

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **Spectates from the frontline: Humanitarian assistance, aid coordination, and challenges in the Tigray Crisis**

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To ascertain the coordination platform of the humanitarian assistance and aid efforts undertaken seven months after the crisis occurred, this study was conducted in the Tigray region of northern Ethiopia. Specific purposes of the study were to describe the coordination platform of the humanitarian assistance, assess the humanitarian needs and responses, and identify the major challenges encountered to deliver humanitarian assistance. Observation and key-informant interviews were used to gain the primary data. The study shows that the coordination platform of the humanitarian assistance led by the interim administration of the Tigray region and co-led by UNOCHA. Eight sectors were being implemented for the emergency response; each sector led by the relevant stakeholders. The sectors hold weekly meeting, while each sector delivered daily updates to the emergency coordination center (ECC). The regional emergency coordination center hosted two meetings per week to briefly discuss the progress of aid delivery. With the limited access and unsustainable communication facility, each sector provided the essential assistance to the needy people, while the needs versus the provided supports had massive gaps. Among other encounters, challenges related to security and access, administrative and operations encounters, and funding limitations have affected the humanitarian assistance. Unless root causes of the conflict are addressed, the operational problems would remain as they were. If the humanitarian assistance is not scaled up, situations related to disease outbreak, famine, and sever security situations are projected to be rampant.

**Key words:** Humanitarian assistance, needs and responses, coordination, challenges, Tigray conflict.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, hundreds of thousands, perhaps even millions of lives have been saved by humanitarian assistance delivered in situations of war and disaster (Smock, 1996). When there are emergency crisis because of manmade or natural disasters, several humanitarian actors get involved to support the affected people. Hence, the need to have a coordination platform is

unavoidable. Why coordination is significant may not be argumentative but defining who coordinates and how it is done incites fierce debate (Reindorp and Wiles, 2001). As defined by Minear et al. (1992), coordination is the delivery of humanitarian assistance in a unified and effective way through the systematic use of policy instruments. These include strategic planning, information

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management, resources mobilization and guaranteeing accountability, arranging a practical segregation of labour, negotiating, and preserving an operative framework with local political authorities and giving leadership (Ibid). Coordination organs are required throughout the field to work from facilitation to control, categorized based on the type of organizations and the diverse stages at which coordination happens (Bennett, 2000). Skilled support teams, clear channels of responsibility for coordination are required for effective coordination, and that coordination is done by players with no conferred attention who perform a service for the entire system (Reindorp and Wiles, 2001).

In the Tigray region of Ethiopia, after the armed clash started on November 3, 2020, millions of people have been forced to leave their homes. More than 2.2 million people are displaced within Tigray (UNOCHA, 2021a), while more than 61,000 people have crossed into Sudan as refugees (UNFPA, 2021). The interim administration of the Tigray region announced that more than 4.5 million people need immediate humanitarian support<sup>1</sup>. An emergency coordination center was established when the TPLF lead government of Tigray was in Mekelle to manage the internal displacement as well as other crisis such as the swarm of the desert locust that occurred months preceding the war. Soon after the power shift, the emergency coordination center had been reactivated.

There exists a massive humanitarian need in the region, and a very dynamic and hindered humanitarian access in which governments, UN and Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) keep calling for unrestrained humanitarian access<sup>2</sup>. In a disaster where several humanitarian actors are involved, installing an effective coordination platform is of paramount importance. As pointed out by Bennett et al. (2006), "in almost every emergency, the same question arises: who should control the chaos created by the multiplicity of players?" The present study aims at identifying the humanitarian actors of the emergency crisis and describing the coordination platform in the Tigray region. Additionally, this study focuses on ascertaining the level of humanitarian needs and the glimpse of response along with detecting fundamental challenges and expected prospects. This article would contribute to the literature of humanitarian assistance and coordination procedures of emergency response, and particularly of the Tigray humanitarian situation. Essentially, the research questions were how the humanitarian assistance is coordinated? What seems the level of the emergency needs versus the level of efforts put to address the needs?

What challenges do exist that hinder the humanitarian assistance?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research design and research approach**

Descriptive qualitative research design was employed to conduct

this study.

### **Data collection tools**

Both primary and secondary sources of data were used. Analysis of secondary sources was utilized to strengthen the findings from the primary sources. Primary data was collected from February 1 – May 30, 2021. Specifically, the following data collection methods were utilized to reply to the research questions and produce reports.

