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Displacement and humanitarian response in Ethiopia: challenges and dilemmas in complex crises



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Contents

5	Executive summary
5	Crisis in Gedeo and West Guji
6	Crisis in Benishangul Gumuz and Oromia Region
7	Internal and external constraints
9	Introduction
9	Methodology
10	Setting the scene: displacement crises in Ethiopia in a changing political context
13	Case Study. Displacement in Gedeo and West Guji
13	A brief history of the crisis
22	Case study. A less visible crisis: the case of East and West Wellega, and Benishangul Gumuz
27	A look at the constraints to humanitarian response
27	A. A “resilience” or “nexus” brake?
30	B. Operational set-up and response modalities of the Ethiopian humanitarian complex
36	C. A question of funding?
39	D. Needs on the ground vs. targeting from the “top”
41	E. Targeting of assistance
43	F. Humanitarian positioning on return processes
46	G. A matter of insecurity or security management?
50	Concluding remarks

Executive summary

Conflict-related displacement is nothing new in Ethiopia, but since the end of 2017 the number of people internally displaced by violence has risen significantly. As a result, the humanitarian community – including MSF – has suddenly found itself needing to adapt and scale up its response to meet the acute needs in conflict-driven crises.

This report looks at two examples of conflict-related displacement crises that occurred in 2018: the crisis in Gedeo and West Guji Zones that started in April 2018, and the violence in the Kamashi Zone in Benishangul Gumuz Region in September 2018. Based on interviews with over 50 humanitarian workers and decision-makers involved in both responses, it examines how humanitarian needs on the ground were assessed and met by the different actors and what some of the key dilemmas or constraints towards an effective response were.

CRISIS IN GEDEO AND WEST GUJI

The crisis started in April 2018. Inter-communal tensions between Gedeo and West Guji Zones escalated and then peaked at the end of May 2018 when renewed violence displaced more than 800,000 individuals across the two zones.

In contrast to previous conflict-related crises, in June 2018, the Ethiopian Government rapidly identified needs on the ground and facilitated access to the area for humanitarian actors. The humanitarian community reacted to the call and a large-scale response was mounted.

In August 2018 however, external factors started to heavily influence the response. Authorities publicly announced that peace-making efforts between the communities and authorities in Gedeo and West Guji had reached a successful conclusion and that Internally Displaced People (IDPs) could finally return home. Despite reassurances given regarding the voluntary nature of the return process, humanitarian workers raised concerns about events and practices on the ground, which posed severe dilemmas on how to direct the response.

In Gedeo Zone, a pattern of systematically targeting aid by status rather than needs emerged, with relief items and food exclusively distributed to individuals registered as IDPs. This was combined with the substantial exclusion of displaced individuals from West Guji from beneficiary lists.

In West Guji, the situation of IDPs returning home was also a source of concern: in many cases, individuals were unable to return to their housing — because of destruction or security concerns — and often found themselves in secondary displacement sites, living in public buildings deprived of basic services. Moreover, substantial reports of biases in targeting and penalising the returning IDP community started to emerge, once again challenging the effective delivery of relief to the most affected population.

Caught in this situation, IDPs often found themselves moving between different Zones and between host communities and collective sites in search of services, aid, and security. This led to a substantial deterioration of the humanitarian situation. In March 2019, when reports of malnutrition among the IDP community started to emerge from social and international media, a change in the authorities' attitude was witnessed, which led to the long-awaited re-opening of access to the Gedeo Zone to provide support to displaced communities. Whether this leads to a drastic change of pace and strategy in the handling of the crisis is yet to be seen at the moment of drafting this report.

CRISIS IN BENISHANGUL GUMUZ AND OROMIA REGION

While the political and humanitarian focus was on Gedeo and West Guji, other displacement crises unfolded across Ethiopia. At the end of September 2018, inter-communal clashes in the Kamashi Zone of Benishangul Gumuz Region in the west of the country resulted in the displacement of 250,000 people.

Despite the obvious need for humanitarian relief, the humanitarian community was already struggling to respond in Gedeo and West Guji and was unable to react rapidly, something almost all interviewed humanitarian workers recognised.

Moreover, political and military tensions between Government authorities and opposition groups contributed to a perception of high insecurity, further delaying humanitarian intervention. A response plan was only made public at the end of December 2018, three months after the onset of population displacement.

Eventually, a response to the crisis started to materialise in early 2019. However, it was implemented at varying pace depending on geographical areas. As of early April 2019, virtually no humanitarian actor was yet present in the Kamashi Zone of Benishangul Gumuz, the initial epicentre of the crisis.

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL CONSTRAINTS

Both crises highlight a number of internal and external challenges for humanitarian response to meet conflict-driven needs in Ethiopia.

External challenges were numerous. Conflict-related displacement crises are political by nature and access, aid allocation, and population movements were heavily influenced by political agendas, over which humanitarian actors have very little influence. Dilemmas on if and how to engage in certain scenarios, in particular in “return areas” in which the safety of IDPs were at stake were particularly complex.

However, there were also a number of internal hurdles and limitations within the Ethiopian humanitarian community itself, including perverse incentives and shortcomings, which, when intertwined with the contextual challenges, posed significant obstacles to an effective humanitarian response.

First of all, the humanitarian system in Ethiopia has been mostly geared towards drought response for many years, operating within a strategic framework shaped by the so-called “nexus” that promotes the use of humanitarian resources to address longer-term needs and focuses on capacity-building of Government systems rather than direct aid delivery.

Whether it was intentional or not, the push towards “ending humanitarian needs” has had some very tangible consequences on how current needs are met. Insisting on rapidly seeking “sustainable solutions” seems to have led to downplaying the prioritisation of rapid response to meet acute needs; or, at least, to have provided political actors with enough material to portray the latter as a driver of “aid dependency”.

The prevailing policies, mostly positioning humanitarian partners as supporters of Government-led service provision, seem to have also legitimised practices on the ground that marginalise the role humanitarian organisations play in critical areas such as beneficiaries’ targeting. This can have dire consequences when it comes to meeting the needs of the affected population as well as on the humanitarian community’s perceived impartiality.

More broadly, this framework seems to have heavily influenced the operational modalities of many humanitarian actors, who have made rather limited investments to increase their capacity to respond to complex crises. This can be seen in the profiles of staff employed as well as overall strategic orientation, geographic focus, and modus operandi. With large numbers of actors strongly focused on longer-term objectives in areas deemed a priority for drought recovery, engagement in conflict-affected crises required a substantial change of gear and mind-set not easily achievable within the tight time frame of rapid-onset disasters. Moreover, the costs of these adjustments, not just in terms of resources but also in re-framing engagement with authorities, may be high for organisations legitimately wanting to protect their longer-term investments.

The reflex for access negotiations and security management also seems to have endured a substantial loss. Adapting to work effectively in conflict scenarios with multiple political and armed actors on the ground has been feasible only for a few humanitarian actors able to mobilise staff with this type of expertise. As a consequence, long delays in assistance, such as in Western Oromia and Benishangul Gumuz, have been reported due to high-risk perception.

The above elements are legitimately perceived as constraints by agencies, based on their modus operandi in Ethiopia for years. Yet, they also represent a humanitarian eco-system struggling to respond to non-predictable crises, focusing more on systems rather than people.

On-going reforms provide a window of opportunity for creatively rethinking current working methods. There is momentum to adapt the humanitarian set-up to a new context, asserting the value added by the humanitarian community well beyond funds mobilisation. Identifying different operational strategies and modalities of intervention would not provide a solution to all the challenges and dilemmas linked to humanitarian assistance to IDPs in Ethiopia. But increasing capacity and adapting operational frameworks to respond more effectively to complex crises are, at least, choices that are in the hands of the humanitarian community itself. Quick decisions are however needed to avoid turning this window into a missed opportunity.

Introduction

This report examines the humanitarian response to two conflict-related displacement crises in Ethiopia: large-scale displacement in Gedeo and West Guji Zones, in the south of the country, which started in April 2018, and displacement along the border between Benishangul Gumuz and Oromia Regions, which started in September 2018.

This report aims to offer insight into the operationalisation of humanitarian action in Ethiopia by answering some key questions related to the modalities and timing with which needs on the ground are assessed and covered, and by highlighting the key dilemmas that the humanitarian community faced during recent crises. The report does not aim to provide an operational evaluation of the response.

These case studies were chosen for two reasons. Firstly because they were responses in which MSF has invested significant operational resources and possesses the first-hand experience needed to inform the report. Secondly, the magnitude, complexity, and duration of the crises allows for a level of analysis that could be usefully extrapolated to reflect more broadly on emergency response to complex crises across Ethiopia. This is most notably the case for the crisis in Gedeo and West Guji, which saw high numbers of humanitarian actors involved and able to share their insights both on the early phase of the response and on the protracted issues witnessed in the area.

METHODOLOGY

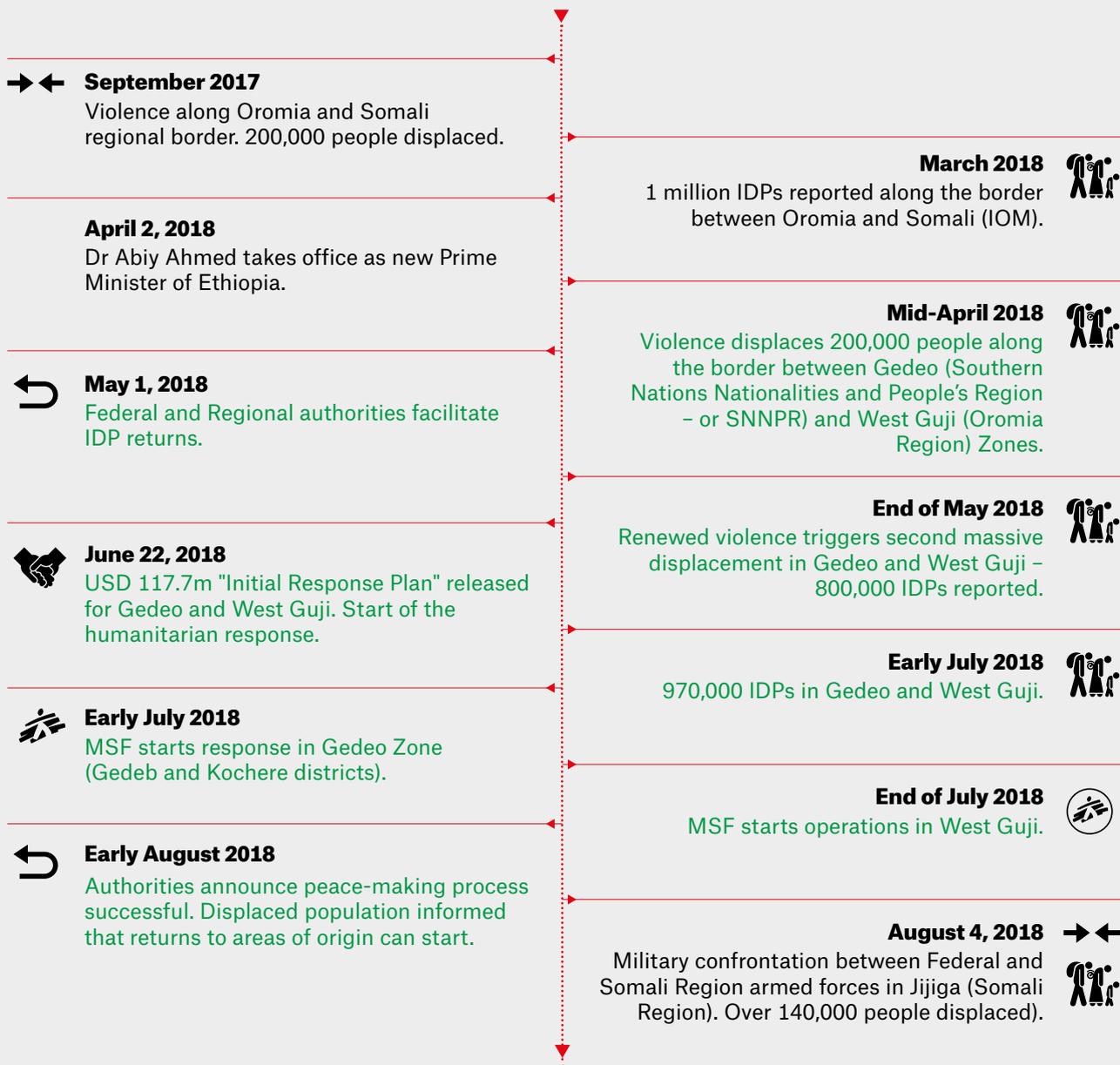
The findings of the report are based on two months of research, including a desk review of relevant documentation (analytical and operational) and semi-structured interviews conducted in Addis Ababa, Nairobi, and East and West Wallega with over 50 humanitarian workers and decision-makers involved in one or both responses.

