

# WAR AND LOCAL RECOVERY IN FIVE TABIAS IN TIGRAY, ETHIOPIA

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

December 2024



# WAR AND LOCAL RECOVERY IN FIVE *TABIAS* IN TIGRAY, ETHIOPIA

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS AND  
POLICY IMPLICATIONS

December 2024



# WAR AND LOCAL RECOVERY IN FIVE TABIAS IN TIGRAY, ETHIOPIA SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The research team wishes to sincerely thank all the individuals and institutions that contributed to the research project's success. Special thanks go to the funders, the Embassy of Ireland, and the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), and to Mekelle University and the Rift Valley Institute for their supporting role. We also extend our gratitude to woreda and tabia officials, our facilitators in the field and all our respondents for their time, as well as the five communities at large for their welcome.

## **DISCLAIMER**

The views expressed here do not necessarily represent the views of the Embassy of Ireland, UK FCDO, Mekelle University and the Rift Valley Institute, or their respective staffs.

## **PHOTOS**

The photo on the cover page shows a group of children sitting in a room in the damaged Adiagew satellite school in Begasheka. The photo at the back shows a group of rural houses in a field in Mai Liham. The research team owns the photo credits.

## **DESIGN/LAYOUT**

Maggie Dougherty

# CONTENTS

---

<b>Abstract</b>	<b>5</b>
<hr/>	
<b>The Research</b>	<b>7</b>
Map 1: The five <i>tabias</i> in Tigray	8
<hr/>	
<b>Key Findings</b>	<b>10</b>
Devastation of local economies and livelihoods	10
Service disruption in education, healthcare, and access to safe water	12
Vulnerability and social protection	13
Local governance and trust deficit	14
Social life disrupted; community cohesion eroded	15
<hr/>	
<b>Community Views on Future Recovery</b>	<b>18</b>
<hr/>	
<b>Policy Implications for Support to Local Recovery</b>	<b>19</b>
Crosscutting Priorities	19
Sectoral Recovery Priorities	21

# ABSTRACT

*The research, supported by the Embassy of Ireland and the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) and involving collaboration between Mekelle University and independent researchers, explores the impact of the 2020-2022 Tigray war, the 2023 drought and subsequent recovery efforts in five tabias in Tigray, Ethiopia, featuring diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and pre-war development levels. In these tabias the research team engaged with 300 individuals from different walks of life, focusing on local economies, basic services, governance, social cohesion, and community priorities for recovery.*

*The findings highlight complex socioeconomic and political dynamics in the period leading up to the outbreak of warfare in November 2020. The research found that pre-war economic progress was brutally halted by the conflict, which destroyed infrastructure, led to widespread loss of assets, and disrupted markets. Recovery is hampered by war-time losses, the 2023 drought, high costs of inputs, and limited access to credit. Education and healthcare services suffered from looting, destruction, and staff shortages; schools remained mostly closed throughout the war. Schools and health facilities struggle to recover, leaving the communities with constrained access to much lower-quality services. Water infrastructure was frequently targeted and access to drinking water remains poor, critically so in some tabias. The war, followed by drought, aggravated vulnerability. Social protection measures like the safety net were stopped during the war, and emergency food aid was hardly available. These programmes, only resumed in 2024, are insufficient and as they currently operate, fail to protect the most vulnerable. Local governance structures are severely weakened: they remain under-resourced and lack community trust, due to war-time corruption, conscription practices, and inefficiency. The war eroded community cohesion, introducing cleavages for instance between families who sent members to the front and those who found ways of escaping this, and exacerbated socioeconomic divides. Trauma, grief, and mistrust pervade social and institutional life. The war disproportionately impacted children, youth, women, and returning fighters. Women experienced unique challenges, including widespread sexual violence and increased caregiving burdens. These groups continue to face significant, and largely unaddressed hardships.*

*Accordingly, the research underscores the urgent need for more sustained and multidimensional recovery support to address the immediate and long-term effects of the conflict and foster sustainable peace and development across the region and Ethiopia as a whole. Views from community members provide valuable guidance for targeted support and rebuilding efforts. Peace and stability were universally called for as the priority for recovery. On a cross-sectoral level, the research highlights the importance of coordinated recovery strategies tailored to the unique needs of each tabia and people-centered approaches with particular attention to the most vulnerable groups. The revitalisation of transparent local governance, the strengthening of local security structures, initiatives to rebuild trust and social solidarity within communities, the scaling up of community-based mental health approaches, and the expansion of more effective social protection measures are critical foundations for greater investment in education, healthcare, WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene), and economic recovery.*