### **Interviews**

Twenty -six key informants were interviewed for this study. Eight informants were from humanitarian non-governmental organizations, 6 from UN agencies, 10 from interim regional administration, and 2 from the National Disaster Risk Management Commission. The informants were selected based on their role in the coordination process and knowledge of the emergency need and responses being delivered. There was a limited number of women in the regional humanitarian coordination environment hence only 2 female key informants were included. Semi-structured open-ended questions were utilized to gather the required information from the key informants. Furthermore, unstructured interviews with community members were conducted in Shire, Maichew, Mekoni, Adigrat, and Mekelle. A total of 20 interviews were made with randomly sampled internally displace people in the stated locations.

### **Participant observation**

The researcher physically participated and observed the humanitarian assistance coordination systems and has hosted, attended, or/and led several meetings when the humanitarian assistance subjects were discussed. Moreover, systematic observation was used to witness the emergency needs and service provided to the conflict affected people and spectated the setup of the IDPs collection centers. The researcher has travelled to several places within Tigray and has witnessed the IDP situation. Besides, from the application of the emergency response projects, this study identified the key challenges in the region that hindered the execution of humanitarian assistance. Therefore, the presented findings that are not cited are the results of the researcher's participatory involvements in the aid delivery process.

### **Secondary source analysis**

Secondary sources were meeting minutes, power-point presentations, response plans and reposts, assessment reports etc. which are publicly or non-public available have been used to strengthen the information gathered through the primary data collection methods.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Emergency response actors in the Tigray region**

The emergency response actors in Tigray region of the northern Ethiopia constitutes UN agencies, a significant number of international and national NGOs, and all government bureaus that lead the respective sectors implemented in the emergency crisis. The federal government ministries also inconsistently deployed

technical experts to the region to support the interim administration<sup>3</sup>. The key actors from the UN humanitarian system namely UNHCR, WFP, UNICEF, FAO, and WHO that are established by separate treaties, with separate governance mechanisms (Reindorp and Wiles, 2001), and IOM, UNFPA, and UNOCHA were found to have active roles in the Tigray humanitarian situation. Particularly, UNOCHA played a key role in reactivating the regional emergency coordination center and contributed to mobilizing the actors immediately after the assignment of the interim administration<sup>4</sup>. This study found a total of 54 humanitarian<sup>5</sup> actors with complete and/or ongoing assistance interventions. This figure includes the UN agencies and ICRC, international and national NGOs. In addition to the National Disaster Risk Management Commission, 10 government bureaus/agencies were found to have an active engagement in delivering direct assistance and/or with coordination roles of the humanitarian assistance in the regional state. The fundamental actions include the leadership of the clusters at the regional level, facilitating the beneficiary identification, and coordinating sectoral assessments.

### **Humanitarian assistance: Needs and level of response**

Seven months after the war broke out in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, much of the discussion and action was on the humanitarian aid. Despite several reports of human rights violations by the mainstream media and reports on the ground, this article focuses only on the aid wing of the humanitarian intervention applied during the study period. Notwithstanding the efforts being made, the general humanitarian response remains extremely insufficient compared to the needs on the ground (UNOCHA, 2021a). There is a massive humanitarian assistance need in all sectors. This study found eight sectors being intervened for the emergency crisis that is, food, health, nutrition, water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), emergency shelter and non-food items (ES/NFI), protection, education, and agriculture and livelihoods. Each of the eight clusters had a lead government bureau from the interim administration of the Tigray region of Ethiopia. The summaries of the needs as compared to the actual responses of the clusters are presented below.

#### **Food cluster**

During the study period, the food sector was managed by the Regional Disaster Risk Management Office, under the Tigray Bureau of Agriculture and Rural Development. The fundamental role of this office was to coordinate the food distribution. It communicates with the National Disaster Risk Management Commission (NDRMC), Early Warning and Response Directorate, for the required

volume of food support for the crisis affected people. About 4.5 million people in the Tigray region Ethiopia needed urgent food supply (UNOCHA, 2021a). There are five rationalities, according to an expert from the NDRMC, to conclude that this number of people needed humanitarian assistance. First, the armed struggle started during the harvesting season, hence the people whose means of subsistence depend on agriculture have not collected their yield. Second, the market system has collapsed because of the war that has seriously disrupted the demand and supply chain. Third, the banking system had been closed, and continued to be closed in several parts of the regional state, which have resulted in obstruction of people from accessing their savings. Fourth, the productive safety-net program beneficiaries are no longer getting service starting from the eve of the war and that the highly vulnerable people are not receiving the monthly ration from the government as they used to. And, finally, there occurred massive internal displacement in the regional state<sup>6</sup>.

According to an expert from Early Warning Response and Food Security Coordination Directorate, this cluster started its operation by the beginning of January 2021. The first round of the food dispatch started on January 18, 2021. The first areas reached were Mekelle city, Raya-Azebo, Raya-Chercher, and Mekoni town from the southern zone of the region<sup>7</sup>. Instantly, sending food to central and eastern zones was started. However, confirmation of the arrival of the trucks to the destination and actual delivery of the food to the needy people were difficult due to the communication blackouts and travel restrictions resulted from the live conflict of that period.