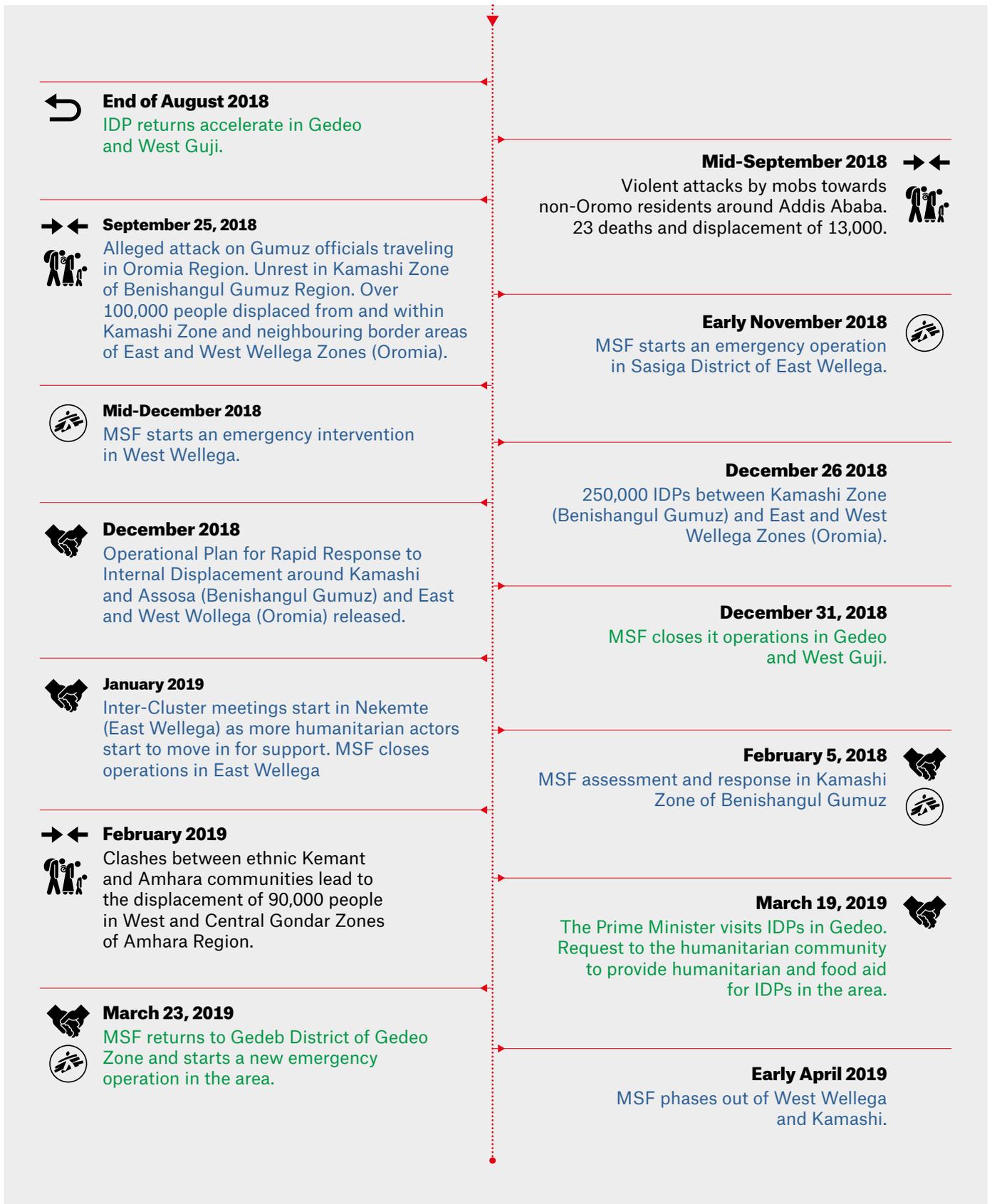
Setting the scene: displacement crises in Ethiopia in a changing political context

TIMELINE OF KEY EVENTS

● Gedeo and West Guji ● Benishangul and Wallegas

 Conflict flashpoint	 People returning	 MSF activity
 Displacement	 Humanitarian response	 MSF specific response





The number of people newly displaced by conflict in Ethiopia rose from 296,000 in 2016 to 1.7 million in 2018

Internal displacement is not a new phenomenon in Ethiopia, but since the end of 2016, conflict-related displacement has risen dramatically across the country. The number of people newly displaced by conflict within the country rose from 296,000 in 2016 to 1.7 million in 2018.¹

This increase is mainly linked to the escalation of violence along ethnic lines.² This trend, though not completely new as it was already observed in the 1990s, has however accelerated in the last three years.

These episodes of violence have been taking place in a context of major shifts within the Ethiopian political system. Massive anti-Government demonstrations, which started in Amhara and Oromia Region in 2015,³ led to continuous popular discontent, demonstrations, and civil unrest across the country. After unsuccessfully pursuing a repressive policy, with the declaration and repeated extension of a country-wide State of Emergency,⁴ tensions emerged in the Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF, the ruling party in the country) and among its different regional constituencies and affiliated parties. This finally led to the resignation of Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn in February 2018,⁵ and the nomination of Dr Abiy Ahmed as Head of Government on April 2nd.

Against the backdrop of ambitious political reforms, violence has escalated along ethnic lines

The new leadership has since embarked on an ambitious reforms programme, responding to popular requests for an expanded political space. Immediately after taking office, the Government revoked the on-going State of Emergency, freed a large number of political prisoners, and allowed actors previously labelled as “terrorists”⁶ to return to the political stage.

While these highly welcomed steps were being taken, significant episodes of violence along ethnic lines worsened. Many of these had started before the new Government took office, but this trend continued throughout 2018 and into 2019.⁷

Faced with a new scenario of rapid-onset displacement crises with high numbers of IDPs, Government authorities and humanitarian organisations found themselves needing to develop different response approaches.⁸

¹ International Organization of Migration, ‘Round 14 Displacement Tracking Matrix: November to December 2018’. Available at: <https://displacement.iom.int/system/tdf/reports/DTM%20R14%20National%20Dashboard.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=4980>

² In recent years, Ethiopia seems to have been witnessing a transformation of its conflict dynamics, moving from localised communal disputes over resources (water, land), occasionally generating displacement, into more widespread, politicized conflicts for which traditional peace-making mechanisms have shown their limitations. See, for example: Simon Richards and Gezu Bekele, ‘Conflict in the Somali Region of Ethiopia: Can Education promote Peace-building?’, Tufts University (2011).

³ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/04/02/ethiopia-abiys-first-year-prime-minister-review-freedom-assembly>

⁴ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/10/ethiopia-declares-state-emergency-protests-161009110506730.html>; <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/feb/12/ethiopia-state-of-emergency-anger-oromo-people>

⁵ For an in-depth analysis of the transition see: International Crisis Group, “Managing Ethiopia’s Unsettled Transition”, February 2019.

⁶ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/06/ethiopia-olf-onlf-ginbot-7-terror-list-180630110501697.html>

⁷ <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/DTM%20R10%20Ethiopia%20ND%20%20.pdf>

⁸ A caseload that, as of February 2019, has reached the figure of 2.23 million people, <https://displacement.iom.int/ethiopia>

Case Study. Displacement in Gedeo and West Guji

In mid-April 2018, a wave of violence displaced 200,000 people along the border of Oromia and SNNPR

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CRISIS

1. The first wave of displacement in Gedeo and West Guji

While a historical change in government leadership was taking place in Addis Ababa, a wave of violence in mid-April triggered the displacement of around 200,000 people along the border between the Gedeo (Southern Nations Nationalities and People's Region — or SNNPR) and West Guji (Oromia Region) Zones.⁹

Most IDPs came from Kercha Woreda (District) in West Guji, a district known for its mixed ethnic composition.¹⁰ Gedeo and Guji communities had experienced tensions in the past, with significant episodes of violence.¹¹ Yet, the exact dynamics and triggers for the large-scale displacement observed in 2018 are not entirely clear.

Caught in a period of political transition, regional and federal authorities held peace-building conferences which led to a quick agreement to “facilitate the return of the IDPs to their respective areas of origin, within two weeks of the displacement”.¹² The swift move, which did not attract any major criticism from the international community, led to the reported return of around 85,000 people to their districts of origin by May 1st. Yet, the situation remained fluid and still undefined at grassroots level, giving limited ground for optimism.¹³

⁹ For more information see: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/conflict_displacement_flash_update_9_may_2018_final.pdf

¹⁰ Discussions with a number of humanitarian workers and UN officials point towards a request by ethnic Gedeo to utilise the Gedeo language in educational establishments in Kercha Woreda as a trigger for the conflict, yet this could not be officially confirmed.

¹¹ For a more in-depth historical analysis, see: Asebe Regassa Debelo, *Ethnicity and Inter-ethnic Relations: the 'Ethiopian Experiment' and the case of the Guji and Gedeo*, University of Tromsø (2007).

¹² https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/conflict_displacement_flash_update_9_may_2018_final.pdf

¹³ As OCHA expressed in a carefully-worded public Flash Update on the displacement: “As of 21 April, nearly 46,000 IDPs have reportedly been returned from West Guji zone, while nearly 39,000 IDPs have reportedly been returned from Gedeo zone as of 1 May. The location of these IDPs is currently not ascertained, and most are believed to be moving back to Gedeo zone. Some IDPs who have not yet been returned are also reported to be moving-in with host communities presumably fearing return and/or inadequate assistance in displacement sites.”

¹⁴ See: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ethiopia_-_west_guji-gedeo_conflict_displacement_-_flash_update_06_june_2018d_0.pdf; also: <https://www.nrc.no/news/2018/september/they-burned-down-our-house/>

¹⁵ 818,000 individuals is the figure provided by government authorities and humanitarian partners in the Response Plan to Internal Displacement around Gedeo (SNNPR) and West Guji (Oromia); of these, 642,152.

FIGURE 1. MAP OF GEDEO AND WEST GUJI ZONES, ETHIOPIA



During the crisis, humanitarian presence and assistance in the affected areas was limited, and reduced further as people started returning to their areas of origin. Many humanitarian actors, including MSF, weren't involved at this stage.

2. Massive wave of displacement in May 2018 and start of the humanitarian response

From the end of May onwards, renewed violence displaced up to 970,000 people and in June the Ethiopian authorities requested international support

Between the end of May and early June, a renewed wave of violence led to a second round of mass displacement. Once again, the extent and magnitude of the violence was never fully understood, although there were reports of widespread civilian deaths, physical abuse, and destruction of property.¹⁴ The number of displaced people increased gradually, with official figures mounting up to over 800,000 in the month of June.¹⁵ As of early July, IOM reported the number having increased to 970,000.¹⁶

¹⁴ See: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ethiopia_-_west_guji-gedeo_conflict_displacement_-_flash_update_06_june_2018d_0.pdf; also: <https://www.nrc.no/news/2018/september/they-burned-down-our-house/>

¹⁵ 818,000 individuals is the figure provided by government authorities and humanitarian partners in the Response Plan to Internal Displacement around Gedeo (SNNPR) and West Guji (Oromia); of these, 642,152 people were displaced within Gedeo Zone, and 176,098 within the West Guji Zone, June 22nd. See also: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-violence/violence-in-southern-ethiopia-forces-more-than-800000-to-flee-idUSKBN1JU14W>.

¹⁶ <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/iom-flash-appeal-ethiopia-gedeo-west-guji-jul-dec2018.pdf>

Historically, internal conflicts have been a sensitive issue for the Ethiopian authorities. Access restriction to conflict-affected areas has been far from exceptional.¹⁷ In sharp contrast with this historical record, government authorities were quick to identify humanitarian needs on the ground and to ask for support from the international community. By June 22nd, a “rapid response plan” was drafted and made public.¹⁸

The needs of the affected population were dire, with thousands of families sheltering in inadequate collective sites

Coordination modalities also changed with the establishment of two Emergency Operational Centres (EOC), one in Dilla town (Gedeo Zone) and one in Bule Hora town (West Guji Zone) to coordinate international support. This was the first time that an EOC provided a coordination structure at field level¹⁹ and created a platform to incorporate clusters’ leadership while at the same time bringing Federal authorities (namely, the National Disaster Risk Management Commission, (NDRMC), Zonal administration and humanitarian partners on board. OCHA and Cluster-leading agencies shared a co-chair role in coordination.

By July, the humanitarian response started to materialise on the ground.

By then, the needs of the affected population were dire. Thousands of displaced families without the means to find accommodation within host communities found themselves living in public buildings, often without protection from the cold weather and rain.²⁰ Hygiene conditions in the bigger collective sites were appalling. In the Gedeb district alone, 130,000 IDPs were reportedly sheltered in collective sites.²¹

Despite notable efforts, the speed and type of response varied significantly

The mobilisation of much-needed humanitarian support varied depending on the sectors and organisations. Some initial funding was provided by re-allocating resources already available within the country, while additional funds were still being mobilised. A rapid re-allocation of resources by the US-funded Joint Emergency Operations Program (JEOP) allowed substantial and quick dispatch of much-needed food aid.²²

Despite notable efforts, the speed of deployment and operational modalities varied significantly. While activities such as the delivery or distribution of items from pre-positioned stocks were handled at a more rapid pace, engagement in more expensive and HR-intensive sectors, such as “hardware” WASH activities or protection, took longer to materialise.

¹⁷ <https://www.refworld.org/country,,IDMC,,ETH,,4d932e2128,0.html>

¹⁸ Response Plan to Internal Displacement around Gedeo (SNNPR) and West Guji (Oromia) Zones, June 22nd, 2018.

¹⁹ Previously only used in Addis Ababa, or for natural disasters and epidemics.

²⁰ <https://www.msf.org/nearly-1-million-displaced-people-urgent-need-humanitarian-assistance-southern-ethiopia>

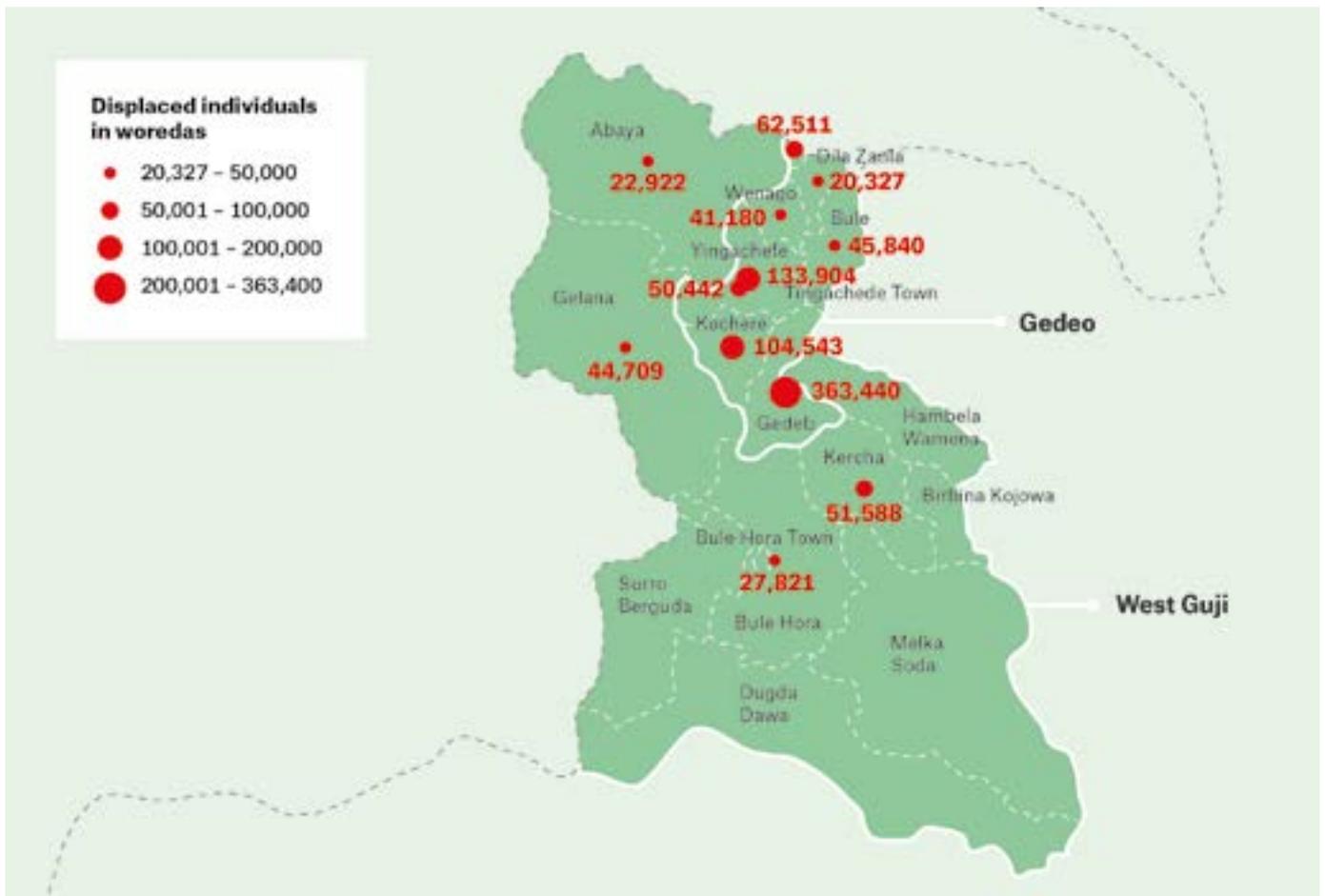
²¹ https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Gedeo%20Site%20Profile%20Report_0_0.pdf

²² See: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/humanitarian_bulletin-16-29_july_2018_final.pdf

Moreover, actors without the pipelines and resources to kick-start activities immediately often underwent a lengthy process of assessments, proposal writings while resources were being mobilised. MSF also took longer than expected to scale up, particularly in West Guji, where a lengthy process of assessments without clear decision-making delayed the start of activities until the end of July.