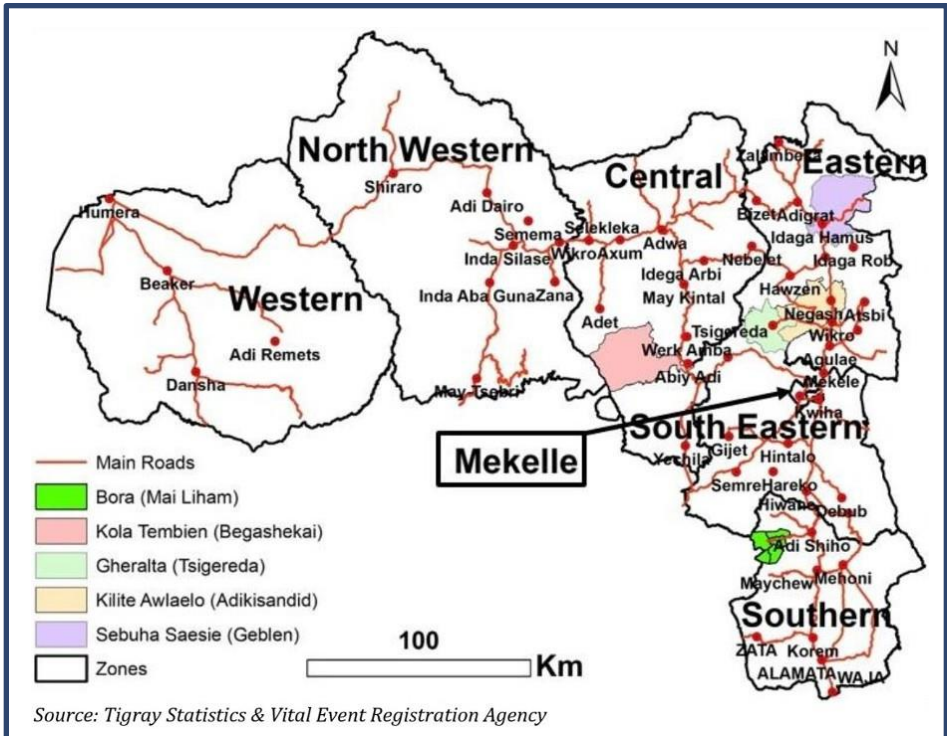
# THE RESEARCH

This summary was prepared based on the report of a study titled ‘War and early recovery in five *tabias* in Southern, Central, and Eastern Tigray.’ The research, funded by the Embassy of Ireland and the UK FCDO, was a collaborative effort between Mekelle University and two independent researchers. The research team was led by Catherine Dom with Kelemework Tafere (PhD) and Tesfaalem Gebreyohannes (PhD). Field research was conducted by Catherine Dom, Kelemework Tafere (PhD), Kiros Berhanu, Selam Tekie, Solomon Gebreselassie, Zbello Tesfamariam, and Betilehem Assefa.

The small-scale, qualitative study, which took place from early April 2024 to the end of October 2024 including fieldwork between 12 May and 23 June 2024, aimed to capture the complex effects of the Tigray war (November 2020- November 2022) and recovery efforts a year and a half after the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA) which ended hostilities in November 2022. Accordingly, the study explored the complex dynamics of war legacies and recovery efforts in five *tabias*—the equivalent of *kebeles* elsewhere in Ethiopia, the lowest level of governance in Ethiopia’s federal system. The five *tabias* are Begasheka in Kola Tembien woreda, Central zone, Mai Liham in Bora woreda, Southern zone, Tahtay Adikisandid in Kilte Awlaelo woreda, Eastern zone, Tsigereda in Gheralta woreda, Eastern zone, and Geblen in Subhae Saesie woreda, Eastern zone.

These *tabias* represent diverse demographic, socio-economic, and environmental contexts including regarding geography (altitude, rainfall), population size and composition, proximity to major urban centres, economic development level before the war, and development potential. In terms of geographical features, for instance, Geblen has the highest altitude at average 2,313 metres above sea level (masl) and Begasheka is the lowest at an average of 1,721 masl. There are also differences in terms of population, ranging from Begasheka (20,000 dwellers) to Geblen (less than 4,000), and population composition and structure. Geblen, for instance, has the highest proportion of female-headed households and is the most heterogeneous *tabia* of the five with almost half of the population being Muslim. In terms of economic development status before the war, Tahtay Adikisandid was the most developed while Geblen was marked by the lowest economic development. These *tabias*, different from one another on a range of markers, are not seen as representations of the general Tigrayan context but are considered as exemplars of a diversity of local contexts.

MAP 1: THE FIVE TABIAS IN TIGRAY



*Boundaries and names shown do not imply endorsement by funders, RVI or any other body.*

To document the effects of the 2020-2022 war and the 2023 drought and identify ongoing recovery effort(s) in the *tabias'* communities, the research team conducted around 300 conversation-like interviews with a mix of community members: women and men of different wealth and age groups, farmers, businesspeople, traders, local officials, individuals with specific profiles (e.g. beneficiaries of social protection, households excluded from such support, members of the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF) who fought during the war). While recognising the subjectivity and positionality of both the researchers and the respondents, the diverse pool of interviewees enables the research team to triangulate a range of viewpoints and identify convergences and differences in people's perceptions, thinking and actions.

It is posited that unless policymakers and policy interventions have a detailed, grounded knowledge of the local context and take into consideration the 'voice of the people', recovery

efforts will fail or lack effectiveness in alleviating people's vulnerability and suffering. To bring people's voices center stage, respondents were invited to describe the past five years regarding (1) local economies/livelihoods, (2) basic services, (3) social protection, (4) local governance, and (5) community cohesion, (6) as well as their views on recovery priorities and how they saw the future. The main findings of the study are presented below.

