

# AID AND CONFLICT SENSITIVITY IN CONTEMPORARY ETHIOPIA

November 2025



**ECSH**  
ETHIOPIA CONFLICT  
SENSITIVITY HUB

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**Rift Valley Institute**  
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SENSITIVITY HUB



# **AID AND CONFLICT SENSITIVITY IN CONTEMPORARY ETHIOPIA**

## **ETHIOPIA CONFLICT SENSITIVITY HUB (ECSH)**

The ECSH is a collaborative platform established by Mercy Corps, the Rift Valley Institute and Adapt Peacebuilding, with support from Global Affairs Canada and the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office. The Hub aims to strengthen the capacity of humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actors operating in Ethiopia to adopt conflict and peace-sensitive approaches and contribute to enduring peace through high-quality research and analysis, capacity-building schemes and convening. This report was commissioned by Ethiopia Conflict Sensitivity Hub.

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## **MERCY CORPS, ADAPT PEACEBUILDING AND THE RIFT VALLEY INSTITUTE**

Mercy Corps supports communities—and the most marginalized within them—to emerge from crisis and build towards a more inclusive, resilient future. Adapt Peacebuilding produces research, implements programmes, provides training and advises organizations supporting conflict affected societies. The Rift Valley Institute works in Eastern and Central Africa to bring local knowledge to bear on social, political and economic development. Copyright © Rift Valley Institute 2025. This work is published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).

## **DESIGN/LAYOUT**

Maggie Dougherty

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# SUMMARY

This study assesses conflict sensitivity practices among humanitarian, development and peacebuilding (HDP) actors in Ethiopia. It seeks to raise awareness and foster a deeper understanding of the evolving aid landscape in the country while analysing the challenges that affect conflict-sensitive programming. The study further aims to enhance institutional and operational conflict sensitivity by equipping HDP actors with evidence-based knowledge of current practices, highlighting internal and external barriers, and providing practical recommendations for improvement. By generating evidence-based descriptive analysis, it helps actors better understand existing approaches, identify gaps and explore pathways to strengthen conflict sensitivity strategies and cooperation frameworks. The study findings also serve as valuable inputs for policy formulation, resource allocation and programme (re)design by donors and implementing partners.

The Ethiopian aid landscape operates in a complex environment marked by overlapping conflicts, displacement, economic stress and climate-induced crisis. In such a context, conflict sensitivity—which combines Do No Harm (DNH) and Do More Good (DMG) principles—is essential for ensuring that aid contributes to peace rather than exacerbates divisions. The study reveals that while awareness of conflict sensitivity concepts is widespread across aid actors, application of these concepts remains inconsistent and often limited to compliance instead of genuine adaptation to context.

## KEY FINDINGS

- **Awareness does not equal practice.** Many organizations are familiar with some conflict sensitivity approaches, most notably DNH principles (77 per cent), yet few have formal policies, staff training or monitoring systems to translate these into practice.
- **Donor frameworks both drive and constrain.** Donor requirements encourage conflict sensitivity integration (82 per cent) but inflexible funding practices undermine adaptation.
- **Local actors remain under supported.** Local NGOs possess deep contextual understanding and trust but face major resource and capacity gaps to implement activities in conflict-sensitive manner.

- **Government engagement is uneven.** While some regional bureaus, such as the Amhara disaster prevention office, require conflict or context analyses before project approval, most lack the tools, capacity and mandates needed to guide or enforce conflict sensitivity standards, thus risking uncoordinated and harmful interventions.
- **Coordination and information-sharing are weak.** UN agencies often produce high-quality conflict analyses but keep them for internal use for security and planning purposes, leaving local partners deprived of access to crucial contextual insights and reinforcing knowledge silos.
- **Institutionalization remains limited.** Conflict sensitivity practices are often project based rather than embedded in organizational systems and accountability structures.
- **Regional dynamics shape aid operations and conflict sensitivity practices.** Aid operations across Ethiopia face region-specific challenges, including access and security constraints in Amhara and Oromia, perceptions of favouritism in Tigray, distributional impacts in Gambella and Tigray, and overlapping crises in Afar. Effective interventions require localized, inclusive and conflict-sensitive programming, strengthened regional coordination, flexible funding and mechanisms that align national policies with local needs while ensuring accountability.
- **Aid can exacerbate conflict.** The negative effects of aid are predominantly illustrated in various parts of Ethiopia through diversion and theft, impacts related to resource distribution, legitimization effects and distortion of local markets.
- **Community perspectives and knowledge are key to promoting conflict sensitive approaches and practices.** Consultations and meaningful involvement of local community actors is insufficient—only about half of the participants reported that the distribution of aid is fair, highlighting the need for more inclusive and transparent processes.
- **Amid challenges, some aid organizations have well-established practices of conflict sensitivity.** This opens an opportunity for institutional exchange, experience sharing and peer-learning.

# INTRODUCTION

Humanitarian, development and peacebuilding (HDP) actors in Ethiopia function in a complex and fragile situation shaped by prolonged internal conflicts, polarization and recurrent humanitarian crises. Since the early 1990s, aid has played a significant role in development across the country, yet its impact has often reflected tensions between centralized state-led growth and limited local accountability.<sup>1</sup> The post-2018 political transition—marked by escalating conflicts, polarization and economic pressures—has further reshaped the aid landscape in Ethiopia. Emerging evidence shows that when aid is poorly designed or detached from local dynamics, it can deepen inequalities and intensify tensions, whereas context-responsive and participatory interventions can reinforce social cohesion and foster peace.<sup>2</sup> Against this backdrop, this study provides a broader image of how local and international HDP actors in Ethiopia understand and apply conflict sensitivity.