Notwithstanding the difficulties and uneven pace, the humanitarian response continued mobilising gradually and scaling up throughout July and up to August.

FIGURE 2. NUMBERS OF IDPS IN GEDEO AND WEST GUJI, ETHIOPIA



3. Change of course: the IDPs return process

In early August, the authorities announced a plan to return IDPs to their areas of origin

In early August, a first announcement was made to communicate the successful finalisation of the peace-making process between traditional and administrative leaders of the two Zones, as well as Regional and Federal authorities.²³ Authorities quickly informed the displaced population that they could return to their areas of origin, setting a first indicative deadline on August 8th. This turned out to be the first of a number of deadlines, which became a recurring feature of the crisis up until the writing of this report.

From mid-August IDP returns accelerated and by early September the population in most collective IDP sites had reduced significantly

The announcement was not well received by IDPs in Gedeo, and triggered demonstrations in and around Gedeb town, in Gedeo Zone (the area with the highest number of displaced people) between August 8th and 9th.

Approached at federal level by humanitarian actors requesting clarifications on the announcement and on the proposed return process, authorities reiterated that “all returns will respect humanitarian principles of safety, dignity, voluntariness, and sustainability”.²⁴ Exchanges in Addis Ababa between humanitarian actors and government counterparts seemed to point toward a gradual approach, prioritising the return of IDPs who felt most comfortable moving back to their areas of origin, and reaffirming the need to pursue and even scale up assistance to displaced populations, given the critical gaps reported in life-saving activities.²⁵

Authorities voiced concerns that sustained assistance would create a “pull factor” and increase “aid dependency”

Yet, from mid-August the return process accelerated. By early September, the population in most collective IDP sites had reduced significantly.²⁶ According to the humanitarian workers interviewed, local and federal-level government officials gave different explanations for this speed-up, including²⁷ the risk of major public health hazards, particularly cholera, due to the extremely precarious and overcrowded living conditions of IDPs, as well as the need to re-open schools (most of them being used as temporary hosting sites) with the start of the school year approaching. Authorities often voiced concerns that sustained assistance would create a “pull factor” and increase “aid dependency”, preventing IDPs from returning to

²³ On 28 July 2018, Aba Gadas (traditional leaders) from both West Guji (Oromia) and Gedeo (SNNP) zones convened a peace and reconciliation conference in Gedere Gencha border kebele to address the Gedeo-Guji conflict. The event attended by officials from the Federal government of Ethiopia, the Oromia and SNNP regions, religious leaders and elders reached a consensus to end the ongoing inter-communal violence and return displaced people to their places of origin by 08 August 2018.” OCHA Situation Update, 16-29 July; <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-humanitarian-bulletin-issue-60-16-29-july-2018>

²⁴ https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/humanitarian_bulletin-30_july_-_12_august_2018_final.pdf

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ “Since the beginning of returns last month, over 265,000 individuals have reportedly been transported back to their area of origin through government facilitation”: <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/iom-ethiopia-gedeo-west-guji-situation-report-no-4-22-august-3-september-2018>

²⁷ For an IDPs’ rights perspective and analysis of the return process, see: <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2018/11/14/the-crisis-below-the-headlines-conflict-displacement-in-ethiopia>

their “sustainable” livelihoods in areas of origin. Some officials more openly stated that the continuous provision of aid would keep attracting ethnic Gedeo IDPs from West Guji Zone, thus indirectly pushing ethnic Gedeo people out of the Zone.

4. Changing operational scenarios and humanitarian dilemmas

The sudden return process caught the humanitarian community by surprise

During the initial phase of the response, the humanitarian community seemed reassured that the government would proceed with caution with any plan to return IDPs to their areas of origin. A major operational assumption was made that the displacement crisis would last at least 6 months.²⁸ As of early August, no humanitarian agency (including MSF) seemed to have highlighted population movements as an immediate possibility.

The sudden return process caught the humanitarian community by surprise and imposed a change of operational scenario in both Gedeo and West Guji Zones.

Reports of obstruction of assistance to IDPs in Gedeo Zone started to emerge in late August

As of late August, the EOC in Gedeo Zone started noting a rapid increase in returns²⁹ in West Guji, progressively steering the narrative towards an “end of emergency phase” and urging humanitarians to divert resources to return areas and engage in reintegration and rehabilitation activities.

Reports of obstruction of assistance to IDPs in Gedeo Zone started to emerge at this stage.³⁰ A widespread practice of targeting aid based on status emerged, meaning humanitarian assistance was only provided to individuals registered or recognised as IDPs on official beneficiary lists rather than based on individuals’ needs. This was accompanied by a strong tendency to deny displaced people from West Guji the status of IDPs in Gedeo Zone.³¹

These practices resulted in a substantial reduction of humanitarian assistance in Gedeo Zone. Distributions of relief items and food were particularly restricted, a trend which has continued up to early 2019.³²

²⁸ “Displacement duration of at least six months: A majority of IDPs interviewed during recent assessment missions have expressed a wish to return to their former homes and livelihoods as soon as possible, though there are concerns that it will take several months until the situation can be fully normalised, after which further assessment of damages will need to be undertaken before moving towards rehabilitation / reconstruction efforts. It is already understood that over 9,000 homes have been burnt / destroyed across the affected area.” in: Response Plan to Internal Displacement around Gedeo (SNNPR) and West Guji (Oromia) Zones.

²⁹ Up to over 450,000 at the end of September: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/situation_update_no8_-_gedeo-guji_-_final.pdf

³⁰ <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/506c8ea1e4b01d9450dd53f5/t/5beccea970a6adb0fa3e3d4e/1542246063572/FINAL+Ethiopia+Report+-+November+2018+-+Final.pdf>

³¹ According to most of the humanitarian workers interviewed, thousands of IDPs, mostly originally from East Guji Zone, kept being included on beneficiaries’ lists while the majority of displaced individuals from West Guji were frequently excluded, up to March 2019.

³² See Humanitarian Bulletin, February 2019: “Unavailability of food assistance for new arrivals in some collective sites where the master list for food provision targets only a few IDPs”. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Situation-Report-No.-21_February-2019_FINAL.pdf

Given these constraints, some agencies reported having changed their approach, somehow “bypassing” the EOC-led formal system of coordination and engaging in direct negotiations with district and village authorities in order to gain ground for distributing relief items to vulnerable IDPs in displacement sites no longer recognised as such. While this was not always successful, a number of humanitarian workers interviewed felt that this strategy provided some gains and allowed for a number of aid delivery breakthroughs. This approach, however, was not witnessed across the board.

A widespread practice of targeting aid based on status emerged, meaning humanitarian assistance was only provided to individuals registered as IDPs on official beneficiary lists

The humanitarian landscape in West Guji also changed dramatically and grew just as concerning. On the eve of their return, IDPs were often given reassurances on the security situation and on the provision of aid and rehabilitation packages in West Guji, as a way to encourage their rapid return.

Yet, the situation for IDPs returning to their areas of origin was often far from ideal and fell short of ensuring a return to “normality” or reinstating the status quo that existed before the clashes. As mentioned by a number of IOM reports, IDPs who were brought back to their areas of origin — in particular Kercha district — were often unable to return to their houses, many of which had been destroyed, and found themselves in a situation of secondary displacement, often in other collective sites like churches or administration buildings.³³ Fear of harassment and feelings of insecurity were mentioned as key reasons for not moving out of these collective sites. From August onwards, the humanitarian agencies operating on the Gedeo side reported “in-and-out” movements of IDPs, with individuals and households regularly moving back to displacement areas and sites on the Gedeo side — with Gedeb District as the main epicentre³⁴ — due to the harsh conditions in West Guji.

Engagement in return areas was extremely complex for the entire humanitarian community

A number of agencies have also highlighted how tracking IDPs, either in Gedeo or West Guji, became impossible once the return process had started. From anecdotal evidence, it also seems likely that a number of displaced individuals and households moved from collective sites toward less visible locations within the host community in Gedeo Zone where they would not have been registered as IDPs.

Engagement in “return areas” was extremely complex for the entire humanitarian community. Concerns were high about the rise of potential pull factors through humanitarian assistance, which would spur the return of IDPs to insecure villages. At the same time, the dire conditions for returning IDPs in West Guji posed a dilemma for humanitarian actors, as withdrawing assistance would have left thousands of people in need exposed to life-threatening hazards. As described further in the report, the elaboration of a coherent strategy proved a very complex exercise.

³³ See: <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/iom-ethiopia-gedeo-west-guji-situation-report-no-4-22-august-3-september-2018>

³⁴ See also: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/situation_update_no8_-_gedeo-guji_-_final.pdf

Security issues also started to pose significant constraints for NGOs and UN agencies in West Guji as tensions grew between the Federal armed forces and opposition groups

Security issues also posed significant constraints for the NGOs and UN agencies engaging in West Guji. Tensions in the area grew between the Federal armed forces and opposition groups that had returned to the country from exile in the previous months,³⁵ and at times evolved into military action on the ground. The perception of high security risks led to several humanitarian actors scaling down operations. The presence on the ground of so-called “Qeerro” youth groups, a grassroots movement with anti-government prerogatives and a strong Oromo nationalist agenda, further complicated the security situation.

In this very fluid situation, MSF made a decision to phase out activities in Gedeo and West Guji from October onwards, perceiving a relative stabilisation of the medical-nutritional situation and enhanced presence of other actors to run the necessary activities in the area. The possibility of maintaining a strategic presence on the ground was considered. However, budget considerations and needs elsewhere — such as Western Oromia, as described below — prompted the decision to move out. MSF phased out at the end of December 2018. In hindsight, this decision was probably premature.

5. Reopening humanitarian access

In March 2019, reports of poor living conditions and malnutrition among IDPs living in Gedeo emerged, with allegations that humanitarian aid was blocked

The crisis in Gedeo and West Guji has been protracted up to the writing of this report. During this period, a number of deadlines for IDPs return to their areas of origin were iterated by the authorities. In the meantime, the situation in Gedeo Zone changed once again.

In early March 2019, a significant social media campaign emerged, highlighting poor living conditions and malnutrition among IDPs living in Gedeo and denouncing their lack of access to humanitarian aid.³⁶ At the same time, articles on the same subject started appearing in the international media.³⁷

In sharp contrast with the precedents set by previous Ethiopian governments, the Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed visited displaced communities in Gedeo Zone in person. Concomitantly, Zonal authorities requested enhanced assistance from NGOs and UN agencies for 170,000 IDPs, the majority of whom were — once again — living in the district of Gedeb.

³⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-politics/exiled-leader-of-ethiopian-rebel-group-returns-home-amid-reforms-idUSKCN1LV0GP>.

³⁶ As a reference to social media, see: <https://twitter.com/hashtag/gedeo>; <https://twitter.com/hashtag/Justice4Gedeo?src=hash>

As for fundraising campaigns, see: <https://www.gofundme.com/help-Gedeo>

³⁷ See: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/mar/14/shadow-falls-over-ethiopia-reforms-warnings-of-crisis-ignored-abiy-ahmed>



© MARKUS BOENING / MSF

A donkey eats from a waste site at an IDP camp in Gedeo, in the SNNPR region of south Ethiopia. Several new camps for IDPs have been established since January 2019 around the small town of Banko Gotiti, close to the border with the Oromia region. The living conditions in the camps are deplorable and people lack food, water and basic items.

It remains to be seen whether over a year of experience in responding to the crisis in Gedeo and West Guji will translate into more effective approaches to providing assistance and protection to IDPs

Once emergency assistance for IDPs in Gedeo had been requested, a second “emergency response” (if the term can be used for a year-long situation) was kick-started.

The mobilisation of humanitarian assistance was taking place during the drafting of this report; therefore, a thorough analysis of this stage of the crisis goes beyond the scope of this paper.

MSF assessed the nutritional situation in Gedeb district in late March 2019, following reports of a deteriorating situation. The results confirmed an escalation of the nutritional situation in previous weeks, rising up to emergency levels. By the end of March, MSF relaunched its emergency intervention in the area.

It remains to be seen, however, whether the experience of over a year of responding to the crisis in Gedeo and West Guji will translate into different and more effective approaches to providing assistance and protection to the displaced population.

Case study. A less visible crisis: the case of East and West Wellega, and Benishangul Gumuz

In September 2018, violence erupted in the Western part of Ethiopia, along the border between Oromia and Benishangul Gumuz, displacing up to 250,000 people

While the events described above were unfolding in Gedeo and West Guji, Ethiopia experienced a number of other conflict-related displacement crises in other parts of the country.

In September 2018, violence erupted in the Western part of the country, along the border between Oromia and Benishangul Gumuz, an area that had seen simmering tensions in previous years. Kamashi Zone of Benishangul Gumuz Region (an area characterised by a mixed population comprising ethnic Gumuz, Oromo, Amhara, and other groups) saw a major spike of violence at the end of September, reportedly after an attack against Gumuz officials traveling in Oromia Region that occurred on September 25th.³⁸ The violence provoked a major wave of displacement from and within Kamashi Zone, and from neighbouring areas of East and West Wellega Zones of Oromia.

In the aftermath of these events, the number of displaced people reportedly reached over 100,000, with more than 80,000 IDPs living in East and West Wellega and some 20,000 in Benishangul Gumuz, where a complex security situation did not allow rapid access to the affected areas. Two months after the displacement, reported figures had spiked up to 250,000 people between the two Regions,³⁹ with numbers in East and West Wellega Zones reaching as high as 101,000 and 81,000 respectively.