# KEY FINDINGS

## **The *tabias* before and during the war**

Before the war in November 2020, people in all *tabias* were hopeful when Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed took office in April 2018. However, tensions and people's fears rose over time as verbal conflicts intensified between federal and regional leaders and as both sides condoned and took actions that worsened the situation (like the federal government not addressing the blockade of roads to Tigray, and Tigray holding elections against federal warnings). In some of the *tabias* a few respondents noted that preparations for war were made, including psychological training, militia exercises, and distributing weapons. However, despite their fears and these preparations, most people remained hopeful that war could be averted so the outbreak of the war in early November 2020 still took most by surprise, as well as the level of violence unleashed 'by a government against its own people.'

The Tigray war saw three broad phases, and this was common to all five *tabias*. The first phase lasted from November 2020 to February 2021. In all *tabias*, active conflict was experienced locally or in nearby areas, with several civilians being massacred in Mai Liham, Begasheka, and Tsigereda, widespread displacement and harm to civilians including looting and destruction of private properties, sexual violence against girls and women in all *tabias* except Geblen, and the occupation of the *tabias* by the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF) and Eritrean forces. The second phase was characterised by more 'stable' occupation, with an increase in mostly voluntary mobilisation by TDF and the eventual withdrawal of the ENDF and interim administration established by the federal government and regaining of control by the TDF and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in June 2021. The third and final phase was marked by severe disruption and hardships, a rise in TDF conscription locally organized by the local administration, starting from the end of 2021, and finally culminated in the signing in November 2022 of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA, known popularly in Tigray as the Pretoria agreement). During this period from June 2021 to November 2022 there was no more active conflict in any of the five *tabias*. However, all of them experienced the direct consequences of the 'de facto' siege which affected the whole region.

## **DEVASTATION OF LOCAL ECONOMIES AND LIVELIHOODS**

*The conflict had catastrophic impacts on local economies, affecting both farming and non-farming sources of livelihoods.*

The pre-war economy was characterised by an upward trend including rise in incomes. Before the war and except for the remoter Geblen, the *tabias* had varied but generally positive

economic trajectories, with irrigation playing a key role in raising incomes in several of them. Tahtay Adikisandid and Begasheka had extensive irrigation networks, while Tsigereda served as a vibrant trade hub for nearby areas and hosted a rising number of non-farm businesses. Economic diversification was common. Many residents engaged in trade, small or larger non-farm businesses, skilled and unskilled labour, and seasonal or longer-term migration, with the range and relative importance of these livelihood options varying among the *tabias*. In addition to individuals, multipurpose economic associations, cooperatives, production associations, credit and saving associations, and youth or women groups were active economic actors in production and distribution. Several factors contributed to the economic growth including relatively easy access to agricultural inputs, safe and affordable transport services, proximity to urban centres, relatively good telecom services except in Geblen, and some access to electricity (though usually only in *tabia* centres) and access to credit from microfinance institutions.

The upward trend of the pre-war period ended with the massive economic disruption due to the war followed by the 2023 drought. Looting, destruction, and disruptions to market access devastated local economies and livelihoods. Agricultural infrastructure like irrigation systems was destroyed or damaged, large amounts of crop stock were burned or stolen, and livestock was slaughtered, stolen, or sold by households to access food. In addition to the impact on local businesspeople, small businesses and production associations lost machinery such as pipes and pumps, stock, and capital. During the wartime interim administration established by the federal government, some attempts were made to distribute agricultural inputs, but they were mostly either unavailable or extremely expensive. Livelihoods were also impacted because of disruption in transport services, which became expensive and often unavailable, exacerbated due to safety concerns and damage to road infrastructure. Transportation disruptions drastically impacted trade as well as the livelihoods of daily labourers. The siege also severely impacted livelihoods, as all food items and other daily life consumables were extremely costly. The disruptions of the war were not equal across the *tabias*: in Geblen, which was economically disadvantaged before the war, the war-related setbacks were less pronounced as there was no intense fighting in the area, but the 2023 drought impact was particularly strong.

The post-conflict recovery is slow. Asset losses during the war have not been replenished. The recovery has been further hampered by the drought in 2023 which severely impacted agricultural yields, particularly in drought-prone Geblen, which reported crop yields of less than 5% of expectations. Irrigation and farming activities continue to suffer from damaged infrastructure and the high costs of agricultural inputs such as seeds, pesticides, and fertilizers. Transport limitations, lax governance, a sense of continued insecurity, and lack of access to credit are key factors hindering local economic recovery for both farming and non-farm livelihoods. Economic recovery efforts involve such diverse actors as the regional government (for instance, through the resumption of agriculture extension services), the local diaspora, and the Tigrayan organisations like the Relief Society of Tigray, but their reach is limited and uneven, and interventions from international humanitarian and development actors remain small-scale and limited.