In line with the report of the cluster, as of March 04, 2021, a total of 814,206.21 *Qintal*<sup>8</sup> of food has been dispatched. This was meant to reach an estimated number of 3,951,271 people which accounted 87% of the targeted 4.5 million people<sup>9</sup>. This dispatch, however, was only for the first round of the food distribution. Regardless of the food aid distribution, the actual distribution of the food item to the needy people was questionable. Follow up was difficult because of communication blackouts. There was no food distribution to the people in the Western Tigray region until the end of March. It has been continuously reported that this part of Tigray together with Tselemti, Raya-Alamata, part of Raya-Chercher, Ofla, and Zata areas of the southern zone were deemed inaccessible for the interim administration of Tigray region<sup>10</sup>. These districts of Tigray were continuously reported as unreachable or areas with limited information. Hence, the necessary food aid and the number of people in these areas remained unknown for the Emergency Coordination Center that was functional in Tigray.

Due to the dynamic security situation, there were times in which people were asked to move to accessible areas to collect food rations as in the case of the people of *Negsege* district of Southern Tigray that moved to the city of Maichew to collect food items<sup>11</sup>. These people had to

travel an average of 35 kilometers to get the food distributed at Maichew town<sup>12</sup>. Seven months after the crisis started, there were people that had the chance to get only 15 kilograms of wheat once and some others did not get the chance to get food support at all<sup>13</sup>.

The food dispatching report had always been questionable for carriage of food and the actual distribution of the food package to the people in need was occasionally different. One of the major challenges for the food cluster has been the confirmation of the arrival of trucks to the distribution centers and the real supply of the food<sup>14</sup>. In the contrary, the federal government of Ethiopia has reported on March 3, for example, that 780,534.6 *quintals* of food items were distributed by the government to 3.8 million beneficiaries<sup>15</sup>. This report, however, was criticized by attendants of the weekly emergency coordination center for the fact that the 3.8 million people doubtfully received the food.

From reports of the weekly meeting of the regional emergency coordination center, as well as from observations from filled visits, the researcher learned that the food distribution had irregularities in terms of the food package and the monthly ration per person. In areas like Adwa, Axum, and Shire, the food items include only wheat (cereal or powder), while some areas received wheat together with soybean and vegetable oil. Moreover, there have been reports that the number of kilograms provided in some parts like Adwa and Shire were only seven Kilograms instead of fourteen per person per month. The approved number of IDP which had an implication to the food rations being requested from the federal government was less than the actual figures on the ground. Hence, the food being distributed was either not reaching all people in need or being distributed to all with decreased kilograms. As in the case of Shire town, the reported number for the food request was less by 200,000 than the actual number of the IDPs.

A total of 308,433 people from six administrative districts have not certainly been reached with food support. This implies that people in these areas have been seriously suffering from food shortages; perhaps people have already been exposed to famine. By the end of May 2021, about 15 Woredas were reported by the food cluster to be inaccessible due to unwillingness of troops and, hence people found in these Woredas remain at risk<sup>16</sup>. According to the report by the Ofla district 150 people are believed to have died from hunger (Addis Standard, 2021). As famine and famine like conditions continue to manifest in Tigray region, it is predicted that this could lead to the loss of more lives (BBC, 2021).

### **Health**

Bureau of health chaired the health cluster. Reactivation of health service delivery in clinics and hospitals, disease surveillance, health service delivery using mobile clinics,

and mental health and psychosocial support are the basic areas of engagement for this cluster during this conflict<sup>17</sup>. Hundreds of thousands of people remain without access to health care (MSF, 2021), as health workers have not restarted working in a significant number of health centres. The continued looting of health facilities by the Eritrean troops, the closure of hospitals and several clinics resulted from the absenteeism of the workers has contribute to the inaccessibility of people to healthcare services. Generally, by the beginning of March 2021, nearly 70% of health facilities had been looted, and more than 30% had been damaged; only 13% were functional (MSF, 2021). Among other health issues, the health cluster deals with SGBV cases to solve the healthiness complications of the victims. According to the cluster's weekly report, a total SGBV case visited health facilities until 21 May 2021 has reached 1,247 out of which most of the cases (672) were admitted in Mekelle, followed by Adigrat (313 cases)<sup>18</sup>. The Covid-19 pandemic remained a major concern as hundreds of thousands are living in compounds without the proper measures of protection. Based on the weekly report of the cluster, the attack rate of COVID-19 was 36.7%, while the death rate was 1.8% as of 21 May 2021<sup>19</sup>.