This study provides a descriptive overview of how conflict sensitivity is understood, practiced and institutionalized among HDP actors in Ethiopia. By mapping the existing landscape of aid and conflict sensitivity, and identifying current practices, gaps and challenges, as well as good practices, the study aims to generate a foundational understanding to inform the Ethiopia Conflict Sensitivity Hub (ECSH), its partners, and the broader ecosystem of donors, NGOs, government institutions and community actors working to embed conflict sensitivity across Ethiopia's aid system.

## SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

Thematically, the study is positioned within the broader framework of aid and conflict sensitivity, emphasizing the dual dimensions of DNH and DMG. It describes how aid interventions in Ethiopia interact with conflict and peace dynamics: Do these interventions unintentionally exacerbate tensions or do they promote resilience and peace? In doing so, the study bridges the conceptual underpinnings of aid and conflict sensitivity, translating them into a context-specific

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- 1 Habte Adane, 'Foreign Aid and Its Impact on Democracy in Post-1991 Ethiopia', *Open Access Library Journal* 2/5 (2015): 6–7.
  - 2 Ethiopian Economics Association, 'The Case for Global Public Investment: Redesigning Development Assistance in Ethiopia', technical note, Addis Ababa: Ethiopian Economics Association, March 2024, 11–13. Accessed 26 October 2025, <https://eea-et.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/The-Case-for-Global-Public-Investment-Redesigning-Development-Assistance-in-Ethiopia.pdf>; OECD, 'The Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus Interim Progress Review', Paris: OECD Publishing, 2022, 12–13. Accessed 29 September 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1787/2f620ca5-en>; OECD, 'States of Fragility 2025', Paris: OECD Publishing, 2025, 100–101. Accessed 29 September 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1787/81982370-en>.

analysis of how HDP assistance in Ethiopia can impact sustainable peace. Geographically, the study draws on data from Afar, Amhara, Gambella, Oromia, Tigray and Addis Ababa. These regions represent diverse contexts of conflict, displacement and aid engagement. Addis Ababa is included for its central role in national coordination and policymaking.

This study employs a convergent parallel mixed-methods design to establish a national baseline on how conflict sensitivity is conceptualized, institutionalized and practiced across HDP actors in Ethiopia. The research process combines literature review, tool development, key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), surveys, robust sampling, data analysis and data quality assurance to map and measure conflict sensitivity across sectors and communities.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### Aid

Foreign aid encompasses the HDP assistance provided by national and international NGOs, UN agencies, and bilateral and multilateral actors.<sup>3</sup> To some extent, the evolution of aid reflects the evolution of ideas as to how development happens. During the 1950s and 1960s, under the modernization paradigm, aid sought to transfer capital and technical expertise from the Global North to the Global South to promote economic growth and state building. By the 1980s and 1990s, the model gave way to structural adjustment programmes and governance reforms that emphasized efficiency, accountability and policy conditionality.<sup>4</sup> The 2000s brought another reorientation through the Paris Declaration, shifting attention towards ownership, alignment, harmonization and results-based management in response to a fragmented and donor-driven model that had failed to deliver sustainable results.<sup>5</sup>

If poorly designed, aid can also reinforce power inequalities and intensify conflict.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, it serves as a lifeline—sustaining millions amid violent conflict, economic stress and climate shocks—and a catalyst for institutional and policy reform. In response to these tensions, contemporary approaches increasingly link aid explicitly to peacebuilding and social cohesion, seeking to support durable stability in fragile contexts. Ethiopia illustrates this broader paradox

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- 3 OECD, 'From Aid to Development: The Global Fight against Poverty', Paris: OECD Publishing, 2012, 49–59. Accessed 6 November 2025, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264123571-en>; UNSDG, 'Conflict Sensitivity, Peace building and Sustainable Peace: Good Practice Note', New York: UN, 2022. Accessed 28 October 2025, <https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/UNSDG%20Good%20Practice%20Note%20Conflict%20Sensitivity%20Peacebuilding%20Sustaining%20Peace.pdf>.
  - 4 Ishrat Husain, 'Poverty and Structural Adjustment: The African Case', Washington, DC: World Bank, 1993. Accessed 15 September 2025, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/517231468741855925/pdf/multiopage.pdf>.
  - 5 OECD, 'Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness', Paris: OECD Publishing, 2005, 10–11. Accessed 15 September 2025, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264098084-en>.
  - 6 Claude Berrebi and Veronique Thelen, 'Dilemmas of Foreign Aid in Post-Conflict Areas', in *Dilemmas of Intervention: Social Science for Stabilization and Reconstruction*, ed. Paul K Davis, 291–320, Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2011.

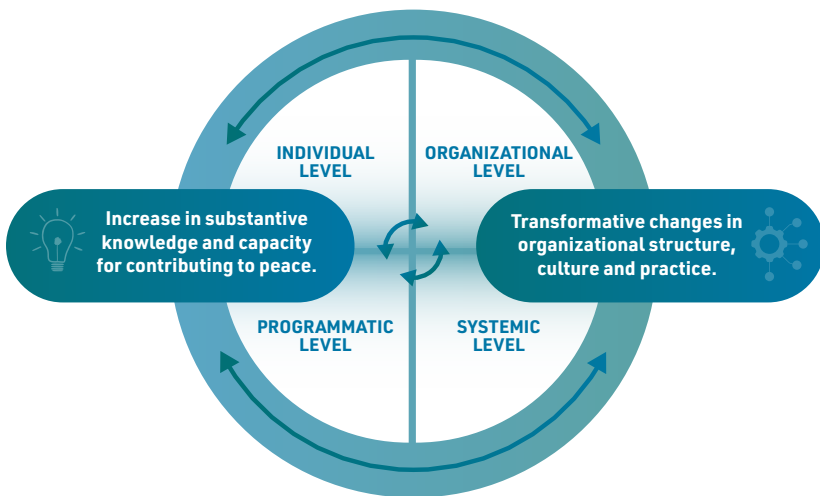


surrounding aid: It is much-needed financial support to meet urgent humanitarian needs and pursue sustainable development but is also a political instrument shaped by shifting global priorities, contested power dynamics and the enduring quest for locally owned development.