## SERVICE DISRUPTION IN EDUCATION, HEALTHCARE, AND ACCESS TO SAFE WATER

*The conflict disrupted essential services, putting health and education at risk across all five tabias and worsening access to drinking water in most.*

In the education sector, disruptions started due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but the war has severely worsened the situation. School infrastructure and equipment including books, computers, school feeding materials, blackboards, chairs, desks, and plasmas were destroyed, damaged, and looted and school compounds were often used as military camps by conflict parties during the active phase of the conflict. In all schools, some teachers and students went to fight either voluntarily or through forced conscription. The teaching-learning process was disrupted as schools remained closed throughout the war in some *tabias*, reopening for a few months with NGO support in Mai Liham and Begasheka, although only a few students were attending for fear of air strikes. After the war, the recovery of the education sector was affected by the widespread destruction, leading to the inability of schools to operate normally. The war and household-level economic hardships including poverty and hunger, along with economic challenges faced by teachers due to low pay, inflation and high costs of living, have led to widespread trauma among children, youth, teachers and parents. This, coupled with perceived low-quality education among teachers and parents alike, negatively impact enrolment, attendance and student and teacher motivation. Most schools have reopened but struggle with teacher shortage (resulting in high workload on existing staff). Resources are severely inadequate, especially in remote schools, and government support for education recovery, beyond salaries, seemed to be limited. Likewise, in each *tabia* some recovery efforts financed by external actors were in place, although these are often insufficient.

Just like education, the health sector, which had seen good progress despite shortages of resources in the pre-war period, was similarly impacted. Most health facilities experienced looting and physical destruction. In the health centres serving the *tabia* communities several staff members joined the TDF, which further limited the services the centres could provide. However, unlike in education, some minimal health services continued to be provided, though these mostly depended on sporadic and limited support by humanitarian NGOs. These extremely limited services led people to return to traditional and religious knowledge and practices and resulted in the death of mothers and children and chronic patients and the spread and reappearance of diseases due to lack of vaccination or treatment. While health services resumed after the signing of the CoHA in November 2022, shortages in healthcare staff, equipment including ambulances, and medicines persist and the available services are, with some exceptions, extremely inadequate (as in government services) or unaffordable (as in private health centres), thus leaving the communities with much-reduced access to lower quality primary healthcare. Severe setbacks have occurred in areas in which there had been remarkable gains before the war—most notably basic hygiene, nutrition, and maternal and child health care. The impacts of the war are further compounded by the 2023 drought, especially worsening malnutrition in several *tabias*. War-time behaviours persist, including birth deliveries at home and recourse to traditional practices and treatment.

Finally, in terms of access to safe water, the research found that water infrastructure was severely damaged and looted by combatants and civilians in Geblen and Mai Liham and in specific areas of Begasheka and Tsigereda, further compounding the unequal distribution of water resources across and within the *tabias* and the impact of climate change. In contrast, access remained good in Tahtay Adikisandid. Access to drinking water emerged as a critical issue, with significant variation in severity across *tabias* in the post-war period. There are some recovery activities by government and humanitarian organisations for drinking water, but results are not tangible everywhere. In June 2024, 95% of Geblen's households had no access to drinking water. Residents in parts of Tsigereda, Begasheka, and most of Mai Liham, also struggled as water infrastructure had only been partially rehabilitated. In Tsigereda an emerging issue was the increased tariff for access to tap water. The challenge of accessing safe water, especially for women and girls, increased their burden as they spent more time and energy fetching water. This raises the risks they face as they must travel longer distances and pose risks to people and animals' health due to use of unsafe water sources.

## VULNERABILITY AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

Before the war, social protection interventions including the federal productive safety net programme (PSNP) and the regionally promoted local Community Care Coalitions (CCC) were reportedly needed only for the vulnerable community members in these *tabias*, including the elderly, disabled, and chronically ill. Emergency food aid (EFA) did not feature as prominent in people's accounts of the period before the war. This lack of emphasis probably stemmed from the absence of a pressing need for such aid in the years leading up to the conflict, as food aid was not permanent during 'normal times.'

The social protection needs of community members increased because of the war. However, apart from rare and limited deliveries of emergency food aid (EFA), there was no other form of formal social protection throughout the war, as PSNP and CCC came to a complete standstill. People survived thanks to community mechanisms based on a strong sense of communal solidarity, especially in the first months of the war. In all *tabias* respondents mentioned food sharing with relatives or neighbours in need and with families of militia excluded from food aid distribution, while some of the aid (including in-kind contributions of clothes, shoes, and money) was collected for and given to the TDF. However, this sense of solidarity eroded over time as the effects of the siege were increasingly strongly felt by all.

The war left a legacy of general impoverishment and exacerbated social vulnerabilities, and this was made worse by the 2023 drought, high inflation, and ever-rising living costs. These factors not only exacerbated the situation for those already vulnerable before the war but also added more people to the category of vulnerable individuals. There is very little support for TDF members who return home with often deep trauma, youth are facing joblessness, hopelessness, and landlessness, and the number of female-headed households and orphans has sharply risen. Women, mothers, and wives dealing with grief, mourning, hopelessness, anger, and resentment in some cases, are particularly vulnerable. Civil servants, daily labourers, small traders, or

businesspeople who exclusively rely on purchasing food, cannot make ends meet.