1. A “silent” emergency

In contrast to Gedeo and West Guji, little attention was paid to the crisis and a small-scale humanitarian response started slowly in October

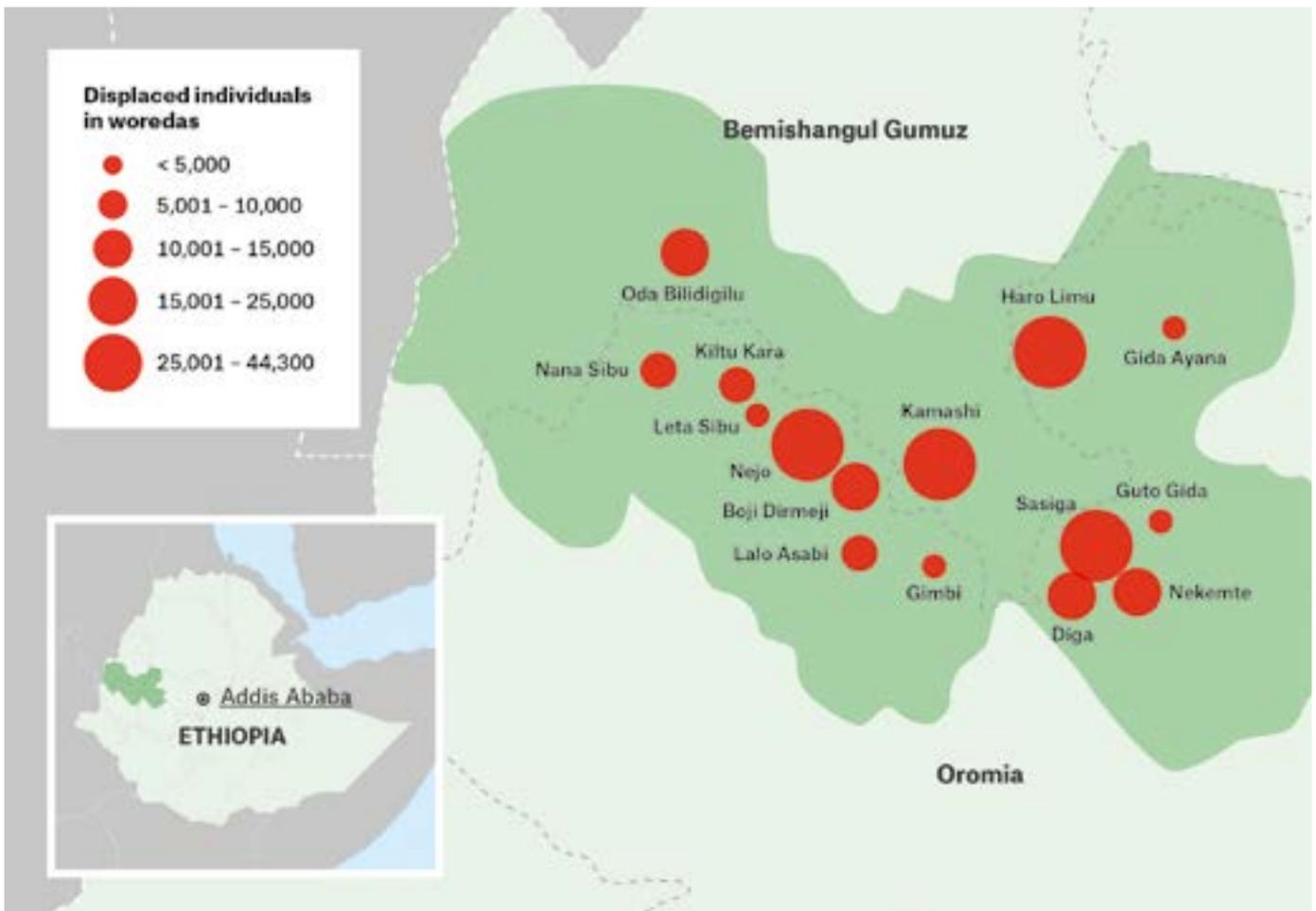
In contrast to Gedeo and West Guji, the situation in Oromia and Benishangul Gumuz barely received any media attention. With much of the operational attention on Gedeo and West Guji, the humanitarian community seemed unprepared to face another significant acute crisis.

The humanitarian reaction started in October, at a rather slow pace. The initial response was mostly limited to adhoc activities or one-shot interventions, with engagement from a limited number of NGOs and agencies.

³⁸ See: https://www.acaps.org/sites/acaps/files/products/files/20181015_acaps_start_briefing_note_displacement_in_ethiopia.pdf

³⁹ See: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Operational-plan-for-rapid-response-to-Kamashi-and-Assosa-8.pdf>

FIGURE 3. NUMBER OF IDPs IN BENISHANGUL GUMUZ AND OROMIA, ETHIOPIA



Slow mobilisation also affected MSF, with assessment teams only arriving in the second half of October, some three weeks after the displacement occurred. Following the initial visit, MSF teams started providing medical support as well as water and sanitation activities and non-food items distributions in collective sites of East Wellega by the end of October. Activities were extended to West Wellega in December, while attempts to access Kamashi Zone of Benishangul Gumuz continued, initially unsuccessfully due to continued security blockage.

The burden of the initial response fell on local authorities and communities, which mobilised resources internally as best they could to face an unprecedented situation

A few NGOs and agencies mobilised between October and December, mostly delivering non-food item kits; one INGO provided enhanced nutrition support in West Wellega, starting from December.

Besides engagement of these few actors, the burden of the initial response fell on local authorities and communities, which mobilised resources internally as best they could in order to face an unprecedented situation for an area that had hardly faced climate or conflict-related emergencies in the past; food and non-food items were distributed (the former with support from the NDRMC), while health facilities were forced to largely overshoot their monthly budgets in order to provide as much free-of-charge care to displaced people as possible.

The local response provided a first layer of assistance but had its limitations: food rations distributed were often described as insufficient and unable to take into account the specific needs of vulnerable people such as young children or pregnant women. Despite efforts by authorities to provide shelter to all displaced individuals, most IDPs in East Wellega found themselves crowded into buildings or rudimentary shelters with little protection from the weather, including rain and cold temperature. It became clear very quickly that increased support in such life-saving sectors was desperately needed.

Humanitarian workers involved in the response unanimously recognised that authorities were generally open and encouraging towards NGOs and agencies willing to respond. Conscious of the difficulties in facing an unknown crisis scenario, the local administrations of East and West Wellega mostly facilitated humanitarian interventions, with very few reports of interference on or blockages of proposed assistance. This openness was however not initially matched by a corresponding level of mobilisation by the international community.

Security concerns were reported as one reason for the delay in the response by a number of humanitarian workers interviewed. Tensions between the different ethnic communities remained high, especially in areas along the borders between the two Regions, where episodes of violence kept being recorded. Access to Kamashi Zone, in Benishangul Gumuz remained restricted by authorities until early February 2019.

On the Oromia side, flaring tensions between opposition groups and federal government at national level became a major factor in the rising insecurity, with a potential for clashes between the two sides. In December 2018, tensions came to a point where a one-week “stay at home” shutdown was declared in East and West Wellega, supported by a strong mobilisation of “Qeerro” youth. The lockdown affected business, road movements, and public services, and basically brought to a halt the large majority of activities in the affected Zones.

Yet, despite these constraints, NGOs already active on the ground were mostly able to navigate the security situation and did not report any serious incident affecting humanitarian staff or facilities. Some activities were briefly suspended as a result of reported tensions and clashes, but this did not lead to a halt or withdrawal of existing operations.

More significantly, the humanitarian system seemed to be facing fatigue and over-stretching, overwhelmed by “yet another IDP crisis”. The fact that the operational plan for “Rapid Response” to the crisis was finalised only at the end of December — 3 months after the displacement occurred — is quite revealing in this regard.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ See: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Operational-plan-for-rapid-response-to-Kamashi-and-Assosa-8.pdf>

Security concerns were reported as one reason for the delay in the response, with flaring tensions on both sides of the regional border

More significantly, the humanitarian system seemed to be facing fatigue and over-stretching, overwhelmed by “yet another IDP crisis”

From January, a more significant humanitarian response started to materialise. By then, living conditions in IDP sites had deteriorated significantly

2. A late response takes place

Starting from January, with an increased engagement at EHCT level and also thanks to advocacy efforts from the NGOs involved, including MSF, a more significant humanitarian response started to materialise in Western Oromia. The setting-up of clusters and relevant meetings at Zonal level started in January, with a number of humanitarian actors moving in progressively.

As a matter of fact, a number of NGOs' and UN agencies' emergency staff deployed to the area were relocated from Gedeo and West Guji, in some cases following the downgrading of some activities there; another clear indication of the capacity limitations of the humanitarian system at that moment.

Upon the arrival of assistance on the ground, the local system's capacity to respond was clearly overstretched. Living conditions of IDPs in collective sites were seeing an overall deterioration, especially in areas where upgrades in the water, sanitation and hygiene provision were not undertaken. Overall, coping strategies saw signs of high stress; although no major crisis in terms of severe malnutrition was recorded, reports of increased moderate malnutrition rates during the crisis are a clear proxy indicator of the deficiencies in terms of livelihood and food, even more so considering that the area has never been traditionally hit by food insecurity.

Drug shortages in health facilities started to be reported, following the depletion of the regular pipeline in the aftermath of the displacement, with IDPs forced to seek medication on the open market.

As of March 2019, the enhanced humanitarian response seemed to finally bring a highly needed upscale in assistance

As of March 2019, the enhanced humanitarian response seemed to finally bring a highly needed upscale in assistance. Actors in the fields of livelihood, camp management and shelter came to the ground in January and progressively started rolling out their programs. NGOs with health and WASH programmes also stepped in, taking over activities managed by MSF in East Wellega in the same month. In March 2019, market assessments were finally performed to facilitate the potential distribution of cash to IDPs for more agile food and non-food assistance.

In light of this new situation, and in the absence of alarming morbidity and mortality indicators among the affected population, MSF opted to phase out from the area by early April.

Yet, the scaling up of humanitarian action took place at varying pace in different areas with a significant number of constraints.

**Kamashi Zone
saw virtually no
humanitarian response
or presence and the
situation remained
volatile into April 2019**

The humanitarian actors' presence in West Wellega has been smaller and slower in scaling up than in East Wellega, also due to reported security concerns. Clearance of UN agencies' movements beyond Nejjo (West Wellega) up to the border with Benishangul Gumuz was yet to be approved as of mid-March, even though MSF and other NGOs on the ground had been operating along the road axis since December without significant incidents.

Kamashi Zone finally became accessible as of early February 2019. MSF conducted a rapid assessment on February 5th, which led to the start of medical and psychological support activities, with a strong focus on medical referrals. As a matter of fact, Kamashi Zone has no hospital facilities; severe cases had to be referred to West Wellega, an almost impossible eventuality for district ambulances considering regional border tensions along ethnic lines. Humanitarian presence, in this specific case, is a must not only for assistance delivery but also and mostly, to ensure a neutral presence enabling protection of the population accessing these services.

The first UN-led security assessment for Kamashi zone, which would have enabled access for humanitarians, was scheduled for March 17th, but was postponed and had yet to take place as of early April.

On the eve of the planned phase-out, discussions once again took place within MSF on how to act given the circumstances. Even if health needs weren't at emergency levels, Kamashi Zone saw virtually no humanitarian presence and the situation remained volatile at the moment of the scheduled phase-out. Yet, with resources needed elsewhere, within and outside the country, the decision to close operations was finally confirmed.

A look at the constraints to humanitarian response

In both crises, numerous constraints and hurdles to an effective humanitarian response were felt by the humanitarian community at large — including MSF. Bottlenecks seem to be both internal — linked to the capacity of the humanitarian system to engage in multiple, large-scale and complex crises — and external — mostly connected to the political environment in the country.

These two dimensions are obviously inter-connected and the broader conceptual and operational humanitarian framework in Ethiopia is both a product and driver of these trends.

A. A “RESILIENCE” OR “NEXUS” BRAKE?

The focus of humanitarian action in Ethiopia has long shifted from “pure” emergency response to a “nexus” approach that prioritises resilience, risk reduction, and national capacity building

In line with global trends,⁴¹ the Ethiopian humanitarian system has moved very decisively in the last few years towards approaches aimed at bridging the gap between humanitarian and development actors. In doing so, it has shifted the focus of humanitarian action from “pure” emergency response towards resilience-building, risk reduction, and national system capacity-building, emphasising the role of government leadership in orienting priorities and favouring the channelling of resources through government systems.

In line with this shift, the 2018 Humanitarian Disaster and Resilience Plan very openly adopted, as the title suggests, a resilience and disaster prevention approach. For the first time, the country’s humanitarian strategy was designed around 3 pillars of which preparedness and response constituted only one, the others being prevention and mitigation through resilience-enhancing investments and strengthening the national system.⁴²

Under this framework, humanitarian resources are often channeled through government systems

The 3-pillar approach is maintained and further elaborated in the Humanitarian Response Plan for 2019. The fact that humanitarian aid “does not address root causes of vulnerabilities and runs the risk of creating aid dependency patterns in affected populations” is openly highlighted as a shortcoming of the humanitarian system. Moreover, the country’s humanitarian strategy is, for the first time, openly aimed toward

⁴¹ Starting from the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016; see for instance: <https://www.who.int/health-cluster/about/structure/new-way-working.pdf>

⁴² “The humanitarian impact of recurrent drought crises in Ethiopia leads to highly predictable patterns of acute needs. Whilst this presents a huge challenge to government and its partners, it also presents an opportunity to make targeted interventions to reduce current and future needs, and to reduce the costs involved in addressing them through predictable means.”, Humanitarian Disaster and Resilience Plan 2018, Foreword by the Humanitarian Coordinator.

On the ground, this translates into the prioritisation of humanitarian resources for chronic and longer-term needs

longer-term objectives, “supporting a paradigm shift towards reducing risk and vulnerability”. To this end, a multi-year humanitarian plan, aligned with the government’s Third Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP III) and UN’s Development Assistance Framework in order to produce a common humanitarian-development strategy 2020-2025, is suggested, with long-term objectives such as enhancing durable solutions for IDPs and IDP returnees, as well as enabling basic service delivery in disaster-prone areas through systems strengthening in prioritised geographic areas.⁴³

A critical, in-depth analysis of this approach and its impact goes well beyond the scope of this paper. However, some very practical consequences in terms of overall humanitarian system’s orientation and roll-out of assistance were observed in recent responses to acute, complex crises.

On the ground, this approach translates into the channelling of massive humanitarian funding toward chronic or longer-term needs⁴⁴ and, more broadly, generates a trade-off between the prioritisation of supposedly emergency-related aid towards systemic priorities (“risk reduction”, “capacity building”) rather than for immediate emergency needs. Even though this choice is not presented in either/or terms, the cost implications of pursuing both objectives with (limited) humanitarian funding are clear, all the more so in a country where acute crises are frequent and where complex ones are on the rise.

With the emergence of rapid-onset, conflict-related crises in the country, the trade-off between short and long-term needs prioritisation has become even more apparent

The conceptual and strategic shifts results in an operational one. With the emergence of rapid-onset, conflict-related crises in the country, the trade-off between short and long-term needs prioritisation becomes even more apparent. The alignment of humanitarian aid towards longer-term risk reduction objectives may be more straightforward in the area of foreseeable climate-related hazards, but becomes more complicated in scenarios where the predictability of risks is much lower, the emergence of needs is sudden, protection concerns are high, and longer-term stabilisation purposes require a security-related agenda, and may see authorities at the different levels of the Ethiopian federalist structure pursue different interests. The aim of “delivering as one” with the government may have serious limitations in these types of contexts.

