Tigray reviewed: Northern Ethiopia and the failure of the humanitarian collective (2020-2023)

Expert meeting

24 June 2024, The Hague
Summary report

The international UN-led humanitarian system failed to protect the civilian population in Northern Ethiopia (Tigray, Afar and Amhara), during their humanitarian response between November 2020 and April 2023. This is the indisputable conclusion of the independent evaluation performed by HERE Geneva. HERE-Geneva was contracted by the Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHE) Steering Group[1] to execute the evaluation which was published in early June 2024.

The world witnessed large-scale sexual violence and civilians dying of starvation, as humanitarian personnel were arrested, detained and tortured. The Ethiopian federal government was highly effective at blocking aid; at the same time, UN Agencies underperformed due to a lack of leadership in the response and an absence of clear reporting lines and accountability.

These critical constructive conclusions that have been produced as part of the HERE conducted evaluation (based on 186 interviews, 44 focus group discussions and extensive document reviews) need careful reflection by the humanitarian sector. All the more, as we witness in Sudan similar challenges that prevent the humanitarian sector from building an adequate response. **Ed Schenkenberg**, director of HERE-Geneva and leader of the evaluation team, presented the main conclusions and recommendations from the IAHE report, after which there was an open discussion with participants of the meeting.

An IASC System-Wide Scale-Up[2] was activated for northern Ethiopia on 28 April 2021, then extended to cover any part of Ethiopia as of 2 November 2022, and was subsequently deactivated on 2 October 2023.
For the evaluation of this scale-up, the following points were taken into the Terms of Reference (TOR).

- **The temporal scope of the evaluation**: Early November 2020 (start of conflict) - 1 April 2023 (start of data collection for this evaluation). The scope was extended until April 2023 because

---

[1] The Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation is an independent assessment of whether collective results achieved in response to an emergency meet the objectives stated in the Strategic Response Plan and the needs of affected people (IASC).

[2] An IASC Scale-Up activation or a Humanitarian System-Wide Scale-Up Activation is a system-wide mobilisation in response to a sudden-onset, or significantly deteriorating, humanitarian crisis, where the capacity to lead, coordinate and deliver assistance and protection does not match the scale, complexity and urgency of the crisis (IASC, 2018).
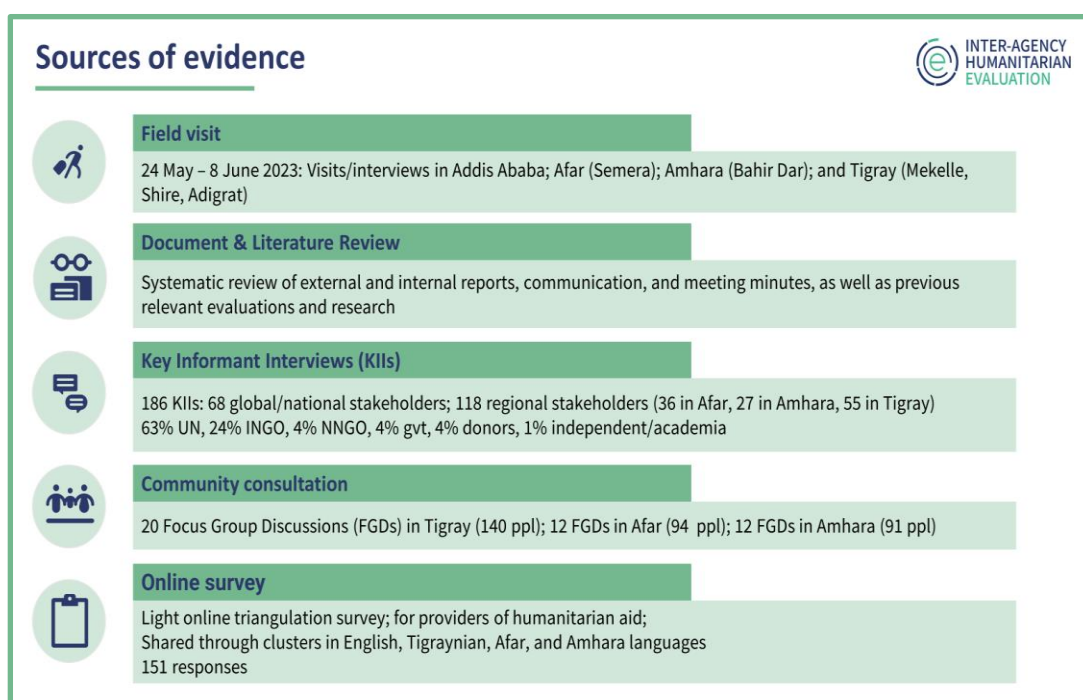
it was expected that after the fighting stopped, a lot of humanitarian aid would be needed and could be implemented.