Against this backdrop of much greater vulnerability, social protection systems are falling short in addressing the increased needs. There was a sense in all five *tabias* that social protection support is extremely insufficient in its coverage and intensity and flawed in its targeting. The PSNP and deliveries of EFA only resumed in 2024, as EFA deliveries were suspended shortly after the signature of the CoHA due to alleged large-scale diversion by government and non-government actors. To this date, these programmes have been insufficient to meet the higher post-war needs and compared to the support necessary for the communities to recover. Residents in all five *tabias* also highlighted serious flaws in their operations, which strongly curtail their effectiveness in protecting the communities' most vulnerable members. Emergency food aid distribution is widely perceived as grossly unfair as beneficiary selection is carried out by people with little to no contextual knowledge, and there is no functional appeal process. This creates huge tensions and resentment within the communities. Some other support has occasionally been provided for specific vulnerable groups, including female-headed households and families of deceased fighters by humanitarian and relief organisations and the local diaspora. However, the coverage remains limited, leaving many without adequate aid. Moreover, the war-time solidarity was said to have been replaced by a 'survival of the fittest' behaviour leaving vulnerable members of the community without anywhere to go.

## LOCAL GOVERNANCE AND TRUST DEFICIT

*Local governance structures suffered significantly, and many community members expressed a lack of trust in government.*

Local governance structures were in place and functional before the war, fused with the TPLF party structure. Under the *woreda* administrations, there were paid civil servants deployed at *tabia* level to work with the community leaders, and an effective community outreach system based on the *kushet* (*keftegna* in Amharic, meaning higher/village) and development groups. However, several respondents perceived that local governance was weakening, highlighting the prevalence of nepotism and corruption, especially since the death of Meles Zenawi in 2012.

During the war, local administration and security leaders went into hiding during the active conflict and occupation phases. When the federal government appointed an interim administration, including *tabia* representatives in some of the *tabias*, they were seen with high suspicion whilst the 'legitimate' local administration was in hiding. The 'former' *tabia* leaders returned to their posts as TPLF regained control when the federal and Eritrean forces left in June 2021. In all five *tabias*, the main task of local officials was to mobilise the community to continue to support the war effort. A particularly controversial aspect of this was their role in the increasingly forcible conscription of household members to the TDF. In all *tabias*—although less strongly so in Gebelen, this remains a sharp dividing line between the local leadership and much of the community. This division is aggravated in several *tabias* by the accusations that local leaders were protecting their own families and relatives in enforcing the conscription and

diverting the limited support reaching the community during the war, as well as channeling community contributions for the TDF to benefit their relatives and networks.

Post-conflict, local governance is seen as deeply problematic, hampered by a lack of financial and material resources and staffing, and demoralised staff at all levels. There was some activity by the local administration in all five *tabias* including in facilitating social protection, health and education services, and supporting the slow resumption of agriculture extension services. However, their role during the war (conscription, corruption, and diversion of resources by some leaders) has eroded community trust. This is aggravated by the perceived lack of attention of the higher-level leadership to people's fate, because of which many across the *tabias* are disillusioned, and feel abandoned and betrayed by those in power. In Tsigereda, Begasheka, and Tahtay Adikisandid, residents report that corrupt behaviours persisted after the war. In these three *tabias*, lack of accountability within the administration and lax enforcement of the rule of law are said to lead to persistently high levels of insecurity especially in Begasheka and Tsigereda, which hampers local economic recovery efforts. Governance efforts to coordinate recovery and restoration are widely seen as inadequate, and there is frustration over the slow pace and inconsistent delivery of aid among community members.

### **SOCIAL LIFE DISRUPTED; COMMUNITY COHESION ERODED**

The war's toll on community resilience and cohesion is profound. The research addressed three critical pillars of community resilience: (1) people's mental state, (2) how community institutions fared, and (3) people's social interactions in their daily lives, and the effects of the war and the post-war conditions on communities' social cohesion.

First, across the *tabias*, there is a widespread sense of eroded cohesion and solidarity. New socioeconomic and political cleavages have emerged due to the war. On the one side are households that 'contributed to the war effort', many of whom lost one or more loved ones. On the other side are those who found ways of protecting themselves or allegedly participated in the looting or 'sided with the enemy,' or traders who profited from the war context through smuggling, brokering, hoarding, and hiking prices. In Geblen, in addition, this line of divide plays out in the relationship between Christians and Muslims as some people said they had contributed less to the war effort. The scarcity of external social protection support in the face of greater and more widespread vulnerability exacerbates tensions about how any such support is distributed, straining relationships between residents and leading to resentment against local officials.