### Conflict sensitivity

Conflict sensitivity refers to the capacity of aid actors to understand context, analyse how interventions interact with it and adapt programming to avoid harm while maximizing contributions to peace and social cohesion.<sup>7</sup> Originating from the Do No Harm (DNH) framework, which specifies the need to prevent aid from exacerbating tensions, this approach has evolved toward Do More Good (DMG), which seeks to proactively leverage interventions to strengthen trust, inclusion and collaboration.<sup>8</sup> This is complemented by what is termed a ‘peace and conflict impact assessment’ (PCIA), which assesses how projects influence peace dynamics.<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 1. Levels of conflict sensitivity**



Source: *Inter-Peace: Peace Responsiveness Training Course* (2025)

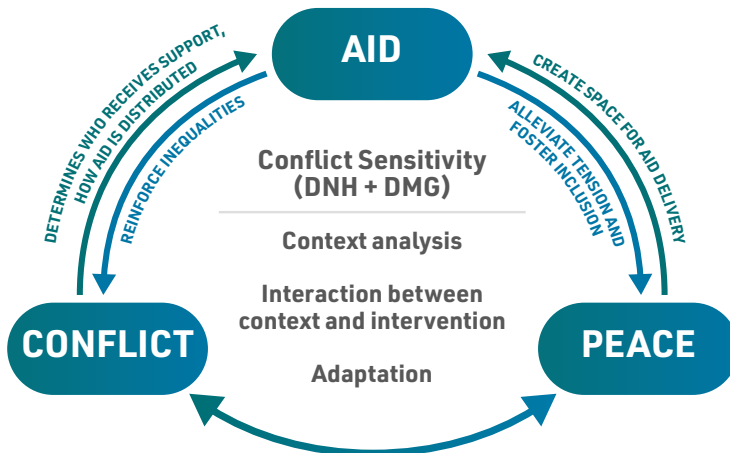
- 7 Mary B Anderson, *Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace or War*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1999.
- 8 UNICEF, ‘Conflict Sensitivity and Peacebuilding: Programming Guide’, New York: UN, November 2016. Accessed 6 November 2025, <https://www.unicef.org/documents/unicef-conflict-sensitivity-peacebuilding-programming-guide>.
- 9 Kenneth Bush, ‘A Measure of Peace: Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment (PCIA) of Development Projects in Conflict Zones’, Working Paper 1. Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, 1998. Accessed 6 November 2025, <https://gsdrc.org/document-library/a-measure-of-peace-peace-and-conflict-impact-assessment-pcia-of-development-projects-in-conflict-zones/>.

Conflict sensitivity operates across four interconnected levels with each shaping how aid actors translate principles into their practices (see Figure 1).<sup>10</sup> At the *systemic level*, donor policies, funding architecture and political priorities set incentives and constraints for what is possible. At the *organizational level*, internal policies, staffing, leadership and accountability systems determine if conflict sensitivity becomes embedded as standard practice or remains procedural. At the *programmatic level*, interventions apply adaptive management, participatory planning, risk-informed design and continuous context monitoring. At the *individual level*, practitioners apply knowledge, ethics and reflective decision-making to respond to evolving local dynamics. Applied effectively, conflict sensitivity goes beyond minimizing harm to promote peace, social cohesion and governance outcomes, consistent with the HDP nexus.<sup>11</sup>

### Aid, conflict and peace dynamics: the interplay

The relationship between aid, conflict and peace is profoundly interdependent (see Figure 2). Aid can influence conflict dynamics by redistributing resources and power—sometimes alleviating tensions through inclusion and fairness—but at other times, it unintentionally fuels grievances and reinforces inequalities.<sup>12</sup> A well-designed aid intervention can contribute

Figure 2. Conceptual map



Source: Developed by the Research Team (2025)

- 10 UNDP, 'Conflict Sensitivity and Monitoring and Evaluation Toolbox', Lebanon: Tensions Monitoring Systems, 2024. Accessed 26 October 2025, [https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2024-10/conflict\\_sensitivity\\_and\\_monitoring\\_evaluation\\_toolbox-en.pdf](https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2024-10/conflict_sensitivity_and_monitoring_evaluation_toolbox-en.pdf).
- 11 'How to Guide to Conflict Sensitivity', Conflict Sensitivity Consortium. Accessed 6 November 2025, <https://www.international-alert.org/publications/how-guide-conflict-sensitivity/>.
- 12 Conflict Sensitivity Consortium, 'How to Guide'.

to peace by rebuilding trust and strengthening social cohesion.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, however, conflict deeply shapes the nature and delivery of aid, determining who receives support, how it is distributed and under what conditions. Moments of peace, in turn, expand the space for secured delivery of aid and long-term development-oriented interventions.