### **Nutrition**

This cluster is led also by the Bureau of Health. The major responsibilities of this cluster are Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM) and Moderate Acute Malnutrition (MAM) treatments based on the nutrition indicators and handling the BSF/TSFP programs<sup>20</sup>. The Nutrition Cluster targets 1.4 million children under the age of 5 and Pregnant and Lactating Women (PLW) with preventative and treatment supports up until the end of the year (UNOCHA, 2021b). According to the cluster report, the MAM and SAM statuses have appeared to be beyond the globally accepted standards. Moreover, during the period this study is considered, there was a very high global acute malnutrition (GAM) rate beyond the acceptable sphere standard (<5%) in both < 5 year – old and pregnant and lactating women (17.8 % and 30.9 % respectively) which is very at a critical stage that needs an urgent response<sup>21</sup>. For this cluster, the repeatedly reported challenges include low multi-sectoral activities due to the security problem, very low number of functional health facilities, the continued looting of nutrition items, equipment and supplies, lack of manpower on nutrition at the health facilities, and poor reporting system<sup>21</sup>.

### **Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)**

The Bureau of Water Resource Development is responsible for chairing of the WASH cluster. This cluster

handles the maintenance of water reservoirs and pipelines damaged during the war, excavation of solid waste disposal pits, rehabilitation of Shallow wells, water distribution through water trucking, and distribution of WASH non-food items. As of March 04, 2021, 23% of the target population was reached with WASH non-food items, 71 of the planned 162 water trucks deployed and 44% of the targeted people supplied with water trucking, several shallow wells rehabilitated<sup>23</sup>. Towards the end of May, this cluster has reached 32.6% of the total target of 1.3 million people via creating access to safe drinking water through durable solution/maintenance. The target to reach people through water trucking was 1.7 million people out of which the cluster managed to reach 41.9%. To achieve this, 139 water trucks were deployed, while the demand was 285<sup>24</sup>. From the aggregated plan of reaching 2.2 million people with WASH non-food items, the cluster has distributed to only 17.86% in seven months. Moreover, the access to key sanitation and hygiene messages was only 8.9%<sup>25</sup>.

Besides supporting the internally displaced people staying in collective centers and the conflict affected host community throughout Tigray, this cluster was also mandated to fulfil WASH facilities in the IDP camps being established. In the Mekelle IDP camp, for example, the cluster will have to construct 390 latrines, hundreds of showers, waste disposal facilities, water system installations, and provision of WASH non-food items for the IDPs to be moved to the camp<sup>26</sup>. Until this study was conducted, the IDP camp in Mekelle did not start hosting IDPs.

### ***Emergency shelter and non-food items***

The emergency shelter and non-food items cluster was merged with the WASH cluster until the end of January 2021. After IOM assigned a fulltime cluster coordinator for this sector, a separate ES/NFI cluster coordination system was established. The Regional Disaster Risk Management Office is the government counterpart of this cluster. Distribution of emergency shelter items, facilitating the construction of emergency shelter or supply of emergency shelter kits for the internally displaced persons, and distribution of non-food items for IDPs staying in collective centers and with the host community, but also the conflict affected people in the urban and rural areas of the Tigray region are the main mandates of this cluster<sup>27</sup>.

According to the cluster coordinator, 2.7 million people need emergency shelter and non-food items. As of March 04, 2021, only 16% of the target populations were reached. Even by the end of May 2021, the cumulative achievement of the cluster was 24%<sup>28</sup>.

This cluster, while sharing the overall challenges with the other clusters, has specific factors that contributed to its low achievement, according to a region head of INGO.

First, the ES/NFI was part of the WASH sector and it did not have a separate cluster coordination platform. Second, there is a massive need like that of the food sector for the fact that hundreds of thousands have been looted their household items and that there are several people whose houses have been destructed +during the war in addition to the internally displaced persons who certainly needed this support. Third, there was a direction from the regional emergency coordination center not to plan for emergency center construction in areas like Mekelle with the assumption that this would serve as a pull factor for the internal displacement<sup>29</sup>. The third factor, however, was reconsidered hence shelter construction started in Mekelle.

The construction of emergency shelters became an issue only after the education cluster requested for the evacuation of the IDPs who stay in schools in many parts of Tigray for the schools should start functioning<sup>30</sup>. By the end of May 2021, a total of 3,400 and 500 emergency shelters were constructed in Mekelle and Shire respectively<sup>31</sup>.

### ***Protection***

Although protection is the task of multiple actors namely office of justice, police, office of women's affairs, office of youth and sports affairs, the Bureau of Social and Labor Affairs take the coordination leadership.

