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The lives and livelihoods of urban internally displaced people in Mekelle, Ethiopia

Caitlin Sturridge[ID] and Fekadu Adugna Tufa[ID]

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About this report

The Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG)'s work is directed by our Integrated Programme, a multi-year body of research spanning a range of issues, countries and emergencies, allowing us to examine critical issues facing humanitarian policy and practice and influence key debates in the sector. This paper is part of HPG's 'Collective action in crises: rights, resilience and reform' Integrated Programme. The author would like to thank HPG's Integrated Programme donors whose funding enables us to pursue the research agenda. With thanks, too, to the Regional Durable Solutions Secretariat (ReDSS) for its support for this case study.

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About the authors

ORCID numbers are given where available. Please click on the ID icon next to an author's name in order to access their ORCID listing.

Caitlin Sturridge is a Senior Research Fellow in HPG.

Fekadu Adugna Tufa is Associate Professor of Social Anthropology at Addis Ababa University.

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1 Introduction

This paper explores the struggle faced by internally displaced persons (IDPs) to rebuild their lives and livelihoods in Mekelle, the regional capital of Tigray in Ethiopia, which is home to around 140,000 IDPs (IOM, 2024a; see Figure 1). While national government has primary responsibility for assisting and protecting IDPs, the international community also has a complementary role to play – as stated in the Guiding Principles and the Kampala Convention (OHCHR, 2024). By taking IDP priorities and experiences as the starting point, the paper is framed by a series of dilemmas facing local, national and international aid actors operating in Tigray:[1]

- Firstly, should aid actors do more to support the livelihoods of IDPs, or instead ringfence limited funds for emergency relief, particularly given the pervasive political narrative that IDPs are returning home?
- Secondly, if aid actors do support livelihoods, who should they prioritise for livelihoods support – the most vulnerable or those most likely to succeed?
- Finally (and dependent on the answers to the preceding questions), what kinds of approaches to livelihoods programming should aid actors support?

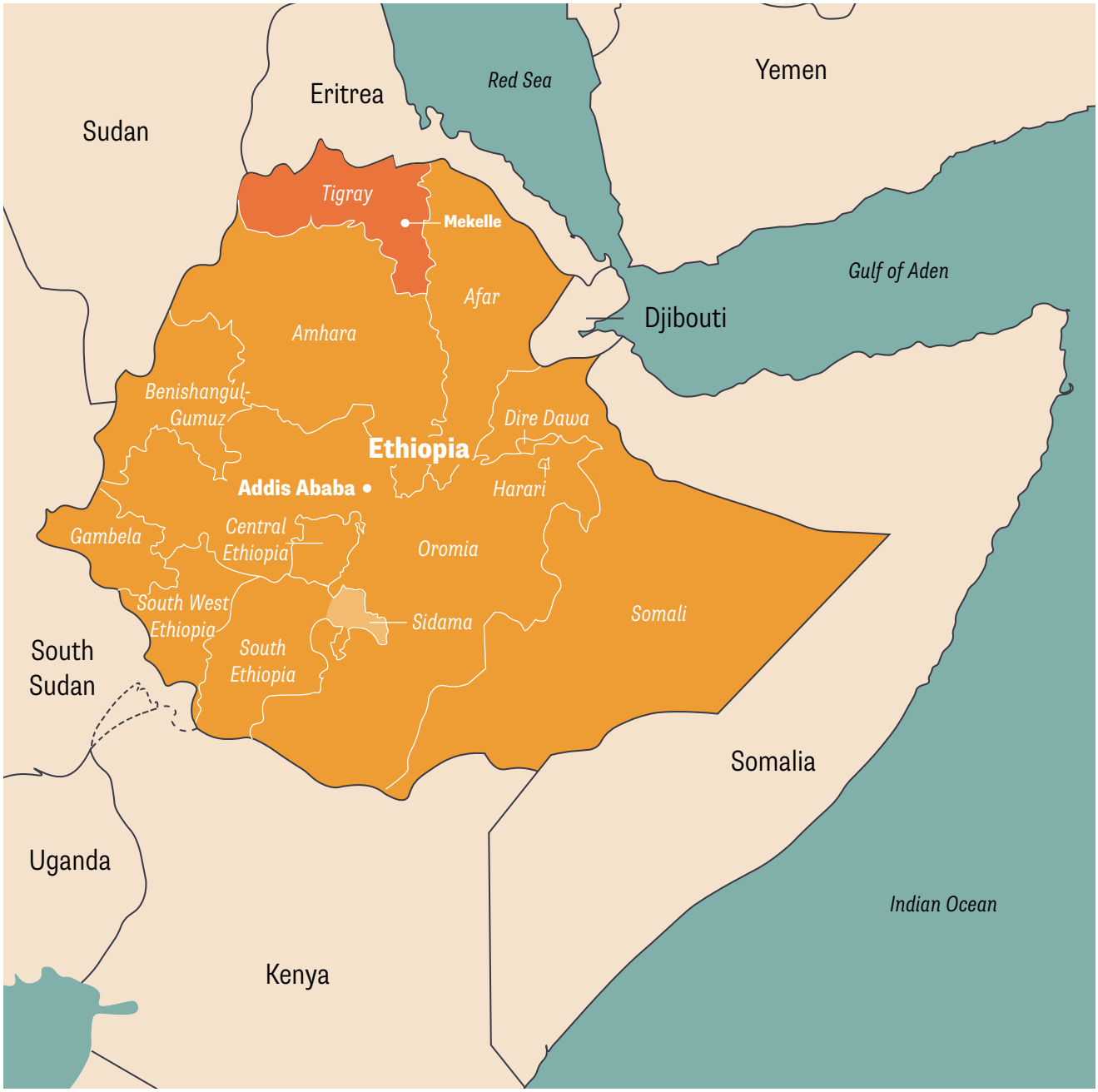
Responses to these questions were often framed by a humanitarian–development divide. Humanitarian informants were more likely to advocate for emergency relief, and a focus on the most vulnerable. In contrast, development actors were more likely to push for a stronger livelihoods focus, and were more willing to target those IDPs with the socioeconomic resources to succeed in rebuilding their lives. But this humanitarian–development divide was also nuanced by an undercurrent of uncertainty among aid actors who felt torn between contradictory objectives, shifting political agendas, and impossible choices. By late 2024, the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) for Ethiopia was only 21% funded (FTS, 2024). Alluding to this gap, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) informant highlighted the acute ongoing humanitarian needs as the top priority, 'let alone the livelihood and development needs'. While this arguably reflects humanitarians' primary mandate to protect lives in the short term, on an increasingly slim budget, it also speaks to a wider failure to lay the groundwork for solutions by supporting resilience and livelihoods from the start of the crisis.

Responses to these three questions were also framed by a central–regional divide. 'Discussions in Addis Ababa and discussions in Tigray don't match – they are two different worlds,' explained an NGO informant. Officials in Addis Ababa 'insisted that conditions were not as bad; that food was more plentiful than it was, that regional data sources were unreliable, and that people were returning, and peace was holding' (Miller, 2024: 21). Amongst United Nations (UN) agencies and international NGOs in Addis Ababa, there is a growing sense that the humanitarian crisis in Tigray has been 'overly prioritised' and that the focus should now shift to Oromia and Amhara. Mekelle-based informants, however,

1 In this paper, the term aid actor can refer to anyone who provides assistance to people in need, including but not limited to local and national government, international and national humanitarian and development actors, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil society organisations and local actors.

routinely described the IDP situation as an 'ongoing crisis' and the aid response as 'wholly inadequate'. The research findings tend to substantiate this gloomier outlook and cast doubt on the optimism of narratives emanating from Addis Ababa.