⁴³ See: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2019_HRP_030719.pdf; in particular, the paragraph on “Enhancing the Humanitarian-development Nexus” (p. 14).

⁴⁴ A very clear example in Ethiopia is the integration of the country-wide moderate acute malnutrition caseload (3.5 million children and pregnant/lactating women) within the Humanitarian Requirements Document. Largely a rather predictable caseload, the reliance on short-term humanitarian funding has potentially dire consequences, as shortages of funding or re-prioritization for emergencies translate into pipeline breaks. Similarly, NGO-supported nutrition interventions regularly take place in districts deemed as “Priority 1” in drought-related assessments; these interventions, being tied to short-term humanitarian funding cycles, often face interruptions early in the year until funds for the upcoming period are made available; this happened also in early 2019: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Situation-Report-No.-21_February-2019_FINAL.pdf

The strategic focus on reducing long-term vulnerabilities has influenced how aid is provided

The framing of IDP-related responses in the 2018 HDRP is in line with the generalised approach aimed at “reducing current and future needs”, and seems to point more markedly toward a recovery, rehabilitation, and resettlement assistance than an emergency response. To quote the foreword of the then Humanitarian Coordinator to the Humanitarian Disaster and Resilience Plan for 2018:

“In addition to climate-driven needs there are also close to one million conflict-induced Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), many of whom need relief and recovery/resettlement assistance. Whilst efforts to address the drivers of this displacement are underway, Government is rolling out ambitious plans for the voluntary return, resettlement or relocation of these communities; humanitarian and development partners are engaged, to support the implementation of durable solutions in a principled manner, and to avoid the situation becoming unnecessarily protracted”.

Aiming at durable solutions is a legitimate and desirable objective; but it should not come at the expense of humanitarian principles

Aiming at durable solutions in a rapid fashion is definitely a legitimate and desirable objective. It should, however, include prioritisation of emergency response and the establishment of mechanisms that allow the respect of humanitarian principles to be properly defined and monitored, rather than taking these for granted in a framework that favours the “ending of needs”.

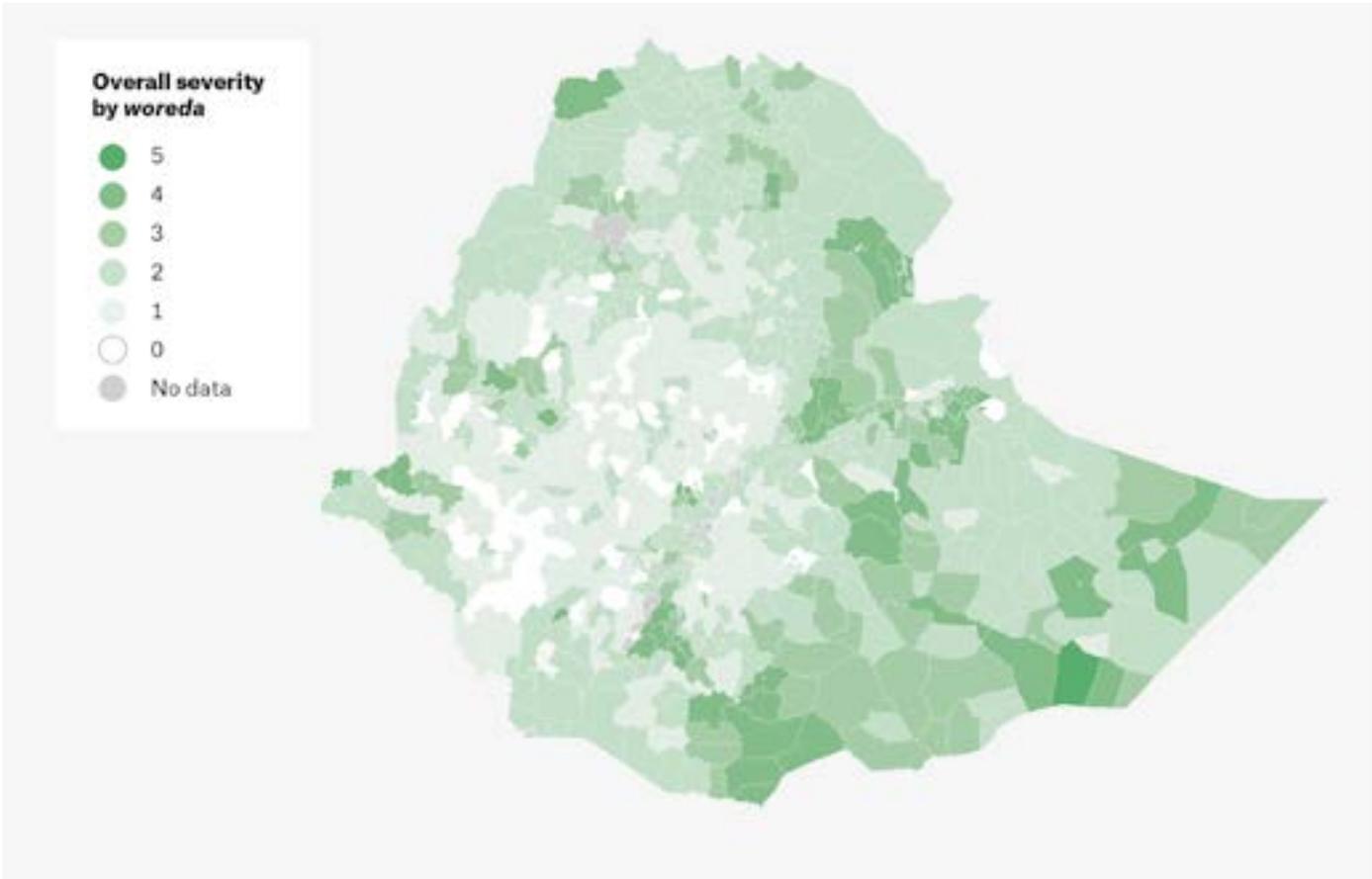
The experience of humanitarian actors in Gedeo and West Guji probably taught a valuable lesson in this sense, as the Humanitarian Response Plan for 2019 features language more strongly steered toward IDPs protection.

Going beyond the theory, this strategic framework has had a direct impact on how aid is delivered on the ground. The emphasis on reducing vulnerabilities, with a focus on systemic/chronic needs, has influenced the modalities of aid delivery in the country and the type of humanitarian expertise available. This, in turn, has affected the humanitarian system’s capacity to tackle acute needs.

B. OPERATIONAL SET-UP AND RESPONSE MODALITIES OF THE ETHIOPIAN HUMANITARIAN COMPLEX

A look at the operational presence of humanitarian partners in Ethiopia provides a rather reassuring picture: at the beginning of 2019, the number of international partners operating in the country increased to 81, up from 66 in 2018,⁴⁵ probably due to the emergence of aforementioned IDP crises.

FIGURE 4. OPERATIONAL PRESENCE FROM HRD



Source: Ethiopia 2019 HNO.

⁴⁵ See: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2019_HRP_030719.pdf

The majority of partners present in Ethiopia are involved in both humanitarian and development activities.⁴⁶ In light of this and the massive humanitarian aid injections in the last few years, Ethiopia has among the highest programme budget⁴⁷ for a number of agencies, with some NGOs mobilising staff in the thousands.⁴⁸ The UN itself counts no less than 28 resident agencies, with one of the largest country teams in the world.⁴⁹

Yet, a massive international presence does not necessarily translate into effective responses to rapid-onset crises, as the latter depends heavily on factors such as the availability of specific expertise, organisational mind-set and priorities, availability of emergency stocks, and room for flexibility and surge capacity.

Moreover, the overall orientation and geographic focus of the humanitarian response in the country for several years seems to have had a deep impact on the operational positioning of actors on the ground.

1. Emergency expertise and mind-set

A system-oriented modus operandi based on a framework of recurring drought-related crises seems to have had a profound impact on the type of humanitarian expertise available

Firstly, a system-oriented modus operandi based on a framework of recurring drought-related crises seems to have had a profound impact on the typical expertise of humanitarian agencies in the country. A large number of interviewees agreed that the operational framework is still largely oriented towards slow-onset crises. Some agencies hinted at progressive change away from this, with some organisations already opening new positions to improve their conflict-sensitive expertise, but this is not the case across the board.

Reliance by numerous agencies on long-serving staff strongly embedded in the Ethiopian context and used to what has been a long-standing government modus operandi in humanitarian crises has likely had a very profound influence on the organisational mind-set. All the more so given the high number of aid workers with government services' background.

MSF itself has struggled internally to elaborate a coherent approach to the crisis in Gedeo and West Guji, with surge staff coming in from outside the country often finding themselves at odds with managers who had been based in Ethiopia for a longer time and who perceived risks in approaches that they thought could jeopardise relations with authorities. Risk-avoidance may be even more pronounced for agencies that legitimately want to protect their longer-term activities.

⁴⁶ In the 2009 Ethiopian Fiscal Year, the last for which official data is available, development aid channeled through government services amounted to USD 3.08 billion: <http://www.dagethiopia.org/content/dagethiopia/en/home/oda-to-ethiopia.html>. More development funding is made available by bilateral and multilateral donors through NGOs and UN agencies' programme support.

⁴⁷ See: <https://www.unsceb.org/content/FS-100-01?agency=WFP>

⁴⁸ Save the Children, for instance, counts 2,400 employees within 50+ offices in the country: <https://ethiopia.savethechildren.net/about-us>

⁴⁹ See: <http://et.one.un.org>

Agencies able to deploy surge staff with experience of complex or conflict emergencies reported benefits

Agencies and NGOs who were able to intervene with surge staff with complex/conflict emergency experience — either because they were already available in the country or through rapid deployments from outside — reported having benefitted from it, mentioning that in some cases this had led to significant breakthroughs in Gedeo and West Guji in negotiating access or aid deliveries with authorities at local level and in gaining better first-hand understanding of needs to inform targeting of beneficiaries. Yet, availability of this type of expertise on the ground was not widespread in the early phase of the crisis; only a few agencies had the internal resources and a set-up necessary for this type of rapid surge.

Given the widespread presence on the ground of NGOs and UN agencies with development activities, actors with a long-term presence in crisis-affected areas are often identified as potential first responders. Yet, as mentioned by one representative of an INGO with significant presence in the country, this translates into massive pressure on development-oriented actors to engage in an emergency response for which they may not have the right expertise or capacity. Understandably, organisations with longer-term engagement on the ground tend to look to donors or clusters to provide a stronger buffer vis-à-vis authorities when it comes to negotiations, in order to avoid jeopardising local relationships.

2. Geographic focus and system-orientation

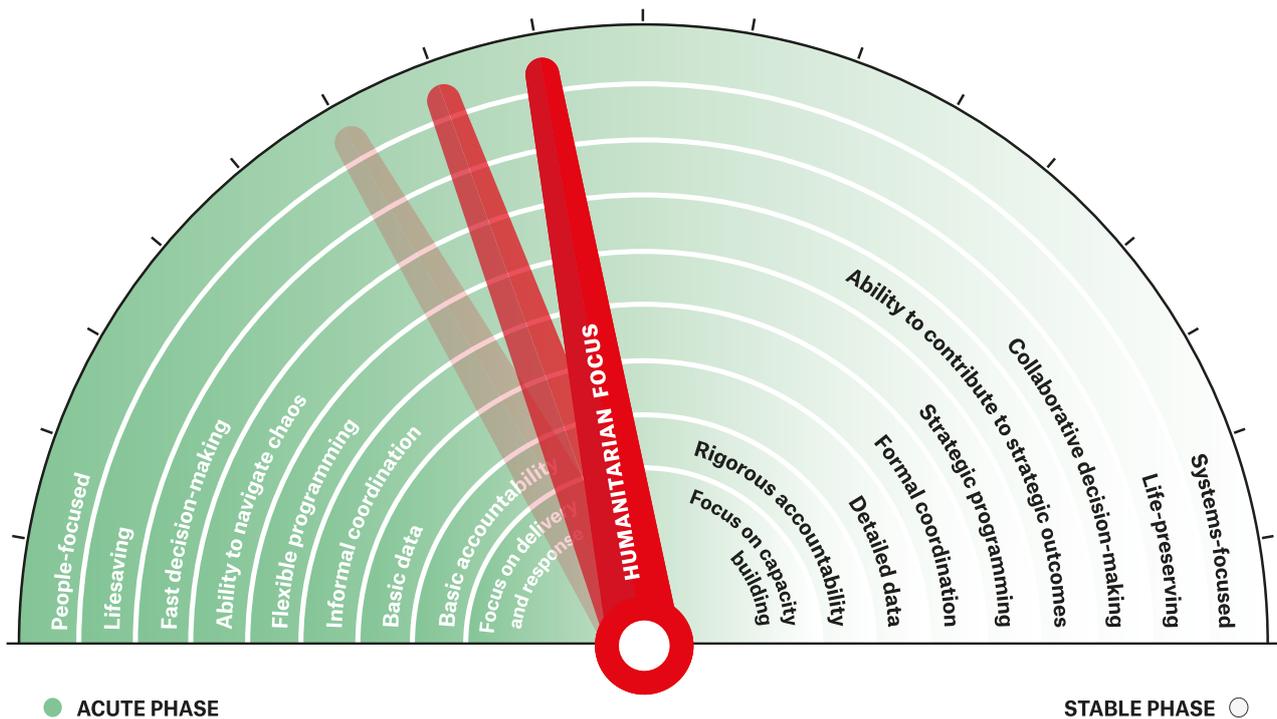
Capacity to divert funding and resources outside of drought-related priority woredas was limited

Some humanitarian workers interviewed clearly expressed that the difficulties they encountered in engaging in certain IDP areas came from the fact that their organisations had mostly developed their operational capacity around Woredas (districts) defined as “Priority 1” as per drought-related risks.⁵⁰ Capacity to divert funding and resources to deploy rapidly in other areas was limited. In the absence of significant additional funding, the risk of jeopardising other activities and, with it, long-term programming is perceived as high. Organisations providing country-wide response in Priority Woredas, with burdensome logistics and supply arrangements for these areas, may be particularly affected in this sense.

Interestingly, some humanitarian workers from agencies focused on food and nutrition have reported difficulties in engaging in East and West Wellega due to the fact that the two Zones had no system already in place for the management of food insecurity and malnutrition (the area being a major agricultural region for the country) and that the lack of pre-existing structures on the ground providing data for response planning and capacity presented a major hurdle.

⁵⁰ For the hotspot priority Woredas as of July 2018, see: <https://reliefweb.int/map/ethiopia/ethiopia-hotspot-priority-woredas-july-2018>

FIGURE 5. ADAPTIVE FOCUS



The above elements are legitimately perceived as constraints by agencies based on their modus operandi in Ethiopia for several years. Yet, they also portray a humanitarian eco-system struggling to respond to non-predictable crises with a more system- than people-oriented focus.