Traditional aid approaches often prioritize efficiency and technical delivery, assuming neutrality in complex and deeply divided settings. Conflict sensitivity challenges this assumption by providing a framework to navigate the complex interplay between aid, conflict and peace. Building on the DNH principle and evolving toward a DMG orientation, conflict sensitivity calls on aid actors to analyse context, anticipate how interventions interact with existing conflict and peace dynamics, and design programmes that minimize harm while enhancing conditions for trust, inclusion and sustainable peace. Increasingly, HDP actors are expected to embed conflict sensitivity across policies, delivery systems and monitoring frameworks so that aid effectiveness is assessed both by outputs and through how it adapts to and influences conflict and peace dynamics.<sup>14</sup>

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13 swisspeace, 'HDP Nexus and Conflict Sensitivity: Changing the Aid System for Good?', Basel, Switzerland: swisspeace, 2023. Accessed 6 November 2025, [https://www.swisspeace.ch/assets/publications/Essentials/20230515\\_Essential\\_HDP-Nexus\\_final.pdf](https://www.swisspeace.ch/assets/publications/Essentials/20230515_Essential_HDP-Nexus_final.pdf).

14 UNDP, 'Conflict Sensitivity Toolbox'. Also see: NGO VOICE, 'Do No Harm and Conflict Sensitivity: Two Sides of the Same Coin?', event report, Brussels: NGO VOICE, 2018. Accessed 6 November 2025, <https://voiceeu.org/publications/conflict-sensitivity--do-no-harm-two-sides-same-coin.pdf>.

# THE EVOLVING LANDSCAPE OF AID IN ETHIOPIA

## GLOBAL SHIFTS IN AID

During the past few years, international aid has been undergoing shifts that see fiscal retrenchment in traditional donor countries amid record levels of humanitarian need. Reduced contributions to multilateral organizations have resulted in a notable shrinking of aid. Official Development Assistance (ODA) from OECD-Development Assistance Committee members, for example, declined by 7.1 per cent in real terms in 2024.<sup>15</sup> Developing regions, particularly sub-Saharan Africa and least developed countries, have been disproportionately affected, with net ODA flows falling by 1–3 per cent in real terms. Projections suggest that major donors may further reduce aid, highlighting the need to reassess traditional aid mechanisms.<sup>16</sup>

These reassessments are already taking shape in response to declining traditional aid. The international development community is increasingly shifting toward market-based strategies and private sector engagement.<sup>17</sup> Engaging the private sector has become a central strategy as development agencies emphasize partnerships with businesses and philanthropies to mobilize resources, scale interventions and align commercial incentives with development goals.<sup>18</sup> While such engagement can bring additional resources, evaluations indicate that the tangible impacts on development outcomes are not always clear, underscoring the need for strategic design and robust monitoring frameworks.<sup>19</sup>

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- 15 'International Aid Falls in 2024 for First Time in Six Years', press release, OECD, April 2025. Accessed 6 September 2025, <https://www.oecd.org/en/about/news/press-releases/2025/04/official-development-assistance-2024-figures.html>.
- 16 Karen Mathiasen and Nico Martinez, 'The Future of US Foreign Assistance: How Low Can They Go?', Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, 6 March 2025. Accessed 31 October 2025, <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/future-us-foreign-assistance-how-low-can-they-go>.
- 17 USAID, 'Private-Sector Engagement Policy: Policy for Agency-Wide Implementation', Washington, DC: USAID, 2018.
- 18 USAID, 'Private-Sector Engagement'.
- 19 German Institute for Development Evaluation, 'What Do We Know about the Effects of Private Sector Engagement?', DEval Policy Brief 3/2022, Bonn: German Institute for Development Evaluation, 2022. Accessed 6 September 2025, [https://www.deval.org/fileadmin/Redaktion/PDF/05-Publikationen/Policy\\_Briefs/2022\\_3\\_ZmPW\\_PB/DEval\\_PolicyBrief\\_03-22\\_EN\\_barrierefrei.pdf](https://www.deval.org/fileadmin/Redaktion/PDF/05-Publikationen/Policy_Briefs/2022_3_ZmPW_PB/DEval_PolicyBrief_03-22_EN_barrierefrei.pdf).

Beyond private sector engagement, the broader shift toward development partnerships reflects the rethinking of the donor–recipient model. Rather than unilateral aid flows, these emerging partnerships prioritize collaboration, local ownership and long-term sustainability. The concept of ‘beyond aid’ highlights the diversification of actors, financial flows, regulatory frameworks and knowledge systems in development cooperation.<sup>20</sup> This trend sees a focus on local empowerment and partnerships shifting from charity-driven models toward localization, nexus programming and adaptive management.

These changes also mean that aid organizations are faced with new challenges to which they must adapt in order to ensure they remain effective. Organizations that have traditionally relied on grants find themselves needing to pivot toward programmes with revenue potential, cost-recovery mechanisms or strong private sector linkages. Moreover, the emerging donors and investment institutions filling the gaps left by traditional Western donors are increasingly funding infrastructure and cross-border projects.<sup>21</sup> As funding is directed toward sectors with commercial potential—such as energy, critical minerals, information and communications technology, and export-oriented agriculture—projects in other areas must be strategically framed to attract the resources they need to operate.

The growing role of development finance corporations and public–private partnerships requires building internal capacity in financial structuring, risk assessment and negotiation to safeguard development goals. To ensure that initiatives deliver genuine local benefits rather than solely serve commercial or geopolitical interests, aid actors must maintain transparency and use robust metrics to measure environmental safeguards and local impact. These changes also introduce new complexities as aid is increasingly being politicized, securitized and fragmented, with donors demanding rapid results while aid organizations grapple with complex and volatile environments.

This evolving aid landscape demands that development organizations continue to advocate for and plan essential grant-based and humanitarian support, especially in contexts where state fragility and the needs of the poorest populations risk being deprioritized. It also calls on the sector to recognize that humanitarian, development and peacebuilding efforts must be integrated and responsive to the operational context.