This cluster was responsible for the protection of civilians like forced displacement and returnees, and refugees across the region as there are killings, abductions, sexual violence including against children allegedly perpetrated by various parties to the conflict and that there were reports of sexual violence common across the Tigray region (OCHA, 2021a).

According to WHO statement, there exist concerns on protection amidst worsening humanitarian situation in the Tigray region of Ethiopia that civilians are being indiscriminately targeted and attacked, including rape and other terrible forms of sexual violence, continue to occur (WHO, 2021). The protection cluster has estimated 2.7 million to be requiring protection assistance out of which the cluster has targeted for 1.4million (UNOCHA, 2021c). To address this target, the cluster had a funding gap of 90% (Ibid).

The fundamental thematic areas that this cluster focused on include identification, emergency case management and referrals to multi-sectoral life-saving services, and awareness-raising activities on IDPs rights, child protection, sexual violence, and GBV (UNOCHA, 2021c). Moreover, delivery of dignity kits to girls and adolescent women, provision of psychological first aid to people in need, capacity building works to government structures on IDP rights, inclusion of persons with specific needs, and protection monitoring were also activities that this cluster prioritizes (Ibid).

## **Education**

This sector is led by the Bureau of Education. The fundamental tasks in this sector include the examination of students of grade 12, grade 10, and grade 8<sup>32</sup>. With strong collaborations with other stakeholders, the chief assignment of this cluster has been getting schools operational and starts the teaching learning process, at least in the accessible areas like Mekelle, an expert from the Educational Bureau stated<sup>33</sup>.

However, the security situation of the Tigray State did not allow the resumption of education services. In fact, schools in many parts of the Tigray region continued to serve as IDP camps. As of March 12, 2021, 13 schools in Mekelle, 10 in Adwa, 4 in Shire, 4 in Axum, and one in Adigrat were occupied by IDPs<sup>34</sup>. Numerous schools have also been changed to military camps including Hatsey Yohans Secondary School, the famous and historic school in Mekelle, Tigray.

A damage assessment has not been conducted, but several schools were destroyed during the war or whose teaching materials have been looted, the expert added. Until this study was conducted, no school in the whole of Tigray has been reported to have started classes. Some education and child protection partners, however, have started implementing education during the emergency in some IDP camps.

Generally, 1.4 million school aged children were identified out of which 420,000 children were targeted (UNOCHA, 2021c). The funding gap for this target was 96% (Ibid).

The immediate response plan of the education cluster was to provide learning opportunities by establishing fast-tracked school readiness and accelerated learning programs in the major town of Tigray specifically Mekelle, Adigrat, Adwa, Axum, Shire, Abi Adi and Maichew (UNOCHA, 2021c).

## **Agriculture and Livestock**

The Bureau of Agriculture and Rural Development leads this sector. One major responsibility of this cluster has been reestablishing a functioning system from the region to *Kebelle or Tabya*<sup>35</sup> level to support the people whose livelihoods depend on agriculture. The months of fighting and extensive lootings have resulted in the devastation of the agriculture system in the Tigray region (OCHA, 2021b). Crops and animals have been looted or burned/slaughtered, particularly notably in the Eastern and Central zones (Ibid) which has resulted in projecting emergency (IPC-4) outcomes in these areas<sup>36</sup>. The major areas of intervention of this sector include the provision of emergency seeds and fertilizer, animal feed support and livestock vaccination. To effectively address the emergency needs, the cluster needs USD 7.7 million from May to July (UNOCHA, 2021c). According to an

expert from the Tigray Bureaus of Agriculture and Rural Development, with all necessary agricultural inputs destructed or looted from the rural areas, it has been difficult for the farmers to do agricultural activities, not to mention the land right issues in a significant part of Tigray<sup>37</sup>.

## **Cluster meetings and the coordination platform**

Although the emergency coordination center was established when the TPLF lead regional government was in Mekelle, the Tigray interim administration has reactivated the center right after its assignment by the federal government. The interim administrator promptly formed his cabinet after which the cabinet members started leading their respective sectors.

### **Cluster meetings**

The eight sectors had weekly cluster meeting. While the chairs of the clusters were the afro-mentioned government bureaus, there were co-chairs from the UN agencies or the INGOs. The co-chairs of the clusters were UNICEF-WASH, FAO-agriculture and livelihoods, IOM-ES/NFI, WHO-health, UNICEF-Education, UNHCR-protection, UNICEF-nutrition, and WFP-food<sup>38</sup>.

The cluster leads were mandated to update the regional emergency coordination center on daily bases. The emergency coordination center holds a regional level meeting twice per week, every Tuesday and Friday, during which each cluster presented weekly progress report and plan for the subsequent week. The weekly meeting of regional emergency response center was led by the vice Interim Regional Administrator, and co-chaired by UNOCHA.