Figure 1 Map of Mekelle in the Tigray Region



In contrast to the majority of studies focused on capitals, this research is concerned with secondary towns and cities, like Mekelle, where the numbers of displaced people are fast growing, where needs tend to be under-reported and under-resourced, and where comprehensive data and evidence is lacking (Davidoff-Gore and Le Coz, 2023). Moreover, the increasingly protracted displacement in Mekelle offers an insight into how IDPs build their livelihoods over time. Another reason for selecting Mekelle was the study's emphasis on understanding difference and diversity. IDPs in Mekelle represent a diverse range of origins, drivers and durations of displacement. While most people were displaced by conflict in the last four years, others have been residing in Mekelle for longer as a result of drought, economic decline or wider ethnic tensions. IDPs in Mekelle also experience a diverse range of living arrangements: while some live amongst host communities, others reside in IDP centres located in school and health facilities, or are in Seba Kare IDP camp.[2]

Between June and September 2024, the research team (comprising researchers from Addis Ababa University, Mekelle University and ODI Global's Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG)) conducted qualitative research in Mekelle, supported by local guides and translators. Empirical data was gathered using a combination of semi-structured interviews and focus-group discussions (FGDs) with IDPs living in camps, centres and informally across six areas or 'sub-cities'.[3] While the study focused primarily on the priorities and perspectives of IDPs, a smaller number of interviews and FGDs were also conducted with members of the host community (see Table 1). The research team also targeted humanitarian and development aid actors, including government officials, donors, UN representatives, and international and national NGO workers. Respondents were identified through purposive snowballing techniques, and disaggregated by age, gender and duration of displacement. The research culminated in a joint analysis workshop with the research team in Mekelle in September, as well as a series of validation workshops held with key stakeholders in Mekelle and Addis Ababa in November.

Table 1 Breakdown of study respondents

	Type of respondent			
	Internally displaced	**Host community**	**Aid actor**	**Total**
Semi-structured interview	55	9	23	**87**
Focus group discussion	14	5	-	**19**

2 Other secondary cities in Tigray, Amhara, Afar and Oromia Regions were also considered but, given time and budgetary constraints, the research was ultimately limited to one location.

3 These were Adi Haqi, Ayder, Hadnet, Qedamy Weyane, Qwiha and Semien.

2 Background to livelihoods in internal displacement

The Tigray Region is still recovering from a devastating two-year war, which erupted in November 2020 between the Tigray People's Liberation Front and the Ethiopian federal government, primarily supported by Eritrean and Amhara forces. At the height of the conflict, 2.6 million people were internally displaced (UNHCR, 2022). By the end of the war, in November 2022, 5.4 million people – 90% of the region's population – were in urgent need of food assistance (WFP, 2022). As of May 2024, over 875,000 IDPs are still registered in Tigray (IOM, 2024a) – although data on IDPs is largely controlled by the government and remains highly contested. While peace is holding for now, there are fears that the region could slide back into conflict if more is not done to enforce the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, also known as the Pretoria Agreement. (See Figure 2 for a detailed timeline of major humanitarian events in Ethiopia between 2015 and 2022.)

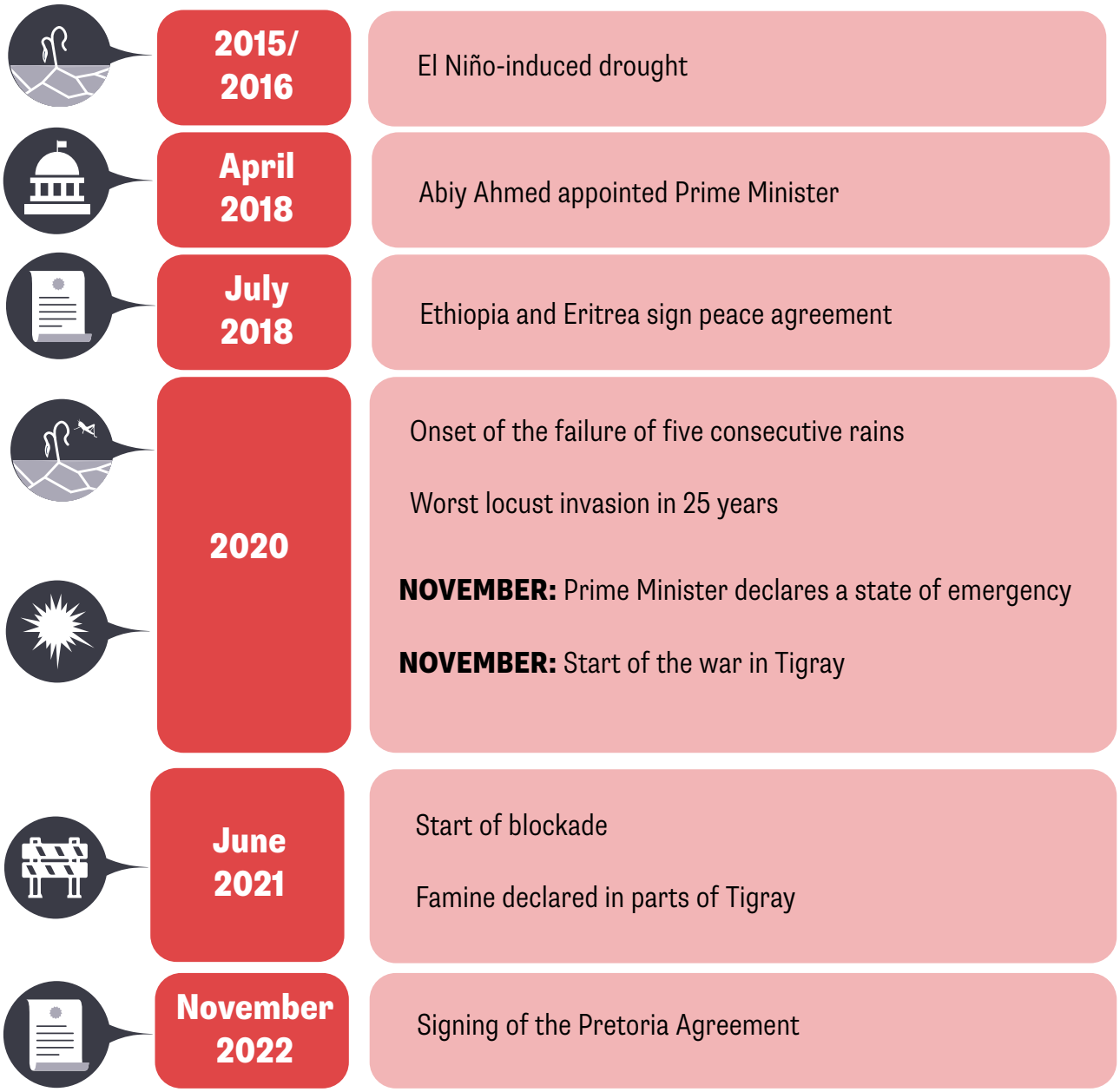
The war devastated the Tigrayan economy, and returning to pre-war livelihoods remains a formidable challenge.[4] Many working-age people were killed, injured or traumatised during the fighting (EHRC and OHCHR, 2021). Moreover, armed forces are alleged to have targeted agricultural production: burning crops and harvests, killing livestock and destroying agricultural and irrigation equipment (Manaye et al., 2023; New Lines Institute, 2024). Crop and livestock farming were the backbone of the economy, and such destruction has weakened livelihoods for years to come (Manaye et al., 2023). Armed forces also destroyed wider livelihoods infrastructure, such as universities, schools, hospitals, clinics, religious institutions, factories, business centres and manufacturing (Gesesew et al., 2021; Gebregziabher et al., 2023; UN HRC, 2022; 2023).

To make matters worse, eight months into the war, the federal government blockaded much of Tigray – shutting down all banking, telecommunication, transport and electricity services, and barring the entry of humanitarian aid, food and medicines to the region for more than a year (Stoddard et al., 2021; Berhe et al., 2022; Gebregziabher et al., 2023). Starved of basic goods and supplies, an estimated 69% of households reported losing their livelihoods (Gebregziabher et al., 2023). Many manufacturing industries (textile, garment, cement) have still not resumed operations, due to ongoing shortages of raw materials and infrastructural destruction.