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20 Heiner Janus, Stephan Klingebiel and Sebastian Paulo, ‘Beyond Aid: A Conceptual Perspective on the Transformation of Development Cooperation’, Bonn: German Development Institute/*Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik*, 2014. Accessed 23 October 2025, <https://www.die-gdi.de/en/discussion-paper/article/beyond-aid-a-conceptual-perspective-on-the-transformation-of-development-cooperation/>.

21 ‘China Urges AIIB to Step Up Cross-Border Development Funding, Says Global Aid Drying Up’, *Reuters*, 25 June 2025. Accessed 31 October 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/china-urges-aiib-step-up-cross-border-development-funding-says-global-aid-drying-2025-06-25/>.

## THE NATIONAL PICTURE

At the national level, the aid landscape in Ethiopia is undergoing profound transformation, shaped by global currents and domestic political realities. Since 2018, a confluence of factors including political and macroeconomic reforms, violent conflicts, escalating climate-related vulnerabilities and reductions in global aid financing have reconfigured aid dynamics across the country.

Given its complex history, internal displacement and regional conflicts, Ethiopia presents a significant challenge for aid actors. Violent conflicts including the Tigray conflict (2020–2022), escalating violence in Amhara and Oromia, prolonged droughts and inflationary pressures have dramatically increased humanitarian needs and compounded vulnerabilities across the country. In 2023, the federal government appealed for nearly USD 4 billion in humanitarian assistance but only secured about 30 per cent of that target. This shortfall has led to limited coverage and inconsistent delivery of aid; for example, reaching only 50–75 per cent of targeted beneficiaries' nutritional needs.<sup>22</sup>

Conflict also remains the primary driver of internal displacement in Ethiopia. As of May 2024, an estimated 3.3 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) across 664,509 households were recorded in 2,739 assessed and accessible sites, reflecting a 3.5 per cent increase since late 2023.<sup>23</sup> Of the total IDP population, 68.7 per cent were displaced by conflict, followed by 16.5 per cent due to drought and 8.4 per cent due to other climate-induced factors such as floods, landslides and fires. According to 2024 IOM data, the Oromia, Somali and Tigray regions host the highest IDP caseloads nationwide. The Somali region bears the largest burden of drought-induced displacement, while Tigray accounts for the highest number of conflict-displaced individuals. Return movements are also significant, with more than 2.58 million returning IDPs identified across 2,651 villages, most notably in Tigray, Amhara and Afar.<sup>24</sup>

The intensifying conflict landscape, particularly in Oromia and Amhara, alongside the fragile post-war recovery process in Tigray, has heightened the operational relevance of conflict sensitivity approaches. Since mid-2023, federal government disarmament of regional special forces in Amhara has triggered violent confrontations between federal troops and local militias. In Oromia, the protracted insurgency involving the Oromo Liberation Army continues to destabilize communities, resulting in frequent civilian displacements, casualties and restricted

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22 'Ethiopia Food Security Outlook: February to September 2023', FEWS NET. Accessed 29 September 2025, <https://fsccluster.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/FEWSNET%20%20Ethiopia%20%20Food%20Security%20Outlook%20February%20-%20September%202024.pdf>.

23 International Organization for Migration, Displacement Tracking Mechanism, 'Ethiopia — National Displacement Report 19 (November 2023–May 2024)', Addis Ababa: IOM Ethiopia, 26 July 2024. Unless otherwise specified, the data in this paragraph is derived from this source.

24 International Organization for Migration, 'Ethiopia Annual Report 2024', Addis Ababa: IOM Ethiopia, June 2025. Accessed 6 November 2025, [https://ethiopia.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1996/files/documents/2025-06/ethiopia\\_annual-report-2024.pdf](https://ethiopia.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1996/files/documents/2025-06/ethiopia_annual-report-2024.pdf).

humanitarian access. These dynamics actively shape programme design and delivery. For example, renewed violence in Amhara has forced several organizations to suspend community engagement activities due to disputes over the legitimacy of local actors and interlocutors.<sup>25</sup> This underscores the importance of updated stakeholder mapping to reflect shifting power relations. In Oromia, fluid conflict lines likewise demand ongoing context analysis and adaptive management. Implementing aid in such settings requires a robust conflict-sensitive approach that understands the interaction between aid and conflict dynamics and acts to minimize harm while maximizing positive impact.

The macroeconomic context in Ethiopia is another important dimension of the evolving aid landscape, shaping both the fiscal space for aid and the social dynamics that determine its impact. Driven by the Homegrown Economic Reform Plan II and the Extended Credit Facility supported by the IMF, both of which aim to reposition the economy through structural adjustment, currency liberalization and fiscal tightening, the Ethiopian economy is undergoing a profound transition.<sup>26</sup> While these reforms are intended to attract foreign investment and enhance competitiveness, their implementation has also triggered significant economic shocks. Most notably, these include the removal of subsidies and the rapid depreciation of the Ethiopian Birr from approximately ETB 55/USD 1 in early 2024 to more than ETB 119/USD 1 by mid-2025, according to the National Bank of Ethiopia, and a surge in inflation, with headline rates exceeding 30 per cent as shown by the consumer price index.<sup>27</sup>

These pressures have eroded household purchasing power and deepened poverty, straining public confidence in the economic reform agenda. In response, the government has proposed revisions to fiscal and monetary legislation, including amendments to the Monetary Policy Framework and Banking Proclamation, though these efforts have yet to yield stabilizing effects.<sup>28</sup> For HDP actors, the implications of this economic volatility are immediate and operationally complex. Rising costs of goods and services undermine the value-for-money of aid inputs. Inflation steadily erodes the purchasing power of cash-based interventions, forcing programmes to recalibrate transfer values more frequently and rethink procurement strategies in light of shifting market conditions. In this context, real-time market monitoring, dynamic budget forecasting and flexible delivery mechanisms have become essential both for maintaining programme integrity and community trust, and for ensuring that aid remains responsive and relevant in an increasingly unpredictable economic environment.