3. Modus operandi

In recent responses, direct implementation has actually been more feasible than in the past

Government services and authorities proved comparatively open to humanitarian actors supporting emergency responses through more hands-on modalities, including direct implementation. In Gedeo, as in most recent IDP crises, direct involvement by aid agencies in collective sites for site management and provision of services was solicited. On the nutrition side, the SNNPR health authorities opened the door for NGOs' engagement in ways that were rarely seen in the recent past: NGO-led nutrition assessments at community level were allowed to inform the response,⁵¹ as well as direct engagement of NGOs staff in case management. More broadly, direct engagement with IDPs and affected individuals (including by international staff) has been reported by most interviewees as being more feasible than in the past.

⁵¹ MSF carried out an assessment in August 2018 in Gedeb and Kochere Districts and presented their results at EOC level.

Yet, the response modalities used by humanitarian actors did not always reflect this change. For example, in Gedeo, significant shortages of hundreds of health staff needed to cope with the increased caseload of IDPs were continuously highlighted during EOC coordination meetings early in the crisis. While some NGOs took advantage of the authorities' opening and provided additional HR, either in facilities or mobile clinics, other health actors kept their focus on a capacity-building approach, deploying only supervisors/monitors and focusing on the provision of training rather than direct delivery. According to interviewees from a leading UN agency working on hygiene promotion, most partners' proposals fell short of going beyond "training of trainers" for health promotion or other "soft" activities.

Despite the more open space for intervention, not all humanitarian actors changed their approach, with serious gaps remaining in sectors like WASH and Protection

Technically complex, expensive areas of intervention likely to require intense negotiations with authorities also saw more limited engagement by international actors, often restricted to the distributions of items. In Gedeo and West Guji, the mobilisation of WASH kits moved quickly in the early phase of the crisis, while "hardware" installations or works in collective sites, including water trucking, saw a more limited engagement and a slower take-off.⁵²

For protection activities, the historically limited space in Ethiopia basically translated into a very reduced capacity for humanitarian actors to respond or meet⁵³ the HR-intense and cost demands. Besides glaring concerns related to violence as a precipitating factor for the displacement and the dilemmas around the voluntary nature of the returns, longstanding concerns for unaccompanied minors were identified throughout the response in Gedeo, with gaps in family-tracing mechanisms and a lack of capacity to provide specific assistance to meet the needs' magnitude.

4. Emergency preparedness and stocks

Pre-positioning of relief items and fast-tracking of emergency imports seem to be gaining attention only now

The reliance on a system in which response activities are prioritised in advance based on forecasts may also negatively impact the availability of emergency supplies. Massive displacement had not been part of the operational reality up to 18 months ago and pre-positioning of relief items and fast-tracking of emergency imports seem to be gaining attention only now, both at Clusters and individual agencies' level. Shortages of essential supplies (including medication) and long lead times for importation processes, for instance of non-food items, have been a recurrent feature in the analysed crises. The importation process for around 12,000 non-food items kits for response in Gedeo, for instance, took no less than 3 months to be completed after the inception of the crisis.

This situation affected the response in Western Oromia even more severely. MSF itself experienced months-long lead times for the importation of life-saving medications, a factor that severely undermined the timeliness of the medical response.

⁵² A notable exception was the rapid involvement of IOM, especially on sanitation in IDP camps.

⁵³ An instance confirmed by actors involved in the Protection cluster.

5. Humanitarian actors' competition and role of coordination structures

Competition around funding led to some organisations “flag-planting” to claim their ability to cover a sector in an area before activities were fully operational on the ground

Beside the constraints linked to expertise and capacity, some emergency interventions were also characterised by competition around funding with some organisations “flag-planting” to claim their ability to cover a sector in a determined district and assert their presence through the clusters/EOC before activities were genuinely fully operational on the ground. MSF struggled to progress with needed health and nutrition activities in at least one district of West Guji due to obstructions from one organisation claiming “full coverage”, despite reassurances from MSF’s side that a rapid hand-over of activities once the operational scale-up by the mentioned actor would be completed. Similar blockages occurred in relation to water-provision activities in the same area.⁵⁴

This attitude may not necessarily stem only from opportunism and defence of funding. Self-perception in terms of operational capacity to deliver may also mislead decision-making. To some extent, it also affected MSF due to internal tensions between two different operational sections,⁵⁵ as the MSF section coming second to the ground in response to the mass displacement situation in Gedeo and West Guji found some resistance from the leading section in terms of opening up room for action in certain geographical areas.

In the early phases of an acute emergency, information may be less than perfect, requiring a more rapid approach to addressing lifesaving needs

The coordination mechanisms for emergency response in Ethiopia also have a potential to exacerbate this tendency of flag-planting. A rather bureaucratic approach has been in place for a number of years, often aimed at avoiding “inefficiencies” in aid allocation by preventing any type of “overlapping” or “duplication” of activities and aiming at maximising the coverage of all reportedly affected areas through geographic “assignment” of partners.

It must be said that this practice has become less pervasive recently.⁵⁶ However, in the early phases of an acute emergency, information on needs on the ground may be less than perfect to decide immediately on a “rigid” geographic allocation of resources/agencies.⁵⁷ Rapidly addressing life-saving needs in a less bureaucratic fashion may initially be achieved at the expense of some efficiency gains, but this can be easily adapted as the situation on the ground normalises.

⁵⁴ This is far from being a practice uniquely found in Ethiopia; the issue was already pointed out and analysed from MSF’s perspective in other reports in the “Emergency Gap” series; see: <https://arhp.msf.es/emergency-gap-final-report-bridging-emergency-gap>; https://www.msf.org.za/system/tdf/publications/niger_case_study_final.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=6900&force=

⁵⁵ MSF includes 5 operational centers: Amsterdam (Operational Centre Amsterdam, or OCA), Barcelona (OCBA), Brussels (OCB), Geneva (OCG) and Paris (OCP). Two of them, namely OCBA and OCA, are present on the ground in Ethiopia and participated in the Gedeo and West Guji response.

⁵⁶ Up to a few years ago, the practice of “One District - One partner” per sector was more or less the rule.

⁵⁷ Even more so when the location of IDPs changes on a near daily basis.

C. A QUESTION OF FUNDING?

The USD 1.5 billion Humanitarian Requirements Document was 77% funded by the end of 2018, in a year where the country did not witness major climate or epidemic-related crises

At first glance, financial room for manoeuvre in terms of rapid response seems to be there

Effective responses to acute crises, especially rapid-onset ones, are strongly dependent on the prompt availability of adequate levels of funding.

A retrospective look at the funding for the Humanitarian Requirements Document for 2018⁵⁸ shows a rather bright picture in terms of overall availability of resources:⁵⁹ at the end of the year, an overall request of USD 1.494 billion had been funded at 77%⁶⁰ (above USD 1.1 billion) in a year that did not witness — contrary to the previous biennium — major climate or epidemic-related crises.

Additional urgent funds requested for the response in Gedeo and West Guji in June 2018 amounted to USD 118 million,⁶¹ roughly 10% of the overall funding raised by donors for humanitarian actions across the whole country over the year. For the Wellegas, a USD 25 million Operational Rapid Response Plan was presented in December 2018.⁶² At first glance, financial room for manoeuvre in terms of rapid response seems to have been taken into consideration.

A look at the funding structure and priorities, however, paints a slightly different picture. When the Humanitarian Disaster and Resilience Plan⁶³ for Ethiopia was issued in March 2018, the strategic focus of the document, and of the types of responses proposed, was steered towards recovery and resilience-building for drought-related and predictable needs,⁶⁴ in line with the prioritisation done in the previous 3 years.⁶⁵

Response to conflict-driven displacement is presented as one among five “key humanitarian issues” for 2018. However, the level of prioritisation of this caseload among the more than 8 million foreseen beneficiaries of food and non-food aid country-wide is rather unclear.⁶⁶

⁵⁸ See: <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-2018-humanitarian-and-disaster-resilience-plan-mid-year-review>

⁵⁹ See: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/HDRP-Funding-for-2018---December31-updated-15-jan.pdf>

⁶⁰ One of the best-funded in the world.

⁶¹ See: <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-us118-million-urgently-required-support-over-818000-people-displaced-inter>

⁶² See: <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-rapid-response-plan-seeks-us255m-reach-civilians-displaced-inter-communal>

⁶³ The name of the Humanitarian Requirements Document was changed to reflect the orientation of the strategy. See: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ethiopia_2018_humanitarian_and_disaster_resilience_plan.pdf

⁶⁴ See: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ethiopia_hrd_2016.pdf; https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/ethiopia_humanitarian_requirements_document_mid-year_review_2017.pdf

⁶⁵ The analysis goes further, underlying how predictive modeling suggested similar levels of needs up to 2020 and that “a modeling of the likely needs and humanitarian requirements, even in the absence of severe drought, [...] totals nearly \$650 million per year”.

⁶⁶ This would be partially addressed at mid-year review stage, where the increased IDP caseload, and in particular the one in Gedeo and West Guji, was mentioned and pointed towards increased prioritisation towards conflict-related displacement with a specific geographic focus on that crisis and on the Somali Region/Oromia border.

With massive amounts of funding going towards longer-term needs, the re-prioritisation of additional resources to meet emerging, acute needs becomes a rather painful exercise

With massive amounts of funding going towards longer-term needs, the re-prioritisation or allocation of additional resources to meet emerging acute needs becomes a rather painful exercise. With few NGOs and UN agencies having significant funds of their own for rapid response, the rapid mobilisation of institutional funds is essential.

In Gedeo and West Guji, a number of donors were able to re-allocate or provide highly-needed additional funds⁶⁷ and to do quite rapidly; however, additional money came mostly in the form of country-wide top-ups rather than as crisis-specific allocation.⁶⁸ Moreover, comparisons with previous years, when donors provided additional funding for drought-related crises, highlight a certain imbalance, with fewer funds available for conflict-driven needs.⁶⁹

Rather than overall funding availability, the main financial bottlenecks observed in the responses to Gedeo and Guji as well as Benishangul and the Wallegas were mostly related to the “quality” of the funding provided, i.e. timeliness and geographic/operational flexibility based on needs.

The Ethiopian Humanitarian Fund (EHF), the major pooled fund for humanitarian response in the country,⁷⁰ was able to unlock a USD 30 million reserve allocation to respond to unforeseen emergencies in the aftermath of the Gedeo and West Guji displacement.⁷¹ Again, this was a country-wide top-up, reflecting additional needs across all sectors and regions rather than for a crisis-specific response. A sub-envelope of USD 6 million was decentralised to the Emergency Operational Centres in Gedeo and West Guji Zones for allocation but the first grants were not finalised until September 7th. By then the situation on the ground had changed radically, with the start of population movements linked to the authorities-led process of IDP returns. Part of the funding had to be put on standby while population locations and humanitarian access were clarified.

⁶⁷ For instance, USAID announced an additional USD 170M in July to respond to emergencies country-wide: <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/united-states-announces-170-million-humanitarian-assistance-help-vulnerable-people>; also ECHO provided a mid-year top-up of 30 M EUR for the country: https://ec.europa.eu/echo/where/africa/ethiopia_en

⁶⁸ For funding through pooled funds such as the Ethiopia Humanitarian Fund this implies Country-wide agreements at clusters’ levels before effective disbursement.

⁶⁹ Humanitarian aid from the European Union, for instance, reached a zenith of more than EUR 168 million in 2015, in correspondence to the drought-related crisis. Contributions in 2018 have totaled EUR 64 million: <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/hac/>

⁷⁰ See: <https://www.unocha.org/ethiopia/about-ehf>

⁷¹ See: https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/EHF%20Reserve%20Allocation%20Strategy%20Paper_%207%20August%202018.pdf. It has to be highlighted that some USD 5 million were allocated to respond to the crisis in Gedeo and West Guji through the national clusters already in the second standard allocation for 2018, in mid-July; see: https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/EHF%20Standard%20Allocation%20Strategy%20Paper_2nd%20round.pdf

Funding mechanisms were mostly set up around slow-onset, drought-related scenarios and were often hard to adapt to respond to more acute needs

Other emergency response funding mechanisms are also active in the country,⁷² which did facilitate initial funding for NGOs and agencies' action in the early phases of the two crises. However, both NGOs and donors reported challenges in ensuring consistent rapid disbursements as in some cases, bureaucratic hurdles prevented the rapid approval of grants. Moreover, these mechanisms were often established years ago, at a time when the major emergency scenarios were slow-onset, drought-related crises or small-scale complex ones. The abrupt onset of large-scale conflict-related displacement seems to require a change of mind-set as well as operational adaptation.

On a general note, a number of NGOs, UN agencies, and donors interviewed raised concerns on how funding mechanisms and practices mostly set up around slow-onset, drought-related scenarios could perform in a rather new humanitarian picture, expressing the need to re-evaluate their effectiveness and re-calibrate funding modalities around acute needs.

It seems fair to conclude that capacity constraints did not derive only or mainly from funding limitations.⁷³ For instance, some donors reported having received few, if any, funding requests for the crisis unfolding in Western Oromia. In a context where major funding flows are directed towards longer-term needs rather than acute crises, the humanitarian system's absorption capacity and operational priorities seem to have played a more significant role.

⁷² Such as the ECHO-funded Rapid Response Mechanism and the OFDA-funded Emergency Response Mechanism.

⁷³ This goes in line with trends that are witnessed outside of Ethiopia, where a generalised tendency to reduce the "emergency gaps" in response to funding gaps is quite prominent. For a specific analysis in this sense, see: https://arhp.msf.es/sites/default/files/MSF_EGS06_Humanitarian_financing_is_it_all_about_money_april%202017.pdf

D. NEEDS ON THE GROUND VS. TARGETING FROM THE “TOP”

Officially reported IDP and planning figures had a significant impact on the assessment of needs and allocation of resources

The set-up of the emergency response system in Ethiopia also plays a fundamental role in determining how needs are defined and resources are allocated and targeted.

The first response plan for the intervention in Gedeo and West Guji was aimed at rapidly mobilising the needed emergency resources and it actually succeeded in providing a framework for starting a response. It also included provisions for further assessments and updates to the plan, based on the evolution of the situation on the ground and did not aim at providing a rigid framework.

While authorities allowed international organisations to conduct their own assessments, officially reported numbers of IDPs and planning figures had a significant impact on the allocation of partners and resources.

TABLE 1. % OF AFFECTED POPULATION IN THE RESPONSE PLAN

	People affected	% of total
Gedeo	642,152	78,5%
West Guji	176,098	21,5%
Total	818,250	100%

Source: NDRMC, Regional and Zonal authorities.

In Gedeo and West Guji, the official IDP figures likely created an involuntary “magnitude and location bias” in the initial strategies of humanitarian actors

At the beginning of the response in Gedeo and West Guji, the major difference in the official IDP figures between the two Zones likely created an involuntary “magnitude and location bias” in the strategies of a number of humanitarian actors. The majority of interviewees noted that the establishment of the Emergency Operations Centre in Dilla was achieved extremely quickly. In contrast, the development of the EOC in Bule Hora was slower and the presence of humanitarian actors more limited.