Successive droughts have combined with conflict to undermine livelihoods and wider food security in Tigray. At least 550,000 Ethiopians have been displaced by drought (most notably in 2010–2011, 2016–2017 and 2020–2023) and a further 275,000 by floods and landslides (IOM, 2024b). Drought and locust invasions have devastated harvests and killed tens of thousands of livestock – contributing to increased food prices and a shortage of seasonal farm work (Oxfam, 2024). These combined pressures of drought and conflict have left nearly 16 million Ethiopians in need of food assistance (WFP, 2024) – and large swathes of Tigray have reached 'emergency' levels of food insecurity (FEWS NET, 2024).

4 Some estimates put the cost of reconstructing Tigray at $20 billion (Endale, 2023).

Figure 2 Timeline of major humanitarian events in Ethiopia 2015–2022



2.1 Barely surviving

In this context of conflict and drought, many IDPs have found it impossible to rebuild their lives and livelihoods in displacement, and are barely surviving on a combination of food aid, other humanitarian assistance, and the charity of others. This was the situation of a 43-year-old woman with seven children who described losing everything due to the war. After using up her initial savings to buy and sell eggs, she now begs on the streets, and has been forced to send her daughter – 'a brilliant student with a bright future' – to be a domestic worker in Addis Ababa. 'When they give us, we eat. When they don't, we starve,' she said. A similar story was described by a 67-year-old man who had lost one of his hands

during the war and was unable to find work: 'I have nothing left. Everything is gone.' Reliant on very limited and unreliable humanitarian assistance, he lived on one meal per day and described living a life 'full of misery and darkness'.

2.2 Getting by

A second and smaller group of IDPs are doing somewhat better. In the absence of support from government and aid actors, many IDPs are using their agency and resilience to shape their own livelihoods, often around a mix of small-scale business, petty trading, day labour and farming. For example, some IDPs engaged in small-scale chicken, goat and sheep rearing. Others provided day labour – mainly domestic work, labouring and loading at markets and transport hubs, construction work at building sites, wood chopping, and security guarding. Other IDPs established small business and trading ventures: preparing and selling food (such as eggs, injera, maize, coffee, beles)[5] on foot or from roadside stalls and kiosks; making and selling handicrafts (such as soap and knitted scarves and jumpers); or providing everyday services, such as hairdressing, butchery or rides via three-wheeler bajaj taxis.

But this is a story of getting by, rather than getting ahead – and one that contrasts sharply with the livelihoods they enjoyed before displacement. The stark 'before and after' contrast is illustrated by a 28-year-old IDP. 'Life was very good' back home in Humera, where he had made a successful living from agriculture and livestock. Displaced to Mekelle since November 2020, he now works as a day labourer – loading goods at market, breaking stones at a construction site, and chopping wood for sale as firewood. Despite doing the 'most exhausting and difficult work', he counts himself as relatively fortunate compared to other IDPs. He is able to feed his family with his earnings, and send any surplus to support relatives displaced elsewhere. But he doesn't see a future for himself in Mekelle, where his livelihood represents a short-term strategy for surviving displacement. He plans to return home as soon as possible – describing it as a place of 'big potential' where he will be able to 'change his life' for the better.

2.3 Getting ahead

While most IDP livelihoods reflect these first and second groups, a minority of IDPs fall into a third group who are getting ahead, and succeeding in rebuilding relatively stable livelihoods in displacement. For example, a 35-year-old woman described a small trading business creatively built around informal credit. Every morning, she purchases milk on credit from traders, which she boils and sells with coffee from her roadside kiosk, using the profits to repay her creditors at the end of each day. She does the same thing on a weekly basis with large sacks of flour, which she bakes into bread and sells. However, her business relies not just on taking loans, but also on providing credit to others. She sells food and bread on credit to mechanics at a nearby garage who repay her every Saturday when they receive their weekly allowance.

5 Injera is the Amharic term for Ethiopian bread – a sour fermented pancake-like flatbread traditionally made from teff flour. Beles are small cactus-like fruits, commonly known as cactus pears, Indian figs, or prickly pears.

'My livelihood depends on their income,' she acknowledged – but if she doesn't give them food on credit, they will go to other restaurants that will. While some clients have failed to clear their debts, for the most part these reciprocal credit arrangements have helped her to attract more customers and bolster her business. She plans to stay in Mekelle, rather than return to Amhara, and is making long-term plans: enrolling in Mekelle University to further her studies and applying for land to construct a house. But she remains mindful of the precarity of her situation:

> My life is relatively OK. I never thought to reach here when I was first displaced. However, I am not sure if this success will continue, or we return to another conflict and everything is destroyed again.

Having set the scene on livelihoods in Mekelle, the remainder of this paper is framed by three critical questions for aid actors:

1. Should aid actors do more to support livelihoods?
2. Who should aid actors prioritise for livelihoods support?
3. What kinds of approaches to livelihoods programming should aid actors support?

3 Should aid actors do more to support livelihoods in displacement?

This chapter addresses the thorny issue of IDP returns – a major topic in Ethiopia that was consistently raised by respondents during interviews, and which has emerged as a significant stumbling block to implementing livelihoods programmes. IDP returns are a political imperative for both the federal government and the Interim Regional Administration of Tigray since the signing of the Pretoria Agreement in 2022. This preference for IDP returns is embedded in longstanding concerns around identity politics and 'ethnic balance', as well as wider questions around control of the contested territories. In the words of an NGO informant, government actors 'haven't moved far from the perspective that IDPs are a short-term issue'.

Between May and June 2024, the Interim Regional Administration of Tigray began implementing a plan to return 690,000 IDPs home. While 1.5 million Tigrayan IDPs have now returned to areas under the interim government's administration, the situation of IDPs from areas still held by Eritrea and Amhara has not been resolved. As explained by an NGO representative, 'While the Pretoria Agreement may have silenced the guns, it has not fully addressed the challenges of returns.' Two years after the end of the conflict, many are starting to lose faith in the government mantra that 'IDPs will return before the rainy season', as the rains have already come and gone many times.

Keen to bring about returns as quickly as possible, government actors prioritise support to areas of return rather than displacement – and discourage longer-term investments for IDPs in Mekelle, which they fear may encourage IDPs to stay rather than return. While a lack of livelihoods investments in Tigray is not necessarily new, the government's preference for IDPs to return home as soon as possible has made it increasingly challenging for aid actors to support livelihoods investments during displacement. By addressing the disconnects that exist between government, IDPs and aid actors, this chapter explores the relationship between livelihoods and return, and critiques the current approach to livelihoods programming.

3.1 IDP perspectives and priorities

In many ways, IDPs share a preference for return – although a closer look suggests that perspectives and priorities vary depending on when and why people are displaced. On the one hand, the majority of IDPs want to return home as soon as it is safe to do so. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates that around 95% of IDPs displaced due to conflict in the last four years prefer return to local integration (IOM, 2024b).[6] While many respondents cautioned against the accuracy of data

6 Figures varied according to the time in displacement – returns were preferred by 87% of people displaced for up 1 year, by 91% of IDPs displaced for 1–2 years, by 82% of IDPs displaced for 3–4 years, and by 99% of IDPs displaced for 5 or more years (IOM, 2024b).

on IDPs, a strong preference for return was echoed by IDPs interviewed as part of this research.[7] On the other hand, a closer look reveals a more complex picture among Tigrayan IDPs displaced prior to the war (largely as a result of political tensions in several regional states). While there were fewer such IDPs, most of them prefer to locally integrate, not return. Indeed, IOM data collected in 2019 (the year before the war) found that 99% of IDPs in Tigray prefer local integration over return (IOM, 2020). This preference for local integration is also shared by IDPs displaced due to drought – country-wide findings reveal that the majority of this group of IDPs have no plans to return home at all (IOM, 2024b). Viewed from this perspective, while most IDPs shared government actors' preference for returns, there is more nuance and diversity to this picture than is often assumed.