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25 Interview with key informant from a local CSO, Debre Berhan, 1 August 2025.

26 Tsegay Tekleselassie, 'Ethiopia's Bold Economic Reforms Target Stability and Growth, but They Come with Risks', *The Conversation*, 16 August 2024. Accessed 6 November 2025, <https://theconversation.com/ethiopian-bold-economic-reforms-target-stability-and-growth-but-they-come-with-risks-236804>.

27 Ethiopian Statistical Service, *Consumer Price Index*, Feb 2024. Accessed 28 October 2025, [https://ess.gov.et/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/CPI\\_Feb\\_2024.pdf](https://ess.gov.et/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/CPI_Feb_2024.pdf).

28 International Monetary Fund, 'The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia: 2025 Article IV Consultation', staff report no. 2025/188, Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund. Accessed 6 November 2025, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2025/07/15/The-Federal-Democratic-Republic-of-Ethiopia-2025-Article-IV-Consultation-Third-Review-Under-568611>.

Against this backdrop, the growing shift toward cash-based assistance—exemplified by the 2024 World Food Programme rollout of cash transfers—reflects both a strategic adaptation to logistical constraints and a broader re-evaluation and evolving means of traditional in-kind modalities, especially in humanitarian programmes. Cash transfers offer recipients greater flexibility and agency, yet their effectiveness hinges on the presence of functioning financial systems, reliable market supply chains and robust oversight mechanisms—conditions that remain uneven across Ethiopian regions. When markets are stable and governance structures are intact, cash can be efficient and empowering. Where these foundations are weak, however, it may expose programmes to inflationary erosion, diversion risks and diminished impact.

The fragility of the macroeconomic environment demands that HDP actors operate with strategic agility, as they are faced with the realities of inflation, currency instability and uneven market functionality. In such a context, programme design must be both technically sound and politically attuned, capable of navigating the tensions between economic transformation and lived vulnerability.

The changing macroeconomic and political landscape in Ethiopia is also transforming how aid is programmed and delivered at sub-national levels. In regions such as Tigray, for instance, the outbreak of war precipitated a dramatic shift from pre-conflict development investments—such as in water infrastructure, education and solar energy—toward emergency humanitarian relief. As one official notes, ‘Since the war began, aid has shifted to emergency humanitarian support, which has been crucial for saving lives during the crisis.’<sup>29</sup> This shift reflects a broader recalibration of aid modalities across the country. In fragile and conflicted-affected areas, the operational constraints shape what is possible, for whom and at what cost.

These constraints are further compounded by a wave of operational disruptions triggered by abrupt funding freezes and cuts, predominantly from international donors, and an increasingly restrictive regulatory environment. Aid organizations that serve as frontline actors in health, nutrition and protection have been particularly hard hit.<sup>30</sup> Although comprehensive data is lacking, cumulative evidence from workforce layoffs, suspended services and at-risk beneficiaries points to widespread disruption in the aid system as a result of funding freezes and cuts. The Civil Society Organizations Council of Ethiopia, which oversees more than 5,300 registered civil society organizations (CSOs), has warned that many of them, particularly those in the health and nutrition sector, are struggling to remain operational due to their heavy dependence on foreign aid.<sup>31</sup> While precise data quantifying the proportion of CSOs forced to pause or

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29 Interview with key informant from Tigray Bureau of Finance and Resource Coordination, Mekelle, 27 July 2025.

30 ‘Impact of the Pause of U.S. Foreign Assistance in Ethiopia,’ UNAIDS, PEPFAR blog, 5 February 2025. Accessed 6 November 2025, <https://www.unaids.org/en/pepfar-impact-ethiopia>.

31 ‘Ethiopia: Implications of the US Aid Freeze & Terminations,’ ACAPS, 13 March 2025. Accessed 31 October 2025, <https://www.acaps.org/en/countries/archives/detail/ethiopia-implications-of-the-us-aid-freeze-terminations>.



close down activities is unavailable, in early 2025 the Ethiopian health ministry mandated the termination of contracts for more than 5,000 health workers funded through US government programmes, including those supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the US Agency for International Development (USAID).<sup>32</sup> This large-scale termination offers a stark indication of the scale of disruption, particularly to health-related projects, and provides a glimpse into the wider damage sustained across the sector.

These challenges are unfolding alongside the proposed government revision of CSO Proclamation No. 1113/2019. While framed as a move toward improved coordination and accountability, this revision has raised serious concerns among domestic and international actors about the potential shrinking of civic space, especially for actors engaged in human rights, peacebuilding and political participation. Stakeholder briefings based on the preliminary drafts suggest that the revised law may introduce more stringent financial reporting requirements, restrict foreign funding for advocacy-related work and grant regulatory bodies broad discretionary powers to suspend or dissolve organizations based on vague compliance criteria.<sup>33</sup> For HDP actors, these provisions could significantly impact operational effectiveness and roll back many of the gains introduced by the 2019 CSO proclamation, which had been widely regarded as a marked improvement over the more restrictive 2009 framework. If enacted, the revised proclamation may constrain the ability of peacebuilding organizations to convene dialogues. Humanitarian actors could also face bureaucratic delays in registration, fund disbursement and programme approval, in particular in conflict-affected regions where timely access is most critical. Development organizations may likewise be discouraged from addressing politically sensitive drivers of conflict such as exclusion, inequality and governance deficits, narrowing the scope of transformative programming and weakening sector abilities to engage with root causes.