Second, communities' social life in Tigray is embodied in a range of widely respected social and religious institutions. Primarily economic groups like irrigation associations have also important social roles. Before the war, these institutions were overall vibrant in all five *tabias* and contributed to social cohesion. This was disrupted and then severely constrained (due to fear, curfew, and the arbitrariness of occupying forces' rule) for eight months, and it continued to be subdued during the siege in all *tabias*. After the war, social life is slowly reviving. However,

institutions such as community savings and credit and mutual support associations (*equbs* and *iddirs*) have lost members and assets and struggle with trauma as well as with challenges to pool the resources needed for them to be able to help their members, as most members are severely impoverished. In contrast, large religious ceremonies and other religious practices like baptisms and funerals have resumed, at least for some people, although reportedly most people significantly reduce expenses and invite fewer people than would have been the case before the war.

Finally, the long-term emotional and psychological impacts of the conflict were frequently noted. Many households and individuals remain in a state of mourning and shock for many lives have been lost in all *tabias*, and emotional trauma due to the hunger and hardships of displacement and sexual violence and the material losses further hinder their ability to rebuild their livelihoods and restore and maintain family and social connections. In Tsigereda and Begasheka, this mental state is impacting households and the community's social life, as there are now many quarrels and fights between people and within households between children and parents and between spouses, and many divorces. The research team was told of widespread trauma, grief, and anger or discouragement, often exhibited through mental/psychological pressure, anxiety, restlessness, forgetfulness, people were seen walking murmuring to themselves, depression, hopelessness, and despair, particularly impacting children, youth, the demobilised/returned TDF fighters and women, as the next section also shows.

### *Disproportionate impacts on children, youth, TDF, and women*

*While the research found that communities are economically much more vulnerable and socially more fragile and less cohesive, the war had uniquely devastating impacts on children, youth, the TDF, and women.*

Children and school-age young people have been robbed of years of childhood/adolescence and this continues to be the case for many. They missed years of schooling, and many are unable to or too discouraged to resume. Malnutrition rates among young children are significantly higher, and this must also be true for older children for whom it is not monitored. Children's mental health is another concern for their parents and the adult generation at large, mostly unaddressed in the *tabias* of this research.

Much like the children, many people also highlighted the fate of young people as particularly troublesome. The high rate of TDF conscription devastated the youth population. Many young people were either killed, injured, or remain missing, leaving deeply felt gaps in families, in the community structures and social fabric, and in terms of economic productivity. Those who are back from the war are visibly traumatised, especially women returnees, with almost no psychosocial support. They as well as the youth in general are for most landless, jobless, and hopeless, their situation being exacerbated by the lack of access to capital. Socio-economic pressures, coupled with the prevailing lack of law and order enabling smuggling/trafficking networks to flourish, have led to increased and fast-rising migration and vulnerability to exploitation as many opt to migrate illegally to Saudi Arabia or fall into addiction and violent behaviour.

Women have borne a huge share of the hardship. During the war, young women fighters faced the same harsh conditions as young men, with the additional challenge of managing menstruation, especially on the battlefield. Many, often very young, have a young child from their wartime or time in the post-war camps, in the context of declining maternal and child health services. Women 'at home' were exposed to widespread sexual violence, although open discussion and seeking treatment are discouraged due to the prevailing stigma. Post-war, women are seen as particularly affected by the perceived strong deterioration of the security situation in the region. During the siege they faced the worry of not being able to provide for their children, and throughout the war the consequences of extremely limited care for pregnant and delivering women. Due to the loss of male family members, many women have become primary earners and caretakers, with limited support or access to resources in addition to grief and trauma. More generally, there is a sense of a severe setback in upholding women's rights.

# COMMUNITY VIEWS ON FUTURE RECOVERY

The research sheds light on the interrelated legacies of the Tigray war in different domains of the life of five *tabia* communities and some specific vulnerable groups within them. Against that backdrop, people in the communities have varied perspectives and expectations about the future and recovery priorities.

Respondents from the five *tabias* almost unanimously vouched for peace and dearly hoped it would prevail, but most expressed fears that conflict might recur due to political factors external and internal to Tigray including commitment of all actors to full implementation of the CoHA, instability all over Ethiopia, the role of Eritrea, and tensions among Tigray leaders and perceived lack of accountability and corruption among the regional leadership. Some were concerned for the long term as people-to-people relationships have been severely damaged, from the community to the country level, and there were calls for reconciliation, although not unanimous, while some in Tahtay Adikisandid, Mai Liham, and Begasheka talked about the need for justice, accountability, and compensation.

In the meantime, respondents hope for a robust recovery process but are deeply concerned about ongoing challenges. Priorities were many and ranged across domains of people's life.

**INFRASTRUCTURE AND ECONOMIC SUPPORT:** People expressed a desire for more reliable infrastructure, especially roads, electricity, and irrigation. Economic support, especially in the form of accessible credit and in-kind asset grants, and affordable agricultural inputs, was identified as essential for sustainable recovery.

**HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND WASH:** Rehabilitating schools, healthcare facilities, and drinking water infrastructure is a community priority, with calls for more and faster support to counteract the setbacks caused by the conflict.