Where IDP and government perspectives diverge clearly, however, is around the relationship between returns and livelihoods. IDPs' preference for return doesn't preclude a desire to rebuild lives and livelihoods in the interim. Viewed from this perspective, a clear disconnect emerged between IDPs' priority for livelihoods and the kinds of support that the government and aid actors are able and willing to provide: 'IDPs want: jobs, education, safety. IDPs get: hygiene kits and food handouts' (Sida et al., 2024: 38). This sentiment was echoed by a UN informant who admitted to not providing any livelihoods support, even though livelihoods are 'mentioned everywhere by the IDPs'.

Indeed, livelihoods emerged as a top priority among IDP respondents. At the outset of the war, in 2020, the three most urgent needs cited by IDPs were emergency relief: food, health care, and water (Stoddard et al., 2021). Four years later, as displacement has become protracted, IDPs are increasingly looking for longer-term, more sustainable support. In the words of a 51-year-old IDP woman, 'My priorities are to work and make a living'. Livelihoods also emerged as a priority when respondents were asked how they would spend a hypothetical cash transfer. Nearly all IDPs said they would invest most or all of it in establishing or strengthening their livelihood in Mekelle – rather than using it to cover their basic daily needs.

3.2 The squeeze on livelihoods programming

Despite this preference for livelihoods, few aid actors in Tigray are implementing livelihoods programmes. Those programmes that do exist are restricted to short 'humanitarian' timeframes (between 3 and 12 months) and specific groups of people who have been prioritised by funders. Some aid actors have bought into the political narrative, and saw little point in supporting livelihoods and resilience for a group of IDPs on the cusp of return. Most aid actors, however, believe that many of the IDPs who haven't yet returned (and especially those from parts of the contested territories still held by Amhara and Eritrea, or those displaced by drought) will likely stay in Mekelle for a while, and possibly indefinitely. 'I don't believe IDPs will go home in a couple of months' time,' said an NGO worker. Despite this acknowledgement, many aid actors still remained reluctant (and even unwilling) to invest in supporting IDPs' livelihoods. While humanitarian life-saving assistance was the priority in the early

7 Data on IDPs in Ethiopia has traditionally originated from local government sources, and it is widely believed that population counts are heavily massaged for political purposes and are not trustworthy.

stages of the crisis, displacement is now entering its fourth year. And yet, as articulated by an NGO informant, 'there is no meaningful livelihood engagement by NGOs or UN agencies in Tigray' – a sentiment echoed by others:

> The Ethiopian context represents the counter-narrative to [Robert] Piper's agenda.[8] There are no meaningful durable solutions here for IDPs at the moment. We have to rely on short-term humanitarian approaches. (NGO informant, Addis Ababa)
>
> When conflict broke out, we were forced to prioritise pure humanitarian interventions – basic needs rather than resilience and livelihoods. Four years on, this strategy has not changed. (Donor, Addis Ababa)
>
> We have stopped doing anything sustainable with IDPs. But what if people are still here in years' time? (NGO informant, Addis Ababa)

This reluctance to shift towards supporting livelihoods and resilience – in spite of protracted displacement and in spite of IDPs' preferences – is grounded in several reasons. Firstly, there was a general unwillingness to challenge (or to be seen to challenge) the federal government and the Interim Regional Administration of Tigray. NGO workers reported being specifically told by government actors to 'hurry up' and wind down livelihoods programming from 2022 onwards. During the war, those who did speak out against the government experienced threats to staff, ransacked offices, and even expulsion from Ethiopia.[9] 'The international community is playing along with the government line [...] and staff are somehow scared to push the agenda,' said an NGO respondent. 'The aid community still struggles to scale up and push the government for the access and operational space that it needs' (Miller, 2024: 10), and this includes questioning the political narrative of return. While many aid actors recognised they were letting IDPs down by not supporting their livelihoods and resilience, this was seen as a necessary sacrifice. By playing it safe, aid actors are hoping to maintain operational access and the ability to provide life-saving assistance.

But while government actors may frown on longer-term programming in displacement, they do not go as far as to block livelihoods interventions. The political preference for return isn't the only factor undermining livelihoods programming. Global funding shortages in aid budgets are certainly driving a 'back to basics' narrative that focuses on immediate needs and life-saving assistance rather than longer-term objectives of livelihoods and resilience (OCHA, 2023; Loy and Worley, 2024). Coordination issues are also behind the dearth of livelihoods programmes. No government agency has been specifically

8 Robert Piper is the Special Adviser on Solutions to Internal Displacement. Established in 2022, his office prioritises development-oriented and nationally focused solutions.

9 For example, in 2021, the Ethiopian government suspended Médecins Sans Frontières and the Norwegian Refugee Council from working in the country, accusing them of spreading misinformation (Jerving, 2021).

tasked with IDP protection and assistance.[10] Whilst it is hoped that the federal government's long-awaited IDP proclamation will help to clarify roles and responsibilities, the ongoing delays in issuing this legislation have created institutional gaps about who is responsible for internal displacement, and what a holistic approach should look like.

Against this backdrop, efforts to bridge emergency humanitarian relief with longer-term development assistance have consistently fallen short. While coordination mechanisms – meetings, working groups, etc. – exist on paper, there was a sense that these were too focused on technical detail, logistics and information-sharing, rather than the bigger and more fundamental questions of 'what should be done, who should do it, and why' (Sida et al., 2024). Moreover, the current response to IDPs is 'project-based', 'agency-oriented' and 'humanitarian-focused'. It is 'my project, my money, my donor', said a UN informant. This isolationist mindset undermines a nexus approach to internal displacement, as well as the opportunity to find interim solutions around sustainable livelihoods, self-reliance and resilience. As articulated by Longley and Maxwell, livelihoods can be 'both a means of addressing short-term, humanitarian response objectives, and of addressing longer-term objectives of reducing vulnerability' (2003: 31).

3.3 Nuancing the relationship between returns and livelihoods

An overly simplistic idea of the relationship between livelihoods and IDP intentions has muddied the waters of the politics of return. The prevailing logic is that IDPs who establish livelihoods will be less willing to return and that, conversely, those struggling with their livelihoods will be more incentivised to return home sooner. This builds on a wider logic pursued by governments around the world that a 'hostile environment' characterised by challenging conditions will make life in displacement so difficult that people will be deterred from wanting to stay and integrate – an outcome that is morally problematic and also not substantiated by the evidence (Hagen-Zanker and Mallett, 2016; Taylor, 2018; 2022; Malik, 2024; Slaven, 2024).

To some extent (and in support of the prevailing logic) IDPs struggling with their livelihoods did want to return home, as they had nothing to keep them in Mekelle. Government and aid actors' failure to invest in infrastructure, services and livelihoods support has left IDPs in a state of limbo. But it is not the psychology of return that prevents IDPs from rebuilding lives and livelihoods in displacement – it is the absence of an enabling environment that should, by now, have been put in place by government and aid actors. In the words of a 35-year-old woman, 'I have spent over three years without any meaningful work – not because of my plan to return, but rather because of a lack of opportunity.' Unable to rebuild their lives and livelihoods in displacement, and in the absence of humanitarian support, many IDPs have already returned.

10 IDPs currently fall under the mandate of several agencies, including: the Disaster Risk Management Commission, the Ministry of Peace and the Ministry of Women and Social Affairs.

But interviews with IDPs also reveal a more nuanced relationship between livelihoods and returns. While IDPs with seemingly nothing to lose may be more likely to opt to return, this doesn't mean that those with livelihoods will be more likely to stay. Livelihoods 'success' does not rule out a return. An internally displaced woman who had built up a successful shop and restaurant in Mekelle revealed that she would gladly give these up if she could return home, as she had enjoyed a better and more lucrative living producing sesame in the contested territories. For IDPs from these fertile lands, livelihoods in displacement pale in comparison to the farming and marketing opportunities they had previously enjoyed. A 60-year-old internally displaced man described life in Humera as 'very productive' – he was able to feed his family, sell the surplus and save money from farming. This contrasts with life in Mekelle, where he relies on relatives to support his meagre income as a day labourer. 'It is challenge after challenge. I am working hard, but it is difficult,' he said.