In addition to the sector coordination meetings that have direct assistances to the people in need, there are separate cluster meetings and working groups aimed at supporting, in one way or another, humanitarian operation.

### **Logistics cluster**

The World Food Program leads the logistics cluster. The main roles of this working group are supporting humanitarian actors in getting clearance for any humanitarian goods that would be transported from Addis Ababa to Mekelle. According to the cluster leading expert from WFP, WFP also provides transport service for partners which could not do it on their own. Moreover, there was a warehouse in Mekelle in addition to centers in Gondar, Kombolcha, and Semera that partners could use for a maximum of four weeks.

The logistics working group further facilitates the

information flow of trips arranged within Tigray. It provided a schedule of traveling partners along with the timeframe and departure and destination locations. This information helps other organizations to join the trip forming a convey which had safety implications.

### ***Inter-cluster coordination group (ICCG)***

The inter-cluster coordination group (ICCG) is a group that consists of the cluster leaders and co-leaders from the UN agencies and humanitarian organizations. Government officials of any level are invited to this assembly. There is a weekly meeting scheduled for this group. In this meeting, major humanitarian issues of the Tigray region from all clusters are discussed for possible solutions and way forwards. UNOCHA leads this meeting.

### ***Access working group***

The access working group is chaired by UNOCHA, had a regular weekly meeting. Only one participant is suggested from each attending organization, usually the files coordinators and area representatives. The main purpose of this working group was to provide information concerning the access of humanitarian actors to the locations where they want to provide the assistance or the target people accessing the services from humanitarian assistance, according to access expert from OCHA. The expert strongly asserted that the access information mainly comes from the humanitarian actors and UNDSS, and the role of the working groups' leaders is information management, data gathering and facilitating the flow of information.

### ***Cash working group***

The cash working group was formed towards the end of February 2021. During the data collection, there was an official assigned to lead organization for the working group, but IOM facilitated activities related to cash-based interventions.

The working group conducts meeting every two weeks in which all cash-based humanitarian assistances were discussed. Among other issues, assessments of the existing market in the region, the transfer values for each sector and the coordination of interventions in specific location aimed at minimizing duplication of resources were discoursed.

### ***Tigray regional humanitarian international non-governmental organizations forum (TRHINGO)***

In Ethiopia, there was a humanitarian international non-governmental organizations forum at country level. The Tigray regional humanitarian international non-

governmental organizations (TRHINGOs) forum was established in November 2020. This regional forum remained under as a subset of the national HINGO forum. Initially, there were about seven INGOs but latter the number increased to 20.

The regional coordinators/managers of the organization are attendants of this forum. The main mission of this forum was to collectively discuss challenges affecting humanitarian supports specifically the international humanitarian organizations and share operational experiences. Concerns such as communication, access, transportations, banking system, the massive humanitarian needs in the Tigray region and the limited funding opportunities have been major areas of discourse for this forum.

### ***Operation coordination cell (OCC)***

This coordination cell was in the process of being formed by the time this study was being finalized. According to national officer from UNOCHA, the Operation Coordination Cell aim to identify methods of strengthening the interaction between UN/ Military/Local forces and humanitarian operators; while delivering services to the people in need of provision. The officer adds that this coordination cell creates the chance of recognizing limitations or concerns to humanitarian agencies and elucidates misunderstandings. This coordination platform would channel all information related to security focusing on access, movements, and specific locations in the Tigray region.

The coordination cell would comprise senior officials who are based and function in Tigray, representatives from UNDSS, UNOCHA, WFP, Area Security Management Focal Points (UNICEF in this case) and one focal person from the international non-governmental organizations. The proposal was that the Operation Coordination Cell would be co-chaired by UNDSS and UNOCHA with meeting regularity of once per week. Until this research was compiled, this coordination unit was not materialized.

### ***Prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) network***

This network, initiated by experts from Save the Children, aims at mainstreaming the humanitarian supports towards freedom of Sexual Exploitation and Abuses. Professionals from the United National Women (UNW) have latter joined the network and helped for further mainstreaming of the system.

### ***Area security management team meeting***

This meeting is a weekly meeting that occurs between the UN agencies. The area security team assesses the

security situation of the region and share fundamental information with all humanitarian partners on weekly bases.

The area security podium had WhatsApp and SMS platforms through which it shares basic security events to all partners. This information had helped UN agencies and humanitarian organizations plan their daily movements.

There is no non-UN organization in this team except the lead of the Tigray Humanitarian Non-governmental Organizations (HINGO). By the time this study was conducted, however, an idea of adding a security expert from humanitarian organizations was initiated, at least two experts from two organizations to attend the area security team meetings.