- **Main objective**: To provide an independent assessment of the UN-led collective humanitarian response in three Northern regions.
- **Five lines of inquiry**
1. <u>Scale-Up</u>: To what extent were the objectives of the IASC Scale-Up met?
2. <u>Humanitarian Access</u>: To what extent did the collective response support HC-led efforts to obtain free, timely, safe, and unimpeded humanitarian access?
3. <u>Coordination and working collectively</u>: To what extent did the response see collective leadership and coordination?
4. <u>Needs and data</u>: To what extent was independent humanitarian data available and used to underpin the response?
5. <u>Coverage and delivery</u>: To what extent did the collective response effectively deliver quality humanitarian assistance and protection?

Typically humanitarian evaluations focus primarily on coverage and delivery (point 5). However, due to the Federal Government's blockade and siege on aid, it was evident that minimal assistance reached the population, hampering the humanitarian community's ability to respond effectively, and for this reason, emphasis was put on reviewing the collective actions of humanitarian agencies in addressing the access constraints. The Federal Government's obstacles included denial of access, refusal to issue travel permits, and withholding of visas. These impediments significantly impacted the fifth point of coverage and delivery.

Ed Schenkenberg explained that both external and internal circumstances influence humanitarian aid. External factors, such as the government's obstacles, are beyond the humanitarian sector's control. In contrast, internal factors are within the sector's influence and can act as either enablers or obstacles. In the case of Ethiopia, the evaluation places great emphasis on these internal factors, specifically the first four points listed.

Sources of evidence

Sources of evidence

INTER-AGENCY HUMANITARIAN EVALUATION

Field visit
24 May – 8 June 2023: Visits/interviews in Addis Ababa; Afar (Semera); Amhara (Bahir Dar); and Tigray (Mekelle, Shire, Adigrat)

Document & Literature Review
Systematic review of external and internal reports, communication, and meeting minutes, as well as previous relevant evaluations and research

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)
186 KIIs: 68 global/national stakeholders; 118 regional stakeholders (36 in Afar, 27 in Amhara, 55 in Tigray)
63% UN, 24% INGO, 4% NNGO, 4% gvt, 4% donors, 1% independent/academia

Community consultation
20 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) in Tigray (140 ppl); 12 FGDs in Afar (94 ppl); 12 FGDs in Amhara (91 ppl)

Online survey
Light online triangulation survey; for providers of humanitarian aid;
Shared through clusters in English, Tigraynian, Afar, and Amhara languages
151 responses

Conclusions

After listing the sources of evidence, Ed continued elaborating on the conclusions of the report, again focusing on the internal factors. These factors were within the control of the UN agencies.

1. **The Scale-Up was unsuccessful for several reasons**: It was found that not all agencies shared the same understanding of what it means to work with a humanitarian mindset, nor did they consistently follow its principles. A number of agencies collaborated closely with the Federal Government, which was involved in the conflict, compromising their independence and risking the instrumentalisation of aid. Additionally, the evaluation found significant variations in the speed at which UN agencies mobilised their capacities and responded to needs.

2. **The Humanitarian Access**: Shortly after the conflict began, the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), chaired by the Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator (RC/HC), established certain thresholds and benchmarks for negotiating access, documented in a collective agreement. This collective strategy was swept aside when the HC signed a separate agreement with the Federal Government that significantly deviated from the original document and granted the government substantial control over humanitarian access in Tigray. In addition, it was also found that the UN system did not sufficiently uphold the duty of care. While staff were harassed, arbitrarily detained arrested and tortured, the UN remains mostly silent.

3. **Coordination and working collectively failed from the start:** The coordination at the national level was weak. The global level provided insufficient oversight as the Humanitarian Country Team was dysfunctional: it did not serve as a forum for policy dialogue and strategic decisions, and there was no mutual accountability guided by collective leadership.

4. **Needs and Data**: Previous issues found by an IAHE in 2019 in relation to questions on the reliability of data covering numbers of People in Need were unresolved. Humanitarian data in the public domain have been vetted by the Government impacting ion the independent character of the data.
   - The humanitarian community was complacent concerning publishing up-to-date, independently-collected humanitarian data.
   - The dominance of food aid data in Ethiopia has overshadowed other sectors, particularly protection.

5. **Limited coverage and delivery:** especially with regards to response to Gender-based violations (GBV), or conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV).
   Although, as said before, the limited coverage and delivery are mostly due to the restrictions and obstructions set by the government, the non-alignment of the UN agencies did not contribute to its capacity to address these factors.

Recommendations: Global level

1. **A coherent system-wide strategy.**
- Leveraging the collective weight of the UN system. As a collective unified UN, you have a better position to put pressure on a government.
- Alignment of pre-existing UN programs with core humanitarian principles and protection standards: Some agencies that had development programs did not want to put their programs at risk, and worked through the government, which goes directly against the principle of independence.
- Clear thresholds (red lines) for a principled response.