Nearly all respondents wanted to return home, including those who had managed to establish decent livelihoods in Mekelle. This challenges the mainstream logic of limiting longer-term livelihoods investments for IDPs in Mekelle, on the grounds that this may encourage IDPs to stay rather than return. The relationship between livelihoods and returns is not that clear-cut and, in any case, livelihoods support should not be used as a political tool for encouraging people to return.

4 Who should aid actors prioritise for livelihoods support?

In the context of funding shortfalls and protracted displacement, humanitarian and development actors in Ethiopia (as well as across the world) are under growing pressure to both address needs and deliver impact. But how to find the right balance between, on the one hand, reaching the maximum number of people in greatest need within operational budgets, and, on the other hand, 'prioritising and focusing on the most impactful transformations' (World Bank, 2024). This chapter of the paper argues that aid actors' decision to prioritise specific groups of people based on their gender or displacement status makes sense in many ways. These groups of people face significant and specific challenges in rebuilding their lives and livelihoods. Nevertheless, a reliance on categories of people will always fail to capture difference and diversity.

4.1 IDPs and women

Of the handful of livelihoods programmes being implemented in Mekelle, most prioritised women or the displaced. Others focused expressly on IDP women (as the specific group found at the intersection of these two categories), in particular those with children or those who have experienced sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). It is only when livelihoods programming entails more significant grants or business loans that aid actors tended to cast the net beyond 'vulnerable groups' to also target people with business acumen. For example, one livelihoods initiative combined smaller cash transfers and training for SGBV survivors with larger grants for entrepreneurs. Another programme allocated resources according to a diverse selection criteria that included those with business experience, training and a willingness to work; SGBV survivors; and women with children.

In many ways, a focus on IDPs and women makes sense in Tigray. Tigrayan women with children shoulder the heaviest domestic responsibilities for care, food, water and firewood – reducing time and energy for livelihoods. What is more, armed actors disproportionately and systematically targeted women and girls with rape and sexual violence, a trend that reportedly continues today (Amnesty International, 2021; Bekele and Eckles, 2023; Fisseha et al., 2023; New Lines Institute, 2024). Many are living with the mental and physical legacies of SGBV, reporting ongoing 'stigma, prejudice, suicide attempts, nightmares, and hopelessness' (Tewabe et al., 2024: 1). Viewed from this perspective, the reduction in maternal and child health services associated with the targeted destruction of the health system, and the shortage of psychosocial support, have also arguably hit women and girls the hardest.[11]

11 'Six months into the war, only 27.5% of hospitals, 17.5% of health centres, 11% of ambulances and none of the 712 health posts were functional' (Gesesew et al., 2021: 1).

Moreover, IDPs face certain challenges that arguably affect them more than hosts.[12] Three specific challenges emerged from interviews:

1. Shelter: All IDPs living in IDP centres in schools and health centres and Seba Kare camp complained of over-crowded, poorly maintained and unhygienic living conditions (see quotes below). The assumption that IDPs will soon return home has contributed to the lack of maintenance and upkeep, and a delay in securing more sustainable shelter options.
2. Hunger: A 60-year-old internally displaced woman whose young family members rarely have three daily meals cited food as her main worry. Hunger was further exacerbated by the 2023 decision by the US government and the World Food Programme to suspend food assistance to IDPs due to widespread diversion (Al Jazeera, 2023). 'While the investigation and much-needed reforms made operational sense, the timing could hardly have been worse' (Miller, 2024: 4) – the suspension coincided with the start of the lean season. Food distributions resumed in November 2023, but the new model now focuses on a smaller number of IDPs.
3. Civil documentation: IDPs unable to return home to renew or replace lost or out-of-date identity cards are unable to access basic services, loans and social protection transfers needed to rebuild lives and livelihoods in displacement.

> The shelter we live in is made of plastic and measures only 20 square meters, which is very cramped, especially for large families. There are six wooden pillars holding up the structure, but they have deteriorated over time. The plastic covering is old and torn, and leaks when it rains. The heat is unbearable when the sun is overhead. And when it rains, the area becomes flooded and swampy, making it extremely cold. (65-year-old internally displaced man living in Seba Kare camp).
>
> We don't have a good place to sleep – no mattress, no carpet, no bedsheets, no blanket. Even the so-called bedroom can't protect us from sun, wind and rain. The windows are broken and the roof leaks (43-year-old internally displaced woman living in an IDP centre)

Nevertheless, an over-reliance on specific categories of people overlooks more complex forms of vulnerability and more diverse understandings of what constitutes 'need' and 'risk' (Pruce, 2019) – such as the specific and diverse needs of sub-groups within the population. For example, pressures on the health system have also made life harder for the elderly, those injured during the war, and people with disabilities. Respondents living with chronic diseases such as diabetes, HIV/AIDS and high blood pressure described struggling with the lack of food, and exhausting any income or savings on expensive medicines. Likewise, older groups of respondents described being unable to compete with the young for work and being completely reliant on friends and family. Vulnerable groups were often overlooked by aid actors for food assistance, even after undergoing a lengthy and time-consuming selection criteria that included providing digital fingerprints. IDP respondents regularly wondered why they had been excluded from

12 It should be noted that being an IDP is a descriptive definition rather than a legal status – as IDPs remain within the borders of their country, they do not require formal recognition (in the same way as refugees) to invoke their rights (Sida et al., 2024).

assistance, with some asking the reserachers whether their fingerprints had been burned. At the same time, youth (and especially young men) complained of being overlooked by aid actors altogether, in spite of the difficulties they also face. A 25-year-old man, for example, described having to limit the number of days he works due to an ongoing head injury from the war. Others referred to the financial and emotional pressures of supporting a wide network of vulnerable friends and relatives.

What is more, while IDPs *do* face specific challenges, there is growing recognition amongst the aid community that the broad category of 'IDP status' doesn't always equate to vulnerability. After all, the two-year war and the blockade devastated the lives and livelihoods of IDPs and residents alike – as is often the case in urban settings where vulnerability and poverty routinely coexist across categories of status (Metcalfe and Pavanello, 2014; Patel et al., 2017). Moreover, a closer analysis of IDP experiences reveals that beyond displacement per se, it is the 'when', 'from where', and 'why' people are displaced that has the most significant bearing on their ability to subsequently rebuild livelihoods. This was illustrated by the strikingly different livelihoods outcomes of two main groups of IDPs residing in Mekelle (see Box 1).

Box 1 The experiences of IDPs displaced before and after the war

Those displaced by the war (from 2020 onwards)

Most IDPs residing in Mekelle are from Tigray Region. Displaced by violent conflict, many suffer from depression and post-traumatic stress – compounded by high levels of family separation (Gebreyesus et al., 2024a; 2024b). One 43-year-old man described his experience: 'I saw the harshest violence that human beings can do to each other in this war [...] it is the nightmare of my life. Trauma and suffering deplete energy, sap confidence and exhaust trust in others' (Easton-Calabria, 2022) – all of which diminish capacity and willingness to rebuild livelihoods in displacement. These IDPs have by and large struggled to rebuild their livelihoods. They have received little humanitarian assistance, if any, and tend to reside in over-crowded poorly maintained IDP centres or in Seba Kare IDP camp located in the outskirts of Mekelle, where livelihoods opportunities are minimal. Their ultimate priority is to return home as soon as possible.

Those displaced before the war (prior to 2020)

A smaller group of IDPs have done better in their livelihoods, and plan to stay in Mekelle for good. Most arrived from 2017 onwards, giving them more time to establish their lives and livelihoods in Mekelle. As many originated from urban areas in Amhara and Oromia regions, they were also in a stronger position to build on trading and business experience in the city. Moreover, this smaller group of IDPs enjoyed a better reception from the government than those who arrived later, with higher levels of aid and assistance, plots of land for farming, and better access to loans – although they have seen a decline in support following the 2020–2022 war. This pre-war group of IDPs also lives alongside long-term Mekelle residents, affording them better business and trading opportunities than those residing in IDP camps and centres.