Taken together, these dynamics point to an increasingly complex aid environment in Ethiopia, where emergency humanitarian efforts coexist uneasily with structural reform agendas and operational flexibility is constrained by both economic volatility and regulatory tightening. This context demands strong institutional systems, transparent monitoring frameworks and a deep understanding of local political, economic and social dynamics.<sup>34</sup> Ultimately, the effectiveness of aid in Ethiopia hinges both on the volume of resources mobilized and on how well those resources are targeted, coordinated and governed in such a landscape. For HDP actors alike, this means that programming must be fundamentally conflict-sensitive, explicitly attuned to the distinct needs of different age and gender groups, and capable of navigating the blurred lines between crisis response and long-term recovery.

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32 UNAIDS, 'Impact of Pause'.

33 Amnesty International, Ethiopia: Authorities must drop proposed changes to the CSO law, halt restrictions on civic space, Public Statement, 18 August 2025, Index No. AFR 25/0185/2025. Accessed 28 October 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr25/0185/2025/en/>.

34 Mulubrhan Atsbaha Geremedhn and Hafta Gebreselassie Gebrihet, 'The Dynamics of Humanitarian Diplomacy During Wartime: Insights from Tigray Crisis in Ethiopia', *Social Sciences* 13 (2024): 626.

There is an immediate need to prioritize conflict-sensitive programming approaches and advocate for sustainable, flexible funding mechanisms that can maintain the continuity of essential services amid the complex and fragile conflict environment in Ethiopia. Failure to do so risks exacerbating humanitarian crises, undermining social cohesion and reversing hard-won gains in public health and development. This evolving terrain sets the stage for a deeper examination of how conflict sensitivity is being understood, operationalized and contested across the Ethiopian aid sector, questions that become ever more urgent as the boundaries between HDP work continue to blur.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR CONFLICT SENSITIVITY CHALLENGES

In the increasingly complex aid landscape in Ethiopia, the imperative for conflict sensitivity has never been more urgent. As HDP actors navigate a terrain marked by violent conflict, economic reform and climate disruption, the risks and responsibilities of aid delivery have intensified. Interventions in conflict-affected and fragile settings do not occur in a vacuum. Rather, they are embedded in local political economies and interpreted through the lens of power, identity and legitimacy. In such contexts, aid is not merely a technical input but also a social and political act. Aid is never neutral.<sup>35</sup> It inevitably becomes part of the conflict context, either mitigating or exacerbating tensions depending on how it is designed, delivered and governed. If poorly designed, efforts to save lives and rebuild communities can inadvertently deepen grievances, entrench inequalities or be co-opted by actors involved in violence. Conversely, well-coordinated and conflict-sensitive programming can foster trust, reduce tensions and lay the groundwork for sustainable peace.

Aid contributions to peace and conflict in Ethiopia are both essential and conditional. Evidence from key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FGDs) and survey responses across Amhara, Afar, Gambella, Oromia and Tigray show that assistance can save lives, ease tensions and rebuild trust, but only when it is fast, fair and co-governed with communities. The same aid, delivered slowly, opaquely or under capture by local elites can fuel resentment, sharpen divisions and even spark violence. Understanding these divergent outcomes requires moving beyond a binary supposition on whether aid is good or bad to instead examine how design and delivery interact with local political economies, social norms and market conditions. The most immediate and visible contribution of aid often emerges in moments of acute scarcity. In Tigray, for example, local officials credit organizations such as Food for the Hungry Ethiopia (FH Ethiopia) and CARE Ethiopia, along with USAID, with saving lives during the 2020–2022 war, stabilizing communities and enhancing local capacities to resolve disputes peacefully.<sup>36</sup> In Amhara, regional authorities explicitly link the timeliness of aid to reductions in theft, resource disputes and opportunistic violence, noting that: ‘When aid reached conflict-affected areas

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35 Anderson, *Do No Harm*.

36 Interview with key informant from Tigray Region Bureau of Youth Affairs, Mekelle, 29 July 2025.

in a timely manner, it not only met immediate needs but also reduced secondary problems.<sup>37</sup> These accounts are echoed in survey data that associate basic-needs coverage with short-term tension reduction and the practical viability of IDP return and reintegration. In such contexts, timeliness and adequacy are the difference between a community spiralling into predation and retaliation or finding space to cope and recover.

Yet, the same aid that stabilizes in one context can provoke in another. According to study findings, a substantial minority of respondents (33.8 per cent) report no observable peace contribution from aid, while 35.7 per cent observe unintended consequences, and 22.5 per cent judge these unintended consequences to be significantly or very significantly negative. The identified risks include delay-induced clashes ('raiding local farms for ripened maize'), opaque targeting that hardens perceptions of favouritism ('leaders influence NGOs to implement projects in their own places of origin') and exclusion from opportunity programming that triggers backlash ('left out because they did not attend school or because of gender'). In some cases, manipulation of aid modalities such as partial cash diversion ('decide to buy livelihoods ... taking some of the money') undermined trust and reinforced social divisions. These findings do not negate the potential of aid. Rather, they clarify the conditions under which that potential is realized or squandered.

Operational practices themselves can become conflict drivers. In South Sudan, for instance, humanitarian access and resources became central to the conflict economy, with access fees paid to armed groups, thus directly financing violence.<sup>38</sup> In Somalia, the securitization of aid—whereby humanitarian operations were integrated into military counter-terrorism strategies—compromised perceptions of impartiality and exposed aid workers and communities to retaliation.<sup>39</sup> Ethiopia is not immune to these risks. Access constraints in Tigray, Oromia and Amhara—ranging from blocked corridors to bureaucratic delays—have repeatedly hindered timely response.<sup>40</sup>

These operational risks are compounded by the broader political and regulatory environment. The Ethiopian civil society sector is under increasing strain due to abrupt funding cuts and proposed revisions to CSO legislation. In such a context, the space for principled conflict-sensitive programming is narrowing as the need for it is expanding.