2. **Real-time monitoring of HC/HCT performance**
- Timely identification/resolution of any emergent leadership/coordination deficits
- Appoint a dedicated Humanitarian Coordinator.
- Update the 2009 HC Terms of Reference (a reference to HCT and mutual accountability)
3. **Address the gap between political-level negotiations and humanitarian access negotiations at the operational level.**
- Agreements made at senior political levels must be transparent, consistent with humanitarian norms and be implemented at the operational level. Ed explained that there was a complete disconnect between the outcomes of high-level meetings in the capital, and what was known on the ground.

Recommendations: Country level
1. **Enhance the effectiveness of the HCT**
- Review the purpose, structure, and value of the Humanitarian Country Team (including NGOs and donors at the table).
2. **Implement the centrality of protection commitment**
- Protection and rights must be part of the main narrative
- Call for putting an end to the impunity of the perpetrators of CRSV
3. **Enhance the approaches to gathering, processing, and disseminating data**
- Publish independently collected and analysed humanitarian data
4. **Develop a comprehensive advocacy strategy for principled humanitarian action**
- Go beyond the binary choice between public messaging and discreet diplomacy
5. **Enhance the preparedness and the implementation of a principled response during the armed conflict in Ethiopia.**
- (Re)assign cluster leadership; activate the Surveillance System for Attacks on Health Care; ensure legal review of agreements with warring parties; put in place duty of care arrangements

Discussion
After this presentation of the evaluation report, the room was opened for dialogue and questions. Following are several points of the discussion.
The report was mainly focused on the collective performance led by UN agencies. However, the issue was raised if NGOs operated differently and more autonomously and if they could have played a different role. Ed explained that to an extent, nonalignment was also seen between NGOs. There was a division between principled humanitarian NGOs and those who worked more closely with the government. However, importantly, some NGOs were forced to stop operating after they voiced concerns: In July 2021, the Dutch section of Médecins Sans Frontières, the Norwegian Refugee Council and the Al Maktoum Foundation were suspended, allegedly for violating certain rules.

Moreover, the question was raised on how the designation of persona non grata[3] has impacted the operational space for humanitarian actors and donor representatives. How can they advocate for a principled approach while simultaneously avoiding the risk of being declared a persona non grata? In response, Ed emphasised that there is no binary choice between speaking out and antagonising a party

---

[3] A diplomat who is asked by the host country to be recalled to their home country.

to the conflict or staying silent about the conduct of hostilities to remain in the country. *"We need to be much smarter in navigating the space between staying silent and being on the barricades [taking a confrontational stance],"* he said. This includes being aligned on finding the balance between working behind the scenes and applying pressure by speaking out. The evaluation saw that such alignment was lacking. The non-alignment between agencies only make it easier for the government to exploit these divisions.

A response to this was then expressed, that although some organisations have spoken out, there is not always enough room for an organisation to manoeuvre and speak out publicly, questioning what an effective advocacy strategy for humanitarian organisations would then look like. Responding to this this comment, Ed Schenkenberg noted that there are no easy answers but that fear for being expelled should not lead to silence or acquiescence. He said that no agency voiced concerns about specific hostilities or the issue of impunity in the country, simply because it was not within their scope of work.

Furthermore, in the discussion, the lack of institutional nonalignment was again highlighted. Country directors serve as representatives of their respective institutional lines. Within the organisations, there was a lack of clarity on how to apply and interpret the principles. Without a clear understanding of these principles and other institutional norms and mandates, negotiating for access becomes exceedingly difficult. Moreover, at the regional level, country directors are evaluated based on their actions for their organisation, not for the collective. It was added that there was a lack of leadership, and the question was raised of how much careerism could have played a role in the failure of the system.

Ed concluded the session by emphasising that the UN humanitarian system was intended to function as an interdependent ecosystem with extensive interaction, but it failed in this context. The decisions made by one agency in collaboration with the host government directly impacted the operations of other agencies, highlighting the significant interdependence among them. Additionally, in Ethiopia, as seen in other contexts, when conflict erupts, the international community often physically withdraws, leaving national and local actors in extremely vulnerable positions. Considering this, whatever our concept of a humanitarian system is, it must incorporate more solidarity and foster better collective action.

Other than the IAHE steering group and the management group for this evaluation (UN) who approved of the report, there has been no response to the evaluation yet from the operational side of the UN or the IASC.

To read Ed's article in the New Humanitarian, please click on this link: [The UN-led response in Ethiopia was a failure. It's time for accountability](#) (published 5 June 2024).
To read the whole IAHE report, please click on this link: [Inter-agency humanitarian evaluation of the response to the crisis in Northern Ethiopia](#) (published 3 June 2024).