4.2 Returnees

While some aid actors focus their limited resources on IDPs, others spoke of ringfencing their efforts to those who return. While this ambition has not yet translated into widespread programming, interviews suggested that this stance is gaining momentum among donors and UN agencies. In the words of one aid actor, 'Our primary focus within IDP support is on returnees, and our work is centred on facilitating their return, livelihood, recovery and reintegration priorities'. A similar line was adopted by a UN representative, who recommended that aid actors focus their efforts on neglected areas of return rather than Mekelle. In the words of another UN respondent: 'We do not support IDP livelihoods unless they have returned' – in other words, this agency does not support the livelihoods of IDPs at all – only returnees.

This stance reflects growing unease about the circumstances under which 1.5 million IDPs have already returned. A desire to return combined with the hardship of displacement contributed to most IDPs making spontaneous and sometimes unsustainable returns to places characterised by a lack of infrastructure, services and assistance and, in some cases, ongoing insecurity. Only a minority of IDPs received any support from government or aid actors to return, which, in any case, extended to the bare minimum of transport costs and a small cash transfer of around $35 (UNHCR, 2023). While government and aid actors have remained largely silent on this matter, several respondents spoke of a growing trend of secondary displacements among IDP returnees, caused by unsustainable circumstances and conditions of return.

> IDPs have returned with no assistance and they are still starving. They couldn't start production because they don't have oxen, which were slaughtered during the conflict. They didn't achieve much by returning. It will take a long time for them to become productive and self-reliant. Everybody is aware of this, and it is not setting a good precedent for others to follow. Yes, 1.5 million people returned. But no one really knows how they did it, or what their experience is. (UN representative, Addis Ababa)

While this research focused on IDP experiences in displacement, rather than return, it is clear that significant investments are urgently needed in areas of return. Returnees (and the host communities that stayed in place) need a combination of humanitarian, development and peacebuilding support, which includes: food and shelter; water, sanitation and health services; protection; access to housing and land that has been destroyed or occupied; and livelihoods support (ACAPS, 2024). While the needs are significant, a binary either/or approach to supporting IDPs or returnees is not helpful. It is not clear on what grounds one group can be considered more urgent, vulnerable or deserving of support than another. Both groups – those who return and those who stay – are numerous (1.5 million and 875,000 respectively), both are suffering, and both have long-term needs requiring support and investments. What is more, this binary approach unhelpfully feeds into prevailing humanitarian–development divides, on the basis that IDPs are a temporary group of people whose immediate needs should be addressed by short-term humanitarian interventions, while returnees fall into a longer-term recovery and development phase.

4.3 The role of social networks

When considering who to prioritise for livelihoods assistance, aid actors should take a range of factors into account. Gender and displacement status were often at the root of why some IDPs do better than others – but not always. With this in mind, aid actors should blend traditional targeting approaches with methods that take into account less tangible factors. In Mekelle, for example, the role of social relations and networks emerged as a key determinant of livelihoods outcomes. In the absence of adequate support from government and the aid community, most IDPs credited Mekelle residents with their survival in the early years of displacement – acknowledging that over time this charity has dwindled as displacement has become protracted, and as hosts' own resources and resilience were weakened by the war.

While support from hosts has been widely documented, much less attention has been paid to the ways in which IDPs have supported each other. Indeed, with traditional intra-household support mechanisms weakened by displacement and family separations, new social networks have emerged within the IDP community. 'Seeking support from a neighbour you do not know is a new thing,' said one IDP woman. IDP respondents described cooking together, taking care of each other's children and possessions, rebuilding each other's shelters, sharing rations, collecting firewood for each other, and crowdsourcing funding for people experiencing personal emergencies. A 62-year-old man described how his neighbour rushed to help him clear the water that had flooded his home after heavy rainfall. Likewise, a 38-year-old woman separated from her family described how she now relies on her neighbours to help her transport her sick child to hospital: 'They carry him to the taxi when he cannot move on his own, and accompany me to the hospital.'

> Traditionally in our village, care was provided by family or villagers who know each other well. Now that we have been spread across camps, care is coming from our neighbours rather than immediate family members. (65-year-old internally displaced man)

The importance of social relations and networks is also illustrated by returning to the three groups of IDPs – those described as 'barely surviving', 'getting by' and 'getting ahead' in Chapter 2. The 43-year-old woman who was 'barely surviving' had 'no close friends and no family members to help [her]'. She felt completely alone and, despite her best efforts, had struggled to build a livelihood in displacement. The 28-year-old internally displaced man used to illustrate the group of IDPs 'getting by' had also seen his social network weakened by war. He was separated from his wife, children and family, and living in an unfamiliar city. Nevertheless, he had managed to build an alternative network among the youth groups in his neighbourhood who distribute daily labouring opportunities amongst the community – and without whose support he wouldn't have been able to find work. Likewise, the 35-year-old woman described as 'getting ahead' attributed much of her success to the emotional and financial support she had received from her family. They welcomed her on arrival in Mekelle, gave her food and shelter, and provided the financial support she needed to establish her business. 'My parents and brothers were crucial in my success,' she said.

So, what do these findings mean for aid actors, and how are they relevant to the wider question posed in this chapter about who aid actors should prioritise for livelihoods support? Simplistic targeting methods that focus on specific groups – such as women or IDPs or returnees – can exacerbate tensions between those who fit the mould and subsequently receive assistance, and those who don't and feel overlooked – particularly when messaging is not clear or transparent (Holloway and Sturridge, 2022; Baseler et al., 2023; Sturridge et al., 2024). It is widely accepted that social tensions emerge when aid is unfairly (or seen to be unfairly) distributed across communities. A 35-year-old internally displaced woman expressed her frustration that she always hears about those who are returning. 'What about those who stay behind?' she asked, and challenged aid actors to design projects with them in mind too. Similarly, a 28-year-old internally displaced woman suggested that IDPs 'wouldn't have relationship difficulties or quarrel with each other if the NGOs distributed aid fairly', a sentiment that was echoed by a 65-year-old internally displaced man:

> There is one thing that disrupts how we get along. It is the unfair distribution of resources from NGOs. Items like soap, blankets, underwear, money, sanitary items, bags and pens are given to some groups but not to others. This leads to conflict between those who receive aid and those who don't. The selection criteria are unclear, and this causes hostility.

4.4 Meaningful dialogue and participation

Social networks with hosts and within IDP communities have played a vital role in supporting IDPs. There is a real risk that decision-making around who to prioritise for aid and assistance could undermine and even unravel these informal support structures, if it is not conflict-sensitive or well-communicated. To avoid this, aid actors must do more to engage communities in meaningful dialogue and participation. Those operating in Ethiopia typically relied on tokenistic gestures of engagement, such as complaint desks, feedback boxes, hotlines, intention surveys, and perception surveys – if they consult IDPs at all.

> If aid actors would only ask about our needs and priorities, they would understand our problems. (60-year-old internally displaced man)
>
> No one has consulted us about our needs and priorities concerning our livelihoods – so the aid that arrives does not consider individual preferences, and is often limited in scope and quantity. (23-year-old internally displaced man)

Similar findings were highlighted by the High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement, which found that 'too often, [IDPs] are not heard by policymakers and are unable to shape their own futures as decision makers in their own right' (2021: 21). At the heart of this failure to engage with IDPs lies the foregrounding of government priorities, institutional agendas and donor preferences, outlined in Chapter 3. 'NGO work is supply-driven, not demand-driven,' said an NGO informant. Another NGO informant in Addis Ababa put it another way:

> Everything is geared towards getting the kinds of answers that we know how to deal with – and that fit the menu of what we are able to provide.

So, what should meaningful dialogue and participation look like? In practical terms, aid actors can build on the recommendations already laid out in the *Independent review of the humanitarian response to internal displacement*, which included: piloting the establishment of IDP representative bodies; supporting IDP-led or IDP-focused organisations; and incorporating IDP representatives into Durable Solutions Working Groups, or equivalent spaces (Sida et al., 2024).