**GOVERNANCE AND SOCIAL COHESION:** Community members highlighted the need for accountable and transparent governance to underpin all recovery efforts. Restoring trust in local government is key to a successful recovery process, and many emphasized that fair and inclusive aid distribution is crucial. Many also highlighted the need for widespread psychosocial support, and that attention ought to be paid to rebuild the community cohesion damaged by the war and the dividing lines mentioned above.

# POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR SUPPORT TO LOCAL RECOVERY

The research attempted to put the voice of local people from the five *tabias* centre stage. Drawing on this, the research team makes a number of suggestions for recovery support that could prompt reflection by policymakers and programming actors. Most importantly, the research underscores the importance of understanding the local context in all its complexity and differences in designing policies, programmes, and interventions, so that they are better attuned to Tigray's current reality – a message that holds for Ethiopia as a whole as well.

## CROSCUTTING PRIORITIES

### *The need for explicit prioritization and coordination of recovery efforts*

The research highlights a current lack of systematic prioritization in recovery initiatives and weak coordination among and between humanitarian and recovery/development interventions and actors. Without clear prioritization guidance, recovery efforts often 'de facto' focus on 'low-hanging fruits' ('high potential' or easier-to-access communities or individuals), which risks aggravating inequalities at community and people levels. Explicit prioritization and coordinated action at and among local, regional, and national levels is crucial to ensure that limited resources are used *effectively* and *equitably*; it is a prerequisite to advocate for increasing these resources, which in turn is indispensable for real recovery. The regional leadership should lead in this, and development partners should engage at that level about the necessity and support the establishment of strong coordination processes.

### *Strengthening local governance and security*

Strengthening local governance (*woreda*, *tabia* and sub-*tabia* levels) emerges as a critical enabler for all other recovery aspects. Rebuilding accountable local governance structures is essential to restore the community's trust, enhance local security, and enable and coordinate local recovery. To address this, a dedicated local governance support programme could focus on enhancing crosscutting functions (planning, finance, justice, law enforcement, community engagement, *woreda-tabia* coordination), alongside sectoral interventions that could systematically include components aimed at recapacitating the relevant local structures. To address the existing disconnect between communities and administrations, new modes of interaction are needed that give more space to people's voices. This calls for a 'fresh look' at *tabia* and sub-*tabia* structures' roles and ways of operating. Attention should also be given to finding ways to motivate frontline service providers and other *tabia*-level recovery actors.

### *Rebuilding mentally healthier people and socially healthier communities*

The research highlights the crucial role of mental health and social cohesion in recovery. To address the prevailing widespread trauma in Tigray's communities and increase access to basic mental health support, the team suggests scaling up community-based trauma healing and trauma-informed service delivery approaches, training local leaders, frontline service providers, strong women, youth, etc., as "barefoot" trauma-healing providers. This can draw on some approaches that have been locally developed, especially after the war. Helping communities to heal, mitigating divisions exacerbated by the war, and rebuilding social cohesion, within communities, the region of Tigray as a whole and beyond, is also essential. Community dialogue to rebuild trust and conflict-sensitive approaches in all recovery support interventions are necessary to ensure a more peaceful recovery environment in the region. The recently initiated Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) process, in which large numbers of former combatants will be supported to reintegrate civilian life in communities that often would need more support than they are seeing, will be a litmus test in this respect.

### *People- and locality-centred recovery approaches*

Recovery efforts should incorporate people-centred and locality-centred approaches, to meet the specific needs of local contexts and particularly vulnerable groups. The research highlights how issues affecting the whole community (e.g. economic hardships, insecurity) uniquely impact distinctly vulnerable groups such as women, children, youth, and households with TDF members. People-centred strategies are needed, that adopt a systemic, cross-sectoral perspective to address challenges specific to each group (e.g. setbacks in women's rights, effects of unemployment on youth social behaviour, challenges of reintegrating civilian life for TDF members in the DDR process). Locality-centred approaches are also needed, which consider local contexts to design interventions that leverage local resources and address specific local gaps. This could use tested approaches such as cross-sectoral or focused area-based assessments. In this regard, the Household Economy Approach (HEA) Livelihood Zone profiles, a framework for analysing livelihood options and market access within well-defined livelihood zones is important. The HEA Livelihood Zone profiles in Ethiopia were developed in 2016. Updating these profiles would provide detailed insights into current livelihood conditions, serving as a robust basis to design locally tailored economic recovery interventions and more fairly allocate social protection aid.

### *The role of flagship programmes*

Alongside humanitarian support and recovery-dedicated interventions like the Response-Recovery-Resilience for Conflict-Affected Communities (RRR) programme, national-level flagship programmes could and should play an important role in addressing local priorities and specific social vulnerabilities. The research team suggests that these programmes should include, alongside the 'one-size-fits-all' measures that they support, interventions that are relevant to specific local contexts and social groups. To this effect, funds could be earmarked to address specific needs identified by localized assessments and research focusing on vulnerable groups; non-government/ civil society organizations experienced in sustainable community support models or in working with a specific social group could be commissioned to collaborate

with the *woreda* and *tabia* administrations to develop and implement location/group-specific measures addressing these needs.

