships with church and faith-based networks, have been used to good effect, and senior church figures were brought in to help conduct initial negotiations.

- **Strong preparedness and contingency mechanisms** were helpful. The food assistance response was able to get under way quickly partly because the JEOP consortium had anticipated the potential for increased needs relating to violence in the run-up to elections and had imported large amounts of food aid. A healthy pipeline allowed food aid to be moved immediately. Agencies with flexible, advance financing mechanisms were also better placed to act quickly without needing to wait for proposals to be approved. UNICEF's standing partnership agreements with the Red Cross and MSF enabled it to support early responses.

- **Prior investments in organisational skills and capacities for access** reaped benefits. Some of the first INGOs to re-enter Tigray did so because they had created structures and incentives to emphasise an assertive access approach, and staff were empowered to take the initiative and seek solutions at the local level.

Weaknesses and areas for improvement

- **Structural impediments to humanitarian independence.** Too many organisations working in Ethiopia appear to have been averse to working amid elevated risk, reluctant to criticise or offend government, and tied into formal processes, structures, and systems that have inhibited rather than enabled access. These are the same systems that have impeded the growth and development of an independent civil society sector in the country and perpetuated a government-controlled aid apparatus that has struggled to implement a principled humanitarian response when the government itself becomes a party to the conflict.

- **Lack of effective advocacy and insufficient international pressure** to allow for adequate humanitarian response in the absence of conflict resolution. While international donors are working hard behind the scenes on humanitarian access issues, it is widely acknowledged that progress has been fatally slow and the joint humanitarian-government access discussions created greater obstacles and delays at the outset instead of clearing a path. There is a need for strong coordination and leadership in combating divide-and-rule strategies and ensuring a strong collective humanitarian voice.

- **Information and communications: unmet humanitarian needs.** International humanitarian organisations and their donors could advocate more strongly for the restoration of critical communications links and services to enable local networks of support, and could engage more with local and international diaspora networks in this area.

- **Instrumentalisation of humanitarian action.** Humanitarian actors again need to be wary of being instrumentalised by different sides, of being co-opted into misleading information campaigns, and of discussions on access themselves becoming a tool for delay and distraction. As one interviewee said, 'People are talking about access as if the number of clearances was the main goal. We should be talking about the impact we are making, which is negligible.'

Conclusion

Tigray represents a massive and ongoing crisis. Access constraints mean that the full extent of needs and avoidable suffering remains unclear, but what is clear is that the levels of assistance currently reaching people are totally insufficient and that stronger protection for civilians from ongoing violence is desperately needed.

The political sensitivities of the conflict mean that access for international humanitarian actors was always likely to be constrained, and it has had to be carefully negotiated at multiple levels. While there have been some successes and some assistance has reached people, the overall response has been too slow, and it remains inadequate. Primary responsibility for assisting and protecting its citizens lies with the Government of Ethiopia and it needs to be encouraged to fulfil those responsibilities, to abide by international humanitarian and human rights law, and to investigate clear evidence of abuses. But international humanitarian actors also need to step up to the task at hand. Donors need to provide more generous funding, aid agencies need to scale up operations, and strong, principled leadership and advocacy are required.

Tigray presents familiar humanitarian dilemmas in stark form. When it is right to speak out in the face of human rights abuses and suffering and how and to what degree it is acceptable to practise quiet diplomacy and prioritise access and the ability to deliver assistance are fine balancing acts that humanitarian organisations have faced many times before. Strong leadership and coordination are important in navigating these dilemmas and in enabling senior-level advocacy while allowing an operational-level focus on programming and protection. Thus far, senior leadership and high-level interventions have not always been seen as being helpful.

The crisis has highlighted the need to invest in and maintain classic humanitarian capabilities: a willingness to take risks within strong security management systems, a willingness and the capacity to negotiate access with armed actors at local levels, the ability to provide immediate assistance without getting bogged down in assessments, and the mindset, preparedness, and organisational structures to pivot to humanitarian action that is impartial, neutral, and independent. It has also highlighted the value of local capacities, partnerships, and presence.

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