While the initial IDP numbers may provide a justification for this imbalance, an analysis of vulnerabilities should have probably introduced a note of caution. The District of Kercha in West Guji Zone was the epicentre of violence at the beginning of the crisis and saw the highest degree of destruction. Around 50,000 IDPs were reportedly sheltering in collective sites,⁷⁴ most of them ethnic Gedeos unable to reach Gedeo Zone and living in extremely poor conditions in the same district where they reported being the targets of threats and attacks. However, this type of essential analysis was poorly highlighted in the early phase of the crisis. Senior-level

⁷⁴ See https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/dtm/ethiopia_dtm_20180723-28.pdf

presence and visits on the West Guji side were limited⁷⁵ and a substantial humanitarian intervention materialised only after the return process started.

As the response in Gedeo and Guji evolved, official IDP figures grew increasingly problematic, particularly after returns started and movements became more fluid

As the response evolved, the official IDP figures grew increasingly problematic. The authorities agreed to the use of IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix for reporting, but the validation of figures remained the prerogative of regional authorities.⁷⁶ Numerous interviewees noted that, while the DTM is useful to highlight displacement crises and provide a first layer of information, it does not provide a comprehensive assessment of needs and is not the most effective tool to determine resource allocation.⁷⁷ Furthermore, as population movements became increasingly more fluid, particularly after the start of the return process, it was hard to rely on official figures as they could never accurately match the pace of movements.

Some interviewees suggested that approximate mapping of day-to-day population movements through proxy information available from teams engaged in IDP site management activities, would have proved more effective in informing the intervention than relying on official, large-scale exercises. However, the response was visibly stuck in an "officiality trap", with publicly endorsed figures becoming a major driver in influencing the allocation of resources.

When the return process accelerated between August and September, discrepancies emerged between the figures of returned IDPs provided by the EOC in Gedeo Zone, which counted the movements towards West Guji in the number of hundreds of thousands,⁷⁸ and the ones provided by the EOC in Bule Hora, reporting much lower figures of returnees. According to some humanitarian workers interviewed, this escalated into a political confrontation, with profound disagreements between the two Zones on the exact number of ethnic Gedeo individuals residing in West Guji before the displacement being the major point of contention between both parties.

Discrepancies in official figures emerged, causing some funding and activities to be put on hold

In this situation of political stalemate, bringing clarity in terms of figures became rather impossible for most actors involved in the response. In the absence of clarity, some funding and activities were put on hold.

⁷⁵ According to interviewees, the EOC meetings in Blue Hora were mostly held in Amharic language up to the month of August.

⁷⁶ See: <https://displacement.iom.int/ethiopia>; the tool allowed Country-wide collection of data on IDPs numbers and locations on a bi-monthly basis and, as of 2017, was regularly made public.

⁷⁷ A number of interviewees have even questioned data related to various displacement areas in the Country, where reported figures could well be politically-influenced or oriented towards boosting mobilisation of resources.

⁷⁸ 330,000 as of October 1st; see: <https://displacement.iom.int/system/tdf/reports/IOM%20Ethiopia%20Gedeo-W.Guji%20Sitrep%20No.5.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=4376>

E. TARGETING OF ASSISTANCE

In building the case for at least including individuals with specific vulnerabilities (such as pregnant and lactating women or the elderly) in beneficiary lists

According to numerous interviewees, informed and principled geographical and household targeting was the major challenge in the Gedeo and West Guji response, all the more so once return processes started and allocation of aid came to be seen as a potential instrument for determining people's movements. The reasons go beyond lack of information or access blockages, and seem to point more decisively to the way in which targeting is done and the perceived role of humanitarian organisations in the process.

The Humanitarian Country Team prioritised the need to ensure principled delivery of aid in the aftermath of the return process in Gedeo and West Guji, but it took a long time to reach a consolidated position. By early October the EHCT endorsed Common Operational Guidance for partners engaging in West Guji, as a way to frame and protect the independence and neutrality of assistance. The principles for engagement focused on evidence-based targeting prioritising the most vulnerable populations, clearly making reference to "do no harm" principles.

Once again, however, a set of principles agreed upon at the top did not translate to field level.

Some organisations did not feel comfortable with the beneficiaries' lists provided⁷⁹ and openly challenged the targeting/verification process, requesting NGOs inclusion in the registration of beneficiaries.⁸⁰ These actors reported lengthy and complex discussions with authorities, during which delivery of assistance was suspended from their side to avoid potential manipulation. One NGO reported having to stop aid delivery for almost three months while reassurances on a sufficiently balanced registration process were sought.

The move was however taken on board by some UN officials active within the EOC clusters, who pushed at EHCT level for humanitarian actors' increased engagement in household targeting.

Not all organisations though seem to have pulled immediately in the same direction. Some humanitarian staff reported not having perceived major challenges in terms of proper targeting for their NGO or agency or did not feel comfortable openly challenging beneficiaries' lists which were often perceived as the prerogative of local authorities.

⁷⁹ In particular for the sensitive areas of Non-food items and cash distributions.

⁸⁰ Some interviewees reported that this was facilitated by directly approaching authorities at village and district level, negotiating different registration processes or, in areas of Gedeo where targeting practices based on status were preventing IDPs from receiving assistance, in building the case for at least including individuals with specific vulnerabilities (such as pregnant and lactating women or the elderly) in beneficiary lists.

Community perception towards humanitarian organisations can be heavily influenced by dysfunctional aid allocation

Some tensions and incidents linked to communities' perception of exclusion from aid were also reported, most notably determining a halt in food distributions in some areas of West Guji in December 2018. Community perception towards humanitarian organisations can be heavily influenced by dysfunctional aid allocation, undermining their image of impartiality and neutrality. Potential for doing harm or the risk of aid fuelling conflicts cannot be ruled out.

The process to work out a formal guidance document to inform the targeting and verification strategy proved very lengthy. Advocacy was done at EHCT, clusters and donors level and finally succeeded in having the EHCT endorse a Guideline for Targeting and Verification in humanitarian contexts in March 2019. The document provides for direct inclusion of communities and humanitarian organisations in targeting committees and for independent verification to be done by humanitarian actors. Reportedly, this was received positively and openly by authorities at Federal level.

Under the current humanitarian framework in Ethiopia, humanitarian actors have not tended to play a prominent role in aid targeting

As a matter of fact, National Guidelines for Targeting were established in 2011.⁸¹ Although mostly focused on food assistance, the guidelines promote principles of impartiality and accountability as well as community participation in beneficiary targeting and registration. It is specified that "this is carried out at community level, overseen and supported by local government and humanitarian partner organisations".⁸² The fact that humanitarian actors have not tended to play a role in the process seems to have been caused primarily by practices on the ground, often in non-conflict contexts where questions of neutrality/impartiality might appear less obvious, and has been legitimised by the broader humanitarian framework in Ethiopia, which emphasises the government's prominent role in humanitarian response.

Consequently, it is highly likely that the future implementation of the new targeting guidelines will mostly depend on the willingness and negotiation capacity of humanitarian actors on the ground. During discussions with some humanitarian staff, interviewees understood that the new targeting guidelines were expected to provide specific guidance for the crisis in Gedeo and West Guji, due to the high level of politicisation, but that they would not be applied strictly country-wide.

⁸¹ *National Guidelines on Targeting Relief Food Assistance*, Addis Ababa, August 2011.

⁸² "Priority should be given to those most at risk, and targeting must be needs-based (following an impartial and transparent assessment of the vulnerability and needs of different groups). All actors and organisations involved in the targeting of [...] assistance in Ethiopia should strive to meet these standards". Ibid.

F. HUMANITARIAN POSITIONING ON RETURN PROCESSES

Most humanitarian workers interviewed agreed that finding an effective and common positioning on the process started by authorities in August 2018 to favour returns of IDPs in Gedeo Zone was a major challenge.

Finding an effective and common position on IDP returns in Gedeo and West Guji was a major challenge across the humanitarian community

It must be recognised that some challenges were beyond the reach of the humanitarian community; most interviewed humanitarian workers and officials highlighted the poor leverage towards government authorities in influencing decisions on IDP return plans, despite repeated attempts to advocate at a high level.

There are nevertheless inter-connections between how the humanitarian community framed and approached the response and the political decision-making that emerged.

First of all, the authorities' rhetoric around preventing "aid dependency" and "avoiding the situation becoming unnecessarily protracted" built very substantially on the language that the humanitarian system itself has introduced and promoted in Ethiopia in the recent years as a "new way of working". Reviewing what this means in conflict-related crises is now a challenge.

Besides, a common understanding of the situation and the political drivers behind the conflict by the humanitarian actors involved was probably one of the preconditions to come up with a consistent approach. However, interviewees from different agencies provided very different narratives on key issues, including the events that caused the displacement in Gedeo and West Guji, as well as the extent and magnitude of the initial violence. There was also no agreement among the interviewees on the drivers behind the push for returns, and whether the process was led by the federal or regional government.

The lack of common narrative on the situation is an indicator of the humanitarian community's struggle to understand the changing operational environment in Ethiopia

The lack of common narrative is a problem in itself, but it is also an indicator of the humanitarian community's struggle to understand its operational environment within the country. Once again, MSF was no exception. Despite a large operational presence in both Gedeo and West Guji and large numbers of staff embedded in or from the IDP community, MSF teams struggled throughout the response to agree on a clear understanding of the initial levels of violence and relations between displaced people, their representatives, host communities, and the authorities. Tracing of secondary IDP movements was conducted, but often without a clear understanding of patterns and drivers. Attempts to obtain highly needed information on the above to build a solid advocacy strategy provided mostly anecdotal information.

Engagement and advocacy on the return process below the Federal level was also reported to be less than ideal. In the early phases of the crisis, the major "muscular" push coming from federal authorities and NDRMC for enhancing emergency response may have produced a bias which

steered most of the negotiation efforts at Addis Ababa level. This may also have been a reflex coming from a consolidated modus operandi and an expectation by humanitarians of strong top-down decision-making on the authorities' side. Yet, with the prolonging of the crisis, the trickling-down of decisions taken in Addis Ababa became more and more problematic and the role of Regional and Zonal authorities in decision-making became increasingly more prominent; in Gedeo, in particular, a number of interviewees confirmed a shift in leadership around October. Yet, the level of understanding and adaptation to this shift by different humanitarian actors remains unclear. MSF itself did not opt for stronger lobbying efforts at regional or capital level, with the exception of adhoc visits from country coordinators regarding specific issues.

The high turnover of senior coordination staff, who were supposed to negotiate with authorities and provide a “buffer” for implementing agencies, was an obstacle

At EOC level, the high turnover of senior coordinators and cluster leaders who were supposed to provide a significant negotiation “buffer” role towards authorities was reported to be an obstacle to this cause. And despite notable efforts by some coordinators, some NGOs and MSF field staff also highlighted how in several cases, the voices of some UN staff embedded in the EOC could hardly be distinguished from the ones of the Government.

In addition, as of mid-October, the National Disaster Risk Management Commission (NDRMC), the major federal stakeholder for humanitarian response, was put under the umbrella of the newly-created Ministry of Peace (a structure in charge of major internal security tasks).⁸³ Several humanitarian actors highlighted how this coincided with an increased effort to frame the humanitarian response and the IDP crisis within a broader political agenda.

The operational strategy of the humanitarian system around the subject of IDPs returns was also problematic.

Negotiations were often reactive rather than proactive, with less effort devoted to designing contingency plans for reaction to sudden or forced returns

Some of the humanitarian workers interviewed, despite recognising the complexity of the political scenario, highlighted a reactive, rather than proactive, mode of operation. In Gedeo and West Guji, the EHCT often pushed government authorities for a clear return plan as a precondition for deciding the modalities of humanitarian engagement in areas of return; according to the humanitarian workers and UN officials interviewed, no concrete answers were provided until April 2019.⁸⁴ Much less effort was devoted to proactively designing contingency plans for rapid reaction in case of sudden or forced returns, considering likely operational scenarios and needed contingency stocks. An attempt came from the ground in December 2018 from lead agencies at EOC level in Gedeo and West Guji, but it is unclear whether the draft contingency plan proposed reached decision-making levels in Addis Ababa.

⁸³ See: <https://www.africanews.com/2018/10/17/muferiat-kamil-ethiopia-s-historic-speaker-now-first-peace-minister/>

⁸⁴ In early April 2019, a formal plan aiming for Country-wide IDP return and resettlement was shared and presented to the humanitarian and donor community by the Ministry of Peace.

More broadly, the shared concerns around if and how to engage in “return” areas did not translate into a visible common approach and operationalisation on the ground.

A common operational approach on if and how to engage in return areas, key precondition for a common effective advocacy strategy, was not visible on the ground

Concerned about creating pull factors in insecure return areas, a few organisations opted for a complete operational phase-out. Other actors adopted a more pragmatic approach: with thousands of IDPs moving to areas of origin with no access to basic services and exposed to potentially life-threatening hazards,⁸⁵ MSF and others opted in the aftermath of the return process for an intervention focusing at least on immediate life-saving needs. The operationalisation of this approach was not straightforward, however. The continuous mobility of the IDP population proved challenging for most organisations. The mentioned interferences on beneficiaries’ targeting seriously undermined the effectiveness of the response, in addition to plunging once again the humanitarian community into a lengthy debate on how to tackle the issue.

Some agencies, on the other side, moved decidedly towards the early recovery and rehabilitation approach voiced by authorities; in early 2019, international funds were reportedly mobilised for longer-term actions on shelters’ rehabilitation, notwithstanding on-going concerns on returning IDPs’ access to their land and properties.

In practice, a common operational approach in return areas, key precondition for a common effective advocacy strategy, was not visible on the ground.

Despite the challenges, there was more openness to discuss IDP principles and protection compared to conflict-related crises in previous years

Despite the challenges, not every conclusion is bleak: a number of interviewees reported more openness in the discussion of IDP principles and protection on the authorities’ side compared to conflict-related crises in previous years. NGO and UN protection monitoring visits to IDPs and returns sites were allowed and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights of the UN was able to deploy in Gedeo and West Guji. International staff presence was accepted to a high degree, once again indicating that authorities may be keen to open to external resources and to the higher level of scrutiny coming with it where they perceive that the needs on the ground justify the “risk”.

As of early April, the Ministry of Peace brought international partners around the table to seek support around a strategic plan to address internal displacement in Ethiopia, acknowledging the existence in the Country of 2.9 million conflict-related IDPs.

Whether the crises described have provided due lessons learnt for future engagement will be determined by the actual operationalisation of the principles on the ground.