Ultimately, however, meaningful dialogue and participation doesn't mean that aid actors should match their interventions with a 'shopping list' of IDP needs and preferences – doing so would be impractical and expensive, especially in a context of funding restrictions and rising needs. Priorities and preferences in internal displacement differ from person to person, across geographies, and according to duration of displacement. What works for some people in some places at some times will not work for everyone, everywhere. Attempts to synchronise interventions with specific preferences would always fall short of meeting everyone's expectations, and would quickly become outdated. The alternative is to learn from the *broader* trends in IDPs' experiences and priorities, and to use this as the starting point for deciding who to prioritise for support. This entails shifting the focus from 'individuals' or 'households' to the wider enabling environment or 'scaffolding'. Scaffolding is understood by this research as:

> the meso-level enabling environment that intersects with the macro (wider economic, social, political and climatic trends) and micro (individual livelihoods activities and assets) in ways that are tangibly recognisable and meaningful to people in their everyday lives. This scaffolding approach can encompass aspects such as debt practices, unpaid care work, social relations, housing and transport, trauma and mental health, among many others. (Sturridge, 2024: 9–10)

This approach may, on first reading, appear counterintuitive: how can people's priorities and preferences be integrated into policy and practice if the focus is not on the individuals who articulate them? On reflection, however, it requires that aid actors step back from targeting specific people with specific livelihoods activities. Ultimately, by relinquishing control over the kinds of livelihoods trajectories and outcomes that aid actors want or expect from specific groups of people, they can incorporate greater flexibility, freedom and choice into the design and delivery of interventions. And in so doing, they can create the space for people to rebuild their lives and livelihoods in their own ways, and on their own terms.

5 What kinds of livelihoods initiatives should aid actors support?

Livelihoods programmes identified in Mekelle tended to focus on skills training, in-kind support, start-up kits and cash transfers – and often some combination of some or all of these approaches. Some interventions sought to provide people with a broad set of skills relating to financial literacy, marketing and entrepreneurship – designed to help people establish their own businesses. Others supported IDPs to take up a specific activity deemed to be economically viable following market assessments or consultations. These activities were familiar to the aid sector: basket-weaving, chicken rearing, tailoring, hairdressing, handicrafts, beekeeping, soap-making and food production. 'We are very traditional,' said one NGO worker. In this regard, aid actors were often very prescriptive. One intervention, for example, provided a large $1,100 grant to a small number of IDPs to purchase bee-keeping equipment (a grant that was far larger than any others identified in Mekelle). 'Households must use the funds for this purpose,' said the aid worker in charge of the intervention. A similar perspective was articulated by another NGO worker who described pre-purchasing equipment for IDPs so that they 'would not eat up the money'.

Building on the need for more meaningful dialogue and participation (outlined in Chapter 4) this chapter recommends that aid actors build greater flexibility and choice into their livelihoods programmes. This approach resonates with a wider challenge to aid actors to embrace uncertainty (Caravani et al., 2022) and complexity (Ramalingam et al., 2008), which, after all, are common features of crisis settings. Ramalingam et al. (2008) map out four crucial steps for this to happen: openness to new ideas; the restraint to accept the limitations of the approach; the honesty and humbleness to accept mistakes; and the courage to face up to the implications of these ideas. But aid actors have typically struggled to incorporate these steps into their programming. Short-term, earmarked funding structures and siloed humanitarian and development work cultures stifle the ability to experiment with new ideas, improvise and fail (Alcayna, 2019; Caravani et al., 2022).

> Individual aid workers who try to do things differently must often work outside their organisation's own systems. No longer engineered into the DNA of humanitarian agencies, flexibility happens only by breaking the rules. (Obrecht, 2019: 9)

5.1 Cash and institutional loans

Small and informal loan arrangements between family, friends and neighbours functioned as an important part of daily life in Mekelle. As illustrated by the example of the 35-year-old woman 'getting ahead' in Chapter 2, informal loans enable IDPs to meet immediate needs and make modest investments in their livelihoods. But what IDPs say they need now are more substantial institutional arrangements from microfinance institutions (MFIs).[13]

13 Microfinance institutions are a pillar of Ethiopia's financial sector, with an estimated 40 lenders, which function as an increasingly important finance source for small and micro businesses (Alibhai et al., 2021).

This perspective was echoed by a 40-year-old internally displaced woman who cited a lack of financial capital as the foremost challenge to her livelihood: 'The main aspect of my livelihood that makes me unhappy is that I wanted to expand this shop, but could not, due a lack of money.' Displaced from Amhara Region six years ago, she opened a small shop with a loan from her brother, but has struggled to make her business profitable, especially after the death of her husband. Despite various attempts, she was denied a business loan from an MFI due to a lack of collateral. Other IDPs described being similarly refused loans because they lacked official identification documents required for accessing financial services. Against this backdrop, a desire for cash arose frequently among IDPs needing the capital to start up or expand their businesses:

> Many IDPs are already experienced in doing business. What we lack is money. If we could get a loan, we could change our situation. (51-year-old internally displaced woman)
>
> If loans were provided, I would work hard to improve my circumstances. I would buy a bajaj and work. (23-year-old internally displaced man)
>
> If we received a loan, we could engage in productive activities, start up or expand our businesses. With the right support, we can rebuild our lives and make a positive impact on our community. (50-year-old internally displaced woman)
>
> The most serious challenge is the lack of initial capital to start a business. I want to be retailer but I do not have the money. (47-year-old internally displaced woman)

A compounding issue is that many Ethiopian MFIs experience chronic liquidity problems, which began during the Covid-19 pandemic and escalated during the war, as people were unable to repay their loans when they lost their livelihoods, resulting in a significant repayment backlog (Alibhai et al., 2021). An MFI informant described losing tens of millions of dollars during the war, in large part because their operation was manual – they lost track of who owed what when documents were misplaced or destroyed during the war. These setbacks have made MFIs more risk-averse, and less willing to lend to IDPs – a group about which they have limited understanding and who they fear could return home without warning and without settling their debts (Phillips, 2004; Crailsheim, 2021; ILO, 2023). This perspective was corroborated by an NGO informant whose organisation succeeded in securing institutional loans from an MFI for 500 Tigrayan women, but not for IDPs, to whom the NGO subsequently had to provide direct cash transfers instead.

Cash is an aid mechanism around which humanitarian and development actors could converge across the nexus. Humanitarian actors can emulate the kinds of workarounds enacted by the aforementioned NGO – by offering unconditional cash transfers or credit to IDPs, in order to fill the gaps left by MFIs. Despite the established value of cash as aid in Ethiopia and elsewhere, many humanitarian actors continue to rely on food and in-kind support – and should scale up their cash assistance to reflect IDP's

needs and preferences.[14] It is widely agreed that cash offers greater flexibility than 'one size fits all' in-kind assistance packages (Gordon, 2015; CALP, 2024), enabling recipients to 'choose a more appropriate set of goods and services that better corresponds to their individual priorities' (Bailey et al., 2014).

Indeed, a commonly cited disadvantage for aid actors is that cash transfers are 'less suited to encouraging specific outcomes' (CALP, 2024). In other words, because they can be used flexibly, outcomes are demand- rather than supply-driven – reflecting the preferences and priorities of IDPs, rather than aid actors. If aid actors are serious about recognising difference and diversity, and building flexibility and choice into programmes, this perceived limitation should be reframed as an advantage. Moreover, feasibility studies have found that cash works well in Tigray, where markets are functioning, accessible and regionally integrated, and where communities, aid actors, financial service providers and authorities share a strong appetite for cash (Alam and Asabu, 2023).

As a complement to cash transfers, development actors could engage more systematically and proactively to secure institutional loans from MFIs. Before the war, MFIs like Dedebit Credit and Savings Institution (DECSI) had been willing to lend to IDPs on a 20/80 credit arrangement, whereby IDPs saved 20% of the value of the loan, and the company provided the rest. They also provided small loans to civil servants on the basis of their identity cards. With the right incentives, MFIs might be encouraged to lend again to IDPs according to these terms. For example, development actors could offer to underwrite the risk of lending to IDPs or invest in rebuilding MFIs' cash flow so that they are in a position to lend again in the future.