## **SECTORAL RECOVERY PRIORITIES**

### *Enhancing social protection*

The Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) and Emergency Food Aid (EFA) are insufficient to meet increased post-conflict vulnerabilities. In addition, weak coordination and lack of alignment between them lead to a critical lack of effectiveness in distributing support across communities and households, severely undermining their stated objective of protecting the most vulnerable. An integrated review of PSNP and EFA frameworks is strongly recommended to ensure that available social protection resources target the most vulnerable populations more fairly. It is also critical to ensure that sufficient subsidy funding is available for the Community-Based Health Insurance (CBHI) which the regional government intends to restart soon, to avoid situations where impoverished households opt-out or must draw on other social protection support (e.g. PSNP transfers) to pay the premium. Finally, the team suggests that there is an opportunity to strengthen the Community Care Coalitions that were in place before the war, by promoting using them as a channel to manage other types of social protection support (from NGOs, the diaspora, local development associations, etc.).

### *Supporting economic recovery and livelihoods*

The research highlights the lack of access to capital as a major obstacle to the recovery of both farming and non-farm livelihoods. Due to unpaid pre-war loans, as many households struggle economically, microfinance institutions (MFIs) are unable to provide new loans that would enable households to recover. It is recommended to refinance MFIs so that they can both expand their client basis and implement measures enabling trustworthy pre-war borrowers to access new capital. To restore farming capacity there is a need to assess supply and demand-side constraints on access to agricultural inputs and develop options to address these, including subsidies or loan-based distribution for some farming households. Restoring irrigation is another priority (repairs of dams, canals, pipes, access to capital for pumps, etc.) and would create local labour opportunities, thereby supporting a wide pool of people beyond the irrigation owners. However, systematic studies of the water potential should be carried out as a basis for sustainable irrigation practices. Productive groups, savings and credit associations, and cooperatives facilitating farmers' access to inputs and output markets should be revitalized. Facilitating labour mobility is another priority and options to do this need to be explored and developed, looking at issues of information on available jobs and mobility costs. Legal avenues to migrate abroad need to be promoted and anti-illegal migration measures radically stepped up to stop the deadly illegal migration, especially of the youth.

### *Rehabilitating basic education*

The research indicates that all education actors (teachers, students, parents) struggle with trauma, mental fragility, and demotivation, and education infrastructure remains damaged and understaffed, posing significant barriers to effective learning. The team recommends enhancing

school safety, expanding school feeding programmes to reduce dropout rates, and providing support to children from the most vulnerable households who will otherwise continue to be 'left out'. Implementing trauma-informed approaches in schools would support teachers and students in coping with the psychological impact of the war. The research also suggests the need to reconsider the accelerated learning system and consider a differentiated approach for different age groups. Particularly, it should be recognised that older adolescents/youth/demobilised TDFs are unlikely to stay in the academic system and need support to transition to work. This may call for massive rehabilitation/scale-up of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) options.

### *Supporting the recovery of the basic health system*

The study shows the importance of giving priority to community-led preventive health and primary health care, with particular attention to nutrition, maternal and child health (MCH), and basic hygiene. This calls for revitalising the health posts, rebuilding the communities' trust in the health system, and as an entry point to restore outreach. Redeployment of ambulances is also a key priority. Providing simple incentives for mothers to deliver at health centres and for community health promotion agents (e.g. women development team leaders) and subsidizing basic hygiene initiatives (e.g. cement latrine slabs) would help regarding nutrition, MCH, and hygiene. A health post-based trauma healing approach involving the health extension workers (HEWs) and the sub-*tabia* leaders would help them to overcome their trauma and to help those with whom they interact in their health-related tasks. HEWs also need to be able to handle the consequences of conflict-related sexual violence, including providing guidance for survivors and facilitating access to professional care as needed. High priority should also be given to youth-friendly health services, focusing on reproductive health and communicable diseases, with an emphasis on prevention campaigns and strengthening health post capacity for testing and referrals. Finally, it is imperative to support the resumption of Community Based Health Insurance (CBHI) to enhance both the health of the population and social protection.

### *Rehabilitating Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH)*

Rehabilitating drinking water infrastructure, and prioritising communities with the lowest access, is a first order priority. Recovery efforts should also involve rebuilding resilient institutions for managing water resources. For larger schemes, management structures may need capacity building. Attention should be paid to the issue of water costs to households, with inflation affecting spare parts and the rise in fuel and electricity prices impacting larger schemes. There is also a need to (re-)establish structures and processes ensuring sustainable management of water beyond individual water points, and as a resource to be shared for multiple usages. As tensions arising from competing usages of water are likely to increase, these structures should have sufficient information on the local water potential – which highlights again the importance of systematic studies of this potential.



*A group of rural houses in a field in Mai Liham*

For inquiries, please get in touch with the authors: Tesfaalem Ghebreyohannes at [tesfitga@gmail.com](mailto:tesfitga@gmail.com); Kelemework Tafere at [kelem40@gmail.com](mailto:kelem40@gmail.com), or Catherine Dom at [cdom@mokoro.co.uk](mailto:cdom@mokoro.co.uk).