### ***Camp coordination and camp coordination cluster-CCCM***

The CCCM cluster is mandated to coordinate the IDP camp establishments. It is one of the lately formed clusters. The cluster lead assigned by IOM. Among other activities, this cluster would physically improve the existing IDP sites, site planning, maintenance, and improvement, engage other partners in the management of camps, capacity building of implementing partners, provision of protection and services to the needy people (UNOCHA, 2021c). However, the cluster had zero percent funding for the period of May to June 2021 (UNOCHA, 2021c).

### ***Emergency telecommunication cluster***

This cluster was officially established by the end of May to support the humanitarian response in Tigray. By the time this study was concluded, this cluster had not even hold its first meeting. Perhaps it will have a weekly meeting like other meetings. The specific contribution of this cluster to the humanitarian operation has not been explored.

### ***Coordination meeting in Shire town of Tigray***

In addition to the coordination efforts being made in Mekelle (capital of the Tigray region), it has been learned that there is another coordination platform in Shire town (capital of the Northwestern zone of Tigray). This inter-agency coordination meeting has been there even before the war happened as many of the agencies involved in this coordination process were those that were supporting the Eritrean refugees in the camps in Tigray. Before the crisis, the coordination meeting in Shire was chaired by the Agency for Refugees and Returnees Administration (counterpart from the Government of Ethiopia) and co-chaired by UNHCR. After the crisis,

however, an expert from National Disaster Risk Management Commission, with the support of UNOCHA is handling the coordination process. The contribution of UNHCR remains vigorous. Sectoral meetings were also active every week in which sector leaders have been assigned based on their sector implementation specialization. The entire cluster meetings occurring at Mekelle level have sub-regional cluster coordination meeting at Shire level.

### **Challenges of the Humanitarian Assistance in Tigray**

This study has identified four major challenges that are hindered the humanitarian intervention in the Tigray region. These encounters include access challenges resulted from the dynamic security situation, operational limits, bureaucratic procedures, and funding limitations.

#### **Access**

The fundamental challenge of the humanitarian assistance in the Tigray region remains access restrictions because of the volatile security condition. Delivery of emergency response assistance to significant parts of the region was not possible for almost five months. However, recent changes in government procedures are making it easier for humanitarians to access Tigray that with prior notice to the Federal Government's Ministry of Peace, humanitarian organizations can access Tigray (MoP)<sup>39</sup>. At least the cargo movement and visits of humanitarian workers from elsewhere to Tigray has improved, the movement within Tigray remains fragile though. The statement from the Office of the Prime Minister, however, has publicly stated that any media wishing to attempt to move to areas where ENDF has not stationed would take risks on their own<sup>40</sup>. This implies that there are locations where the Ethiopian National Defense Force has not controlled, hence not accessed even for the humanitarian assistance.

What made it more complex was the availability of multiple actors in the areas threatening the safety and security and limiting access to humanitarian assistance. As publicly being narrated and reported, these groups include Tigray Defense Forces, Eritrean Forces, and Amhara Special Forces in Western, North Western and Southern zones<sup>41</sup>. Almost the whole of Tigray was either partially accessible or hard to reach area. As of May 31, only some of the major towns mainly Mekelle, Wukro, Adigrat, Axum, Adwa, Shire, Adi-Daero and Shiraro were reported to be accessible. Yet, the roads to these towns remain partially inaccessible<sup>42</sup>.

#### **Operational**

According to a key-informant from UNOCHA, the

humanitarian assistance in the Tigray region is unique in term of several issues out of which the complete downfall of the functioning government was the major one<sup>43</sup>. In other emergency situations in Ethiopia, government has always been the counterpart for the smooth humanitarian responses. In the Tigray case, however, the structure of the former government has been totally collapsed and that newly assigned interim administration has only senior officials at regional and zonal level, the informant added. Although it has been tried in some districts, the assignment of Woreda administrators has not been successful until this study was concluded. The capacity of those being assigned is also questionable, as qualified people are not willing to work for the interim administration for safety and blame and shame reasons, as observed by the researcher. Operationally, the closure of banking system in significant portion of Tigray towns, unavailability of transportation service, shutdown of communication and electricity for more than four months have significantly challenged, if not aggravated the humanitarian supports, according to regional manager of one INGO.

### **Bureaucracy**

Initially, there were bureaucratic hassles in denying/ delaying approval of humanitarian workers visit and cargo travels that significantly affected the humanitarian operations in the Tigray region. These rejections were made by the Federal authorities at Addis Ababa level and by military commanders at the major roads within Tigray. The rationality was that the government would not be responsible for any risks on the travelers. However, even for those who wanted to take the risks, the administrative refusals were strong. Administratively, according to expert from the interim administration, the procurement procedures for the purchase of items needed for the emergency response for the interim administration and perhaps the non- government organizations have played significant effects. Accountability issues, while transporting food and nonfood items to local areas has been a serious concern as there have been manifestation of people from the interim administration manipulating the aid resources, the respondent added. The unavailability of police and justice system opens a gate to such manipulations by irresponsible individuals.