Humanitarian and development actors should also work together to amplify the expedition and facilitation of identity cards for IDPs. While civil documentation tends to be seen by humanitarians as 'lower-priority "development" issues', it represents an essential part of the scaffolding needed for building protection, food security, health care and livelihoods – around which both humanitarians and development actors could effectively align their efforts (Sida et al., 2024: 40).

5.2 Portability and transferability

A second way of providing greater flexibility and choice is by building portability and transferability into livelihoods interventions. Prior to displacement, most IDPs were involved in agricultural farming (sesame, sorghum, tomatoes, onions, potatoes) as well as livestock rearing (cattle, sheep, goats) and dairy production. Against this largely agricultural backdrop, many aid actors have rejected opportunities for building livelihoods synergies on the basis that farming is not compatible with urban displacement. According to one NGO worker, 'rural' IDPs do not have 'a good understanding of how business works'. This same rationale was used as a reason for not supporting IDP livelihoods in the first place – on the basis that urban skills do not hold long-term value upon return to rural areas.

14 While exact figures are difficult to come by, Ethiopia's Disaster Risk Management Commission reported that, in 2023, in-kind support provided by the government totalled $10 million in 2023 in Tigray while the equivalent of $2 million in cash transfers was made to conflict- and drought-affected people (DRMC, 2024).

In fixing 'rural' and 'urban' as distinct economic entities, aid actors overlook the more fluid and complex ways in which livelihoods are constituted (Andersson, 2001; Agergaard et al., 2010; Greiner and Sakdapolrak, 2013). Indeed, prior to displacement, many IDPs had already diversified traditional farming livelihoods with so-called 'urban' activities, such as trading and business, shops and cafes, security and factory work. Upon displacement, many IDPs were able to build upon this diversified experience to engage in similar kinds of activities in Mekelle: small-scale urban farming, day labour on building sites, security guarding, selling food from roadside kiosks and cafes, and so on.

The experience of a 43-year-old internally displaced man originally from Zalambessa, who successfully used his construction skills across various locations, provides a practical example of the portability of livelihoods in practice. In 2004, he moved to Addis Ababa to work in the construction sector, before taking up a role as site manager at a public university in Somali Region. He subsequently returned to Zalambessa in 2018, following ethnically motivated attacks, where he manufactured and sold bricks. When the Tigray war broke out in 2020, he fled to Mekelle, where he worked as a day labourer on construction sites. At the time of the research, he was supervising the construction of a friend's house, but he plans to save his wages to move back to Somali Region and buy a brick machine, adding: 'I have a profession, and I can work and re-establish myself.'

Most aid actors did not recognise these synergies and overlaps – either because their capacity and resources were already over-stretched, or because they assumed they didn't exist. Either way, opportunities for building transferability and portability into livelihoods programming are being missed or overlooked. Aid actors can address these gaps by designing livelihoods around activities and skills that are relevant back home and in displacement. This involves:

- **Looking backwards**: Designing aid interventions around the kinds of skills and expertise that IDPs had prior to displacement. IDPs able to 'get by' or 'get ahead' had often succeeded in building on and adapting pre-existing experience and skills – such as business, trading, livestock and small-scale farming – rather than starting from scratch with an unfamiliar livelihood activity. Despite this, in the words of one NGO worker, there is a tendency to rely on 'plug in and play' interventions drawn from elsewhere, which can be rapidly scaled up and scaled down.
- **Looking forwards**: Providing IDPs with the kinds of goods and skills that they can take with them should they return. Take cash for example. Not only is it easier to carry and transport back home than in-kind goods, but it also gives IDPs the flexibility to pursue livelihoods activities that suit their skills and experience upon return.

6 Conclusion and recommendations

This paper has sought to answer the following three dilemmas facing aid actors in Tigray.

Should aid actors do more to support livelihoods in displacement?

Chapter 3 of this paper argued that aid actors have largely maintained a narrow focus on short-term emergency relief. Strongly influenced by the political narrative of returns (as well as wider funding and coordination constraints) livelihoods programming has been deprioritised in displacement – even though livelihoods are a key priority among IDPs. While aid actors' decision to prioritise emergency relief can be justified on the grounds that the needs in Tigray dwarf the available resources, this may ultimately prove to be a false economy. Four years since the start of the conflict, displacement has become protracted, and a sustainable response that incorporates livelihoods is now urgently required. Livelihoods are not a panacea, but they are a key part of the puzzle. And by delaying livelihoods programming, aid actors are sacrificing opportunities for building IDPs' resilience in the interim and finding solutions in the long run.

- **Recommendation 1:** Prioritise longer-term livelihoods investments of IDPs and returnees. This is especially important for: IDPs who are still waiting to return to contested territories and for whom a political solution still feels remote; IDPs who have been displaced by ongoing droughts and do not prioritise a return; and IDPs who have returned home spontaneously and are struggling to rebuild their livelihoods. Aid actors torn between supporting those who return and those who are displaced should move away from an 'either/or' approach. While government actors did not champion livelihoods programmes in Mekelle, neither did they block them – suggesting that, with the right willingness and ambition, there may be room for manoeuvre and engagement on this issue.

If aid actors *do* support livelihoods, who should they prioritise for support?

In Chapter 4, the paper found that, when livelihoods programmes do occur, aid actors have by and large prioritised vulnerable groups located at the intersection of displacement status and gender – in particular, IDPs, returnees, women with children and SGBV survivors. While these groups of people face significant and specific challenges in rebuilding their lives and livelihoods, a better understanding of what IDPs need and want, and why outcomes vary between groups of people, would help aid actors to construct a more diverse and complex understanding of vulnerability than traditional targeting mechanisms allow. A better understanding of IDPs' experiences would also help to shine a light on the informal and social support structures that have sustained many IDPs until now, but which can come under pressure when decision-making about who to prioritise for support is not adequately communicated or conflict sensitive.

- **Recommendation 2**: Put communities at the centre of the response. IDPs felt ignored and overlooked by aid actors, who often foregrounded government priorities, institutional agendas and donor preferences when deciding who to prioritise for support. While it is not feasible to design programmes according to specific requests or individual preferences, aid actors should adopt the technical recommendations already laid out in the *Independent review* (Sida et al., 2024) in order to learn from the broader trends in IDPs' experiences and priorities, and use this as the starting point for deciding who to prioritise for support.

What kinds of approaches to livelihoods programming should aid actors support?

In Chapter 5, the paper found that, of the handful of livelihoods initiatives identified in Mekelle, most took an individualised approach to livelihoods – focusing on specific individuals (rather than systems) or particular livelihoods assets or strategies (rather than structural constraints). By incorporating greater flexibility and choice into livelihoods programming, aid actors can create the space for people to rebuild their lives and livelihoods in their own ways, and on their own terms. This requires an overhaul of the current approach – in particular, a rejection of individualist and isolationist mindsets ('my project, my money, my donor') in favour of more collaborative approaches across the humanitarian–development nexus. It also requires a willingness to relinquish control over the kinds of livelihoods trajectories and outcomes that aid actors want or expect from specific groups of people.

- **Recommendation 3**: Scale up the availability of cash through transfers and loans to IDPs. Humanitarian and development actors should work together to address a lack of capital – which emerged as a key challenge and priority among IDPs. Humanitarians should scale up their use of flexible cash and unconditional cash transfers to fill immediate gaps, while development partners engage more systematically with MFIs to address underlying issues of risk and liquidity. Humanitarian and development actors should also work together to expedite the renewal of identity cards for IDPs, which has blocked many from accessing loans.
- **Recommendation 4**: Build portability and transferability into livelihoods programming. To balance IDPs' preference for return with a desire to rebuild livelihoods in the interim, aid actors should design interventions that are relevant both in displacement and upon return. Instead of introducing new activities (which might be easier to scale up, but harder to sustain), aid actors should build on IDPs' pre-existing skills and experiences.

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Humanitarian Policy Group
ODI Global
203 Blackfriars Road
London SE1 8NJ
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7922 0300
Fax: +44 (0) 20 7922 0399
Email: hpgadmin@odi.org
Website: odi.org/hpg