⁸⁵ <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/iom-ethiopia-gedeo-guji-return-analysis-report-i-august-2018>

G. A MATTER OF INSECURITY OR SECURITY MANAGEMENT?

The security situation in Ethiopia is changing, with the emergence of new patterns of conflict and violence

Most interviewees agreed on the fact that the overall security situation across Ethiopia has seen a significant evolution in the last two years. The increase in tensions and clashes along ethnic lines have turned some administrative boundaries into hotspots of internal ethnic-related violence; among the consequences in terms of humanitarian operations, restrictions of access have been repeatedly mentioned by interviewees, very well exemplified by the long-term inaccessibility of Kamashi Zone in v Benishangul Gumuz. In some areas of the country, the involvement of State and non-State armed actors in clashes have contributed to an escalation of conflict, culminating in the reported use of heavy weaponry.⁸⁶

In the last year, the return of a number of opposition groups with armed wings, such as the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), has introduced a new factor in the security equation: military operations with the Ethiopian Armed Forces and opposition groups on opposite sides have been observed in areas where humanitarian activities are taking place, as has been the case in different areas of Oromia. This has occurred both in West Guji and in East and West Wellega, albeit in different modalities.⁸⁷

Humanitarian actors have reacted differently to this change, with varying approaches to security management

The reaction by the humanitarian community to this changing scenario has been, once again, uneven and strongly dependent on the individual organisations' modus operandi in terms of security management.

UN agencies depend on UNDSS instructions and guidance when it comes to security management.

⁸⁶ This has been the case in Moyale, along the Southern border between Oromia and Somali Regions, which has witnessed on-and-off fighting peaking in December 2018, when reports of prolonged heavy clashes caused deaths and the displacement of hundreds of Ethiopians towards Kenya. Similar incidents, allegedly involving the Ethiopian Defense Forces, had already provoked the flash displacement of some 9,700 individuals in March 2018. Humanitarian access to the Somali side of Moyale, especially for relief food deliveries, has been extremely limited and at times completely shut down since 2017. See: <https://af.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSKBN1OE090>; <https://reliefweb.int/report/kenya/nearly-10000-ethiopians-seek-asylum-moyale-kenya-following-violence-back-home>

⁸⁷ Unfortunately, an objective analysis and comparison of the number and magnitude of conflict-related incidents in the country over the last two years is not yet available. The Uppsala Conflict Database Program, for instance, one of the most comprehensive databases in this sense, has updated information only up to 2017. See: <https://ucdp.uu.se/#country/530>. The same is valid for incidents and security restrictions affecting humanitarian actors, as a humanitarian access incidents database was put in place by OCHA only in late 2018; yet, the data publicly available for January and February 2019 for Geddo and West Guji shows a rather telling picture: while the overall number of incidents is not specified, restrictions of movement and active hostilities & military operations constitute 22% and 17% respectively of the causes for humanitarians lack of access to beneficiaries: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/22022019_ocha_geddo_wguji_displacement_snapshot.pdf

Security guidelines and advice — or the lack thereof — were often developed without physical presence on the ground, contributing to risk-avoidance

In Gedeo and West Guji, UNDSS has indeed tried to maintain a physical presence by detaching staff to the operational hubs of Dilla and Bule Hora. However, the turnover of security focal points was described by interviewees as extremely high, with changes happening every two to three weeks during most of the crisis. As for West and East Wellega, the limited resources available to UNDSS did not allow the deployment of any security focal point to the ground as of March 2019. Security guidelines and advice — or the lack thereof — coming without physical presence contributed to a risk-avoidance posture.

NGOs not relying on UNDSS have reported different security management strategies. Some organisations that were able to deploy coordination staff with security management experience on the ground, especially in West Guji, reported having reduced the duration of access constraints. However, not all NGOs possess this type of expertise in the country or had the capacity to provide it from outside.

In East and West Wallega, the perception of the security situation within the humanitarian community was extremely uneven, with different narratives of risk and insecurity emerging

Actually, some incidents affecting humanitarian actors did occur, as reported by a number of interviewees. In West Guji Zone tensions increased in October, closely linked to increased military operations, with some cases of blockages of NGOs and agencies' cars by armed actors or individuals. However, according to interviewees, a security management team was never established in Dilla or Bule Hora and UN staff interviewed reported having to hibernate without due guidance or adequate communications equipment.⁸⁸

Incidents involving blocked humanitarian convoys were also reported in East and West Wellega, notably in proximity with the border of Benishangul Gumuz.

Interestingly, the perception of the security situation, especially in the Wellegas, was extremely uneven. Two different narratives seemed to emerge: one depicting Western Oromia as a highly insecure context with life-threatening risks for humanitarian staff; the other one, mostly recorded from the NGOs that mobilised in the area in the early phase of the crisis, recognising the existence of security risks and access constraints but with limited risks for agencies and NGOs themselves.

⁸⁸ Reportedly, only in January 2019 some international staff was seconded to the ground in order to develop evacuation and medical evacuation plans.

Ethiopia has not traditionally been considered a highly insecure context, there is lack of in-country reflex and expertise in security management and access negotiation

This divide and, more broadly, the different security management practices are understandable: Ethiopia has not traditionally been considered a highly insecure context and, until very recently, the only armed/security actor humanitarian actors have engaged with for access was the Ethiopian government. This has led to a substantial loss of in-country reflex and expertise in security management and access negotiation.⁸⁹ The political sensitivity of highlighting security concerns vis-à-vis authorities and a humanitarian framework strongly focused on delivery through government systems are likely to have exacerbated it.

With this in mind, it is easy to understand why some humanitarian organisations struggled to navigate the new challenges posed by a changing security environment.

A lack of interiorisation of the shift in the security scenario may have consequences, as organisations unable to provide internally resources for enhanced security management find themselves relying almost exclusively on advice coming — directly or indirectly — from local authorities.

Imbalance and a poor community perception in terms of impartiality and neutrality may emerge as a risk. In East Wellega, the district of Haro Limu — considered an opposition stronghold — saw very poor humanitarian engagement due to perceived security risks; as a matter of fact, in this case, formal blockages were not coming from authorities⁹⁰ but were driven by humanitarian agencies' high risk perception.

In the absence of a mind-set shift and a more appropriate security management strategy, there is a risk of humanitarian action being perceived as biased

National staff ethnicity in conflict-related contexts also became an issue in light of the ethnic-related tensions; finding “neutral” profiles that are not exposed to risks to be deployed to conflict-affected areas is a challenge that MSF itself has experienced. The risk of an ethnic bias in terms of staff presence cannot be ruled out, especially as the easiest choice for organisations — also based on experience in non-conflict related crises — can be to rely mostly on local staff or individuals from the same ethnic constituency as the area of assignment.

In the absence of a mind-set shift and a more appropriate security management strategy, there is a risk that humanitarian presence or action could be perceived as biased.⁹¹ Not all interviewees agreed on the urgency of this matter, however, and not all recognised the risks of poor community perception or neutrality in the current context.

⁸⁶ Although a trend in the direction of risk aversion within the humanitarian community seems to be rather global; see: <https://arhp.msf.es/emergency-gap-papers-aid-environment/emergency-gap-insecurity-always-insurmountable-obstacle>

⁹⁰ MSF and other actors were actually able to move there in several occasions, through strengthened security contacts and checks.

⁹¹ Some incidents, such as blockages of convoys directed towards Benishangul Gumuz in West Wellega by non-State armed actors, can be perceived as a first signal of potential attrition.

There was, however, an overall agreement on the need to upgrade security management and reduce security-related access hurdles. The responsibility does not lie with UNDSS but with the Humanitarian Country Team. If the current access constraints in insecure areas are perceived as a major obstacle to delivering assistance, it would be appropriate to expect a request for UNDSS capacity enhancement and, more broadly, a different security set-up for the humanitarian system. This needs to be based on updated analysis that takes into account the changing context and will require resources. It must be recognised that the step may have political implications and impact relations with authorities. Whether there is willingness to navigate them or not remains to be seen.

Investments in enhancing staff security awareness and management are needed

More broadly, and at individual organisations level, investments in this sense and in enhancing staff security awareness and management should be expected, with consequent requests of additional resources to donors. However, seeing the absence of significant incidents affecting agencies, a number of interviewees questioned the relevance of the investment. Some humanitarian workers interviewed have actually expressed their fear that only a severe incident targeting humanitarian staff would lead to a genuine push for such initiatives.

Concluding remarks

The context in Ethiopia is changing and the humanitarian community needs to change with it if it is to respond effectively to current needs

Reinstating the relevance of humanitarian action in the acute phase of conflict-related crises is essential

Acute, rapid-onset, conflict-related crises have become the new reality in Ethiopia and are likely to continue to drive humanitarian needs for the foreseeable future. With rapid political change, internal clashes are likely to continue and localised conflicts may also see changes in terms of dynamics and scale.

The humanitarian complex needs to adapt to face this new reality in Ethiopia and navigate the challenges that come with it. Improvement in the timeliness and effectiveness of responses to more complex crises needs is essential.

Reinstating the relevance of humanitarian action in the acute phase of conflict-related displacement is not only necessary to save lives and limit human suffering but is also a key precondition for advocating for a principled approach towards responding to IDPs' needs, including protection. The humanitarian community, and MSF with it, can only assert its legitimacy by providing people-focused, life-saving support in a timely fashion during the acute phases of crises that see the local system struggling the most in providing the needed assistance. "Missing" the acute phase results in both the deterioration of humanitarian needs and poor effectiveness in advocating with authorities.

Challenges in responding effectively have been both internal and external. Ethiopia is far from being a "failed State" like some other humanitarian hotspots in the continent, and has a fully functioning government with which donor countries have strong economic ties and long-term interests. Until the very recent political changes came in, political decision-making often downplayed humanitarian access in favour of other internal political priorities. Leverage by the international community has often been limited, also due to the conflicting priorities in the country: Ethiopia plays a fundamental role in regional stability and counter-terrorism,⁹² as well as migration;⁹³ all agendas that international donors consider a high priority.

⁹² A leading role in the AU- and UN-led stabilization of Somalia represents a clear example; see: <http://amisom-au.org/ethiopia-endf/>

⁹³ The amount of EU funding in the Country through the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa linked to reducing migration flows amounts to above EUR 230 million: https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/region/horn-africa/ethiopia_en

The limitations of the structural set-up of the humanitarian complex in Ethiopia need to be recognised

With this political environment, and the strong degree of politicisation witnessed in the crises described, challenges and interferences in humanitarian action are definitely foreseeable regardless of a potential improvement in the humanitarian system's emergency response capacity.

Yet, recent political changes have also brought an increased openness from government authorities to acknowledge the humanitarian impact of internal conflict. Room for increased significant engagement seems to exist.

Sensibility towards public opinion, as seen in the response to the most recent media campaigns on Gedeo Zone, seems to have been increasing on the authorities' side. This new factor could have an impact on humanitarian access and space.

Some interviewees also saw a positive evolution in the discussion within the humanitarian community, with operationalisation of humanitarian principles being much more thoroughly discussed than in previous years.

"Traditional" partners and donor countries have a unique role to play when it comes to responding to large-scale acute complex crises, by virtue of their experience and expertise; downplaying the need for a principled response to conflict-related crises to focus on other priorities would constitute a major political failure.

Framing humanitarian action in a developmental rhetoric of "ending needs" has had an impact on the humanitarian mind-set and capacity in the country

In January 2019, the Ethiopian Parliament adopted significant revisions to the country's refugee law,⁹⁴ allowing for stronger integration through improved access to education, work permits, and enhanced rights. It would be rather paradoxical for similar improvements to be denied to displaced Ethiopian citizens. The basis for sustained and increased international advocacy on the issue seems to be there.

Nevertheless, the limitations of the structural set-up of the humanitarian complex in Ethiopia and the framework for crisis response need to be recognised.

First of all, the long-standing overarching humanitarian strategy and narrative in the country, geared towards tackling long-term needs and framing emergency response activities — including in conflict-related settings, in a developmental rhetoric of "ending needs" — has definitely had an impact on the humanitarian mind-set and capacity.

⁹⁴ See: <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2019/1/5c41b1784/unhcr-welcomes-ethiopia-law-granting-rights-refugees.html>

The current humanitarian framework has led to a substantial loss of expertise and capacity in responding to acute and complex crises

Blaming humanitarian aid for creating dependency or claiming that it should be operationalised in a way that prevents displacement crises from becoming “unnecessarily protracted”, as stated by a former Humanitarian Coordinator, is indeed a radical position given the acute immediate needs of displaced populations and the inherent difficulties in ensuring that “solutions” for displacement follow humanitarian principles and meet IDP rights.

Humanitarian funding and financing modalities, as well as organisations’ operational focus and strategies, seem to have been profoundly shaped by this humanitarian framework. There has been a substantial loss of expertise and capacity in responding to acute complex crises and a tendency to focus on longer-term programming.

This, combined with a form of bureaucratisation of the humanitarian coordination system, has also drastically reduced the agility and flexibility needed in the early phases of crisis responses, by introducing a framework that puts an emphasis on immediate comprehensive strategies and “avoiding overlapping” to optimise resources, rather than rapid response to the most acute needs.

Reflexes in terms of access negotiation and security management seem to have suffered as well, with many humanitarian actors relying on the authorities to identify areas of action and assess risks. The same phenomenon is observed with targeting beneficiaries, as clearly highlighted in Gedeo and West Guji.

Mobilisation of adequate expertise and resources for complex crises has also been a challenge for emergency-oriented organisations such as MSF, which has definitely struggled in navigating some of the difficulties emerging in the described crises. It is however even more challenging when the orientation of the humanitarian complex leaves little room for the critical investments needed to build up adequate skill sets and rapidly mobilise the highly needed surge capacity.

In this sense, rapid response mechanisms with a focus on acute crises may provide a useful driver to improve the response, provided that donors and implementing actors enhance their emergency preparedness and ensure sufficient surge capacity — including in terms of staff with specific expertise — to make sure funding becomes rapidly effective on the ground.

MSF is now reflecting internally on how to maximise the relevance, timeliness, and effectiveness of its own responses to emergencies in Ethiopia. An external evaluation of the 2018 MSF response in Gedeo and West Guji is due to take place with these objectives in mind.

A similar exercise focusing on the overall humanitarian system's reaction, as suggested by some of the humanitarian workers interviewed for this report, would be extremely beneficial, provided that a "success story" conclusion is not established presumptively, and that a spirit of critical self-appraisal prevails.

The momentum is there to adapt the humanitarian set-up to respond more effectively, but quick decisions are needed

The on-going reform programme in Ethiopia provides a window of opportunity for creatively rethinking the current approaches to humanitarian response in the country. The momentum is there to adapt the humanitarian set-up to a new context, asserting the value added by the humanitarian community well beyond the mobilisation of funds. Identifying different operational strategies and modalities of intervention would not provide a solution to all the challenges and dilemmas linked to humanitarian assistance to IDPs in Ethiopia. But increasing capacity and adapting operational frameworks to respond more effectively to complex crises are, at least, choices that are for the most part in the hands of the humanitarian community itself. Quick decisions are however needed to avoid turning this window into a missed opportunity.