### **Funding**

Given the fact that humanitarian needs in the Tigray region were greatly massive, the required funding to alleviate these needs was huge. All sector cluster coordination meetings state the funding challenges as a stern matter. Affirming that there are millions of people in Tigray that need humanitarian assistance, the Tigray

regions response plan declared that there is a financial requirement of USD 853 million with a funding gap of 55.6% (UNOCHA, 2021c). From this percentage, USD 197 million is the outstanding gap for the period of May to July 2021 (UNOCHA, 2021b). The chair of the emergency coordination center in one of the weekly meeting stated that Tigray is not, as expected, receiving the international community's support through the UN system. He officially requested UNOCHA to help coordinate the funding process.

In addition to the above elaborated challenges, lack of clarity on the number and high influx rate of internally displaced people, inconsistent data of IDP, the confusing responsibility of cluster lead government bureaus versus the sector they are leading, and the continues looting by the Eritrean troops in the case of medical and food items, affected the humanitarian assistance as mentioned by many of the key-informants. The continued conflict was also affecting the humanitarian assistance as fighting kept happening here and there, as spoken by the regional police commission in one of the weekly meetings.

### **Conclusion**

The researcher has learned that there were several coordination meetings happed in the Tigray humanitarian crisis. The required sectoral and managerial meetings were already occurring. However, the coordination platform stands at Mekelle and Shire only. Although there are hundreds of thousands in these two areas especially at Shire, there were millions of IDPs in the remaining parts of Tigray. Hence, observation of the researcher stands on the fact that the coordination procedures were not scaled up to levels required to respond to the needs. Moreover, limitation in working with an integrated approach has been observed. There have been situations in which partners distributed food without nonfood items that forced people to sell part of their rations to procure nonfood items, after which other partners came with nonfood items when the people already had come out of food items.

The number of humanitarian actors was very high. Several international and national NGOs and UN agencies were found to have operational presences in the Tigray crisis. But the humanitarian assistance being delivered was certainly less than required. Soon after the power shift, the interim administration and federal government were involved in supporting the humanitarian assistance delivery process. The support from government structures, however, was not to the required level.

The humanitarian crisis just happened in quite a short period giving less time for a prediction. The people of Tigray had experienced multiple shocks. There has been a serious desert locust crisis and the harvest of the

previous season was not collected properly because of the conflict. During the conflict, livestock's were looted, permanent trees were cut, and above all, the people were prohibited from ploughing their lands in a significant portion of Tigray. The above multiple shocks, unless solved, would certainly result in serious food shortage, and continue to cost the lives of many civilians residing in the Tigray region of Ethiopia.

Trying to alleviate the root cause of the humanitarian crisis through all possible ways, the researcher suggests more integrated relief works from all concerned organs. Moreover, short-term and medium-term recovery and rehabilitation supports need to be prearranged.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The researcher attended the emergency response coordination meetings representing a humanitarian INGO. The writing of this article does not represent the organization and that the NGO is not responsible for the information or the impact thereof. This study merely has a scientific purpose of updating the academic and humanitarian audiences.

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4. Interview, regional head of an International Non-Governmental Organization, Mekelle, 16 February 2021.
5. The figure of the humanitarian actors includes those that have completed or ongoing activities in the seven months. Organization, having a presence in Tigray, with plans to do humanitarian activities are not considered.
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7. Ibid.
8. One Qintal is equal to 100 kilograms.
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11. Interview, an expert from the Tigray Emergency Preparedness and Response Directorate involved in the food distribution process, Mekelle, 14 February 2021.
12. Interview, a 48-year-old Woman, Maichew, 15 March 2021. She herself have moved from Neksege to Maichew to collect her food ration but has not returned in fear of the continued fighting in her area.
13. Interview, a 36-year-old man, Shire, 03 May 2021. Having a family of size of four, he has received food only once in five months of his stay in Shire town
14. Interview, an expert from Tigray Emergency Preparedness and Response Directorate, Mekelle, 21 February 2021.
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16. According to the weekly report of the food cluster, 28 May 2021, excluding the Woredas controlled by Amara special forces, Nekesege, Bora, Adiet, Hahayle, Wajirat/Bahritseba, Seharti, Samer, Egela, Hawzien, Werqamba, Nebelet, Edaga-Arbi, Enda-mehoni/rural kebeles, Asegede, and Zana were areas to which food could not dispatched or distributed.
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