At the same time, aid also works through relational pathways that are subtler but no less consequential. Nearly half of the surveyed participants (48.8 per cent) highlight the contribution

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37 Interview with key informant from Amhara Region Disaster Prevention and Food Security Bureau, Bahir Dar, 29 July 2025.

38 Tanya Parker and Rebecca May, 'Humanitarian Financing and Access in South Sudan', London: Overseas Development Institute, 2017.

39 Abigail Stoddard, Adele Harmer and Victoria DiDomenico, 'Aid in Danger: The Perils and Promise of Humanitarian Action in Conflict', London: Humanitarian Outcomes, 2020.

40 FEWS NET, Ethiopia Food Security.

of aid to mediation, dialogue and conflict resolution, while 43.1 per cent point to social cohesion through inclusive services and joint community initiatives. In Bahir Dar, a key informant from Agar Ethiopia Charitable Society describes how community awareness efforts have helped reverse stigma against gender-based violence (GBV) survivors, enabling women to reintegrate into local markets.<sup>41</sup> In East Wollega, a livelihoods programme operated by a local NGO that engaged communities in identifying the most vulnerable has helped resolve long-standing tensions.<sup>42</sup> Economic interdependence also plays a role: more than a third of respondents (36 per cent) report that aid strengthened shared markets and livelihoods, raising the opportunity cost of violence and embedding mutual interests in stability. These examples illustrate how symbolic inclusion—who is visibly recognized and served—and structured inter-group contact can soften stereotypes, reduce rumour and rebuild fractured social fabrics.

Whether these positive dynamics emerge, however, depends on the governance of aid itself. The same modality may foster peace in one *woreda* (third-level administrative division) and provoke backlash in another, depending on the clarity of targeting, transparency of criteria, degree of community participation and safeguards against diversion. Acceptance and legitimacy rise when selection rules are public, simple and co-validated with local communities; grievance channels are accessible and responsive; and inclusion is intentional, especially for women, persons with disabilities and GBV survivors.

From these patterns, a clear logic model emerges: Inputs of funds, goods, disbursement systems and staff translate into peace-relevant outcomes only when activities deliberately integrate timeliness, inclusion, transparency and integrity. These proximate outputs—households reached, dialogues convened, mixed-group markets rehabilitated—feed into near-term outcomes such as reduced unmet needs, stronger perceptions of fairness and increased inter-group contact. Over time, these outcomes lower opportunistic crime, build trust in institutions and reduce susceptibility to mobilization. This chain is also moderated by structural conditions: scarcity, elite capture, political interference, market functionality and entrenched social norms. Since aid cannot bypass these dynamics, it must be designed to navigate them.

Moreover, the Ethiopian peacebuilding context is increasingly crowded with major national-level initiatives—for example, on transitional justice, national dialogue and disarmament, demobilization and reintegration—each aiming to address deep-seated grievances and chart a path toward reconciliation. These efforts, however, face significant challenges related to sequencing, security and credibility. The transitional justice process remains under scrutiny, while the national dialogue has been criticized for its slow pace and lack of tangible outcomes, fuelling scepticism among stakeholders and the public. In this context, aid actors must tread carefully. Their interventions intersect with, and at times substitute for, state-led peacebuilding efforts. This makes it more urgent that aid be conflict-sensitive, both in how it avoids harm and in how it contributes to inclusive, legitimate and sustainable peace.

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41 Interview with key informant from Agar Ethiopia Charitable Society, Bahir Dar, 26 July 2025.

42 Interview with head of women and children affairs in East Wollega, Nekemte, 24 July 2025.

# CONFLICT SENSITIVITY IN CONTEMPORARY ETHIOPIA: PRACTICES AND CHALLENGES

## CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

Conceptual clarity is key to guiding effective programming. Though the concept of conflict sensitivity has been around in humanitarian, development and peacebuilding (HDP) discourse in Ethiopia for some time now, a lack of clarity remains one of the primary challenges to its practical application. As one interviewee observes, partners have now started using the language of conflict sensitivity but gaps in understanding remain a persistent challenge.<sup>43</sup> Such confusions are more prevalent in the humanitarian and development sector.<sup>44</sup> In contrast, those who work peacebuilding sector tend to assume that they are conflict sensitive by virtue of what they do. This is not often the case, however.<sup>45</sup>

HDP actors frequently equate conflict sensitivity with a wide range of practices that are either not conflict sensitive per se or are insufficiently so to qualify as such. These include Do No Harm (DNH) assessments, risk and safety assessments, and stakeholder analysis or mapping. These processes are, however, distinct from conflict sensitivity. In fragile contexts, conflict sensitivity departs from programme considerations to instead entail a problem-focused approach and analysis, with the primary intention to avoid doing any harm to the context and to proactively and deliberately contribute to peace (see Table 1).

The most widespread understanding of conflict sensitivity in the HDP sector in Ethiopia is found to be the DNH framework (see Figure 3). While DNH is a key pillar of conflict sensitivity, the two are not synonymous: They ‘are not equivalents nor interchangeable terms’.<sup>46</sup> This is the case both in conceptual and empirical terms. In conflict sensitivity, the aim is not only avoiding unintended harms but also planning and including contributions to peace in the technical implementation of programmes. In some circles, this approach is referred to as the ‘peace responsiveness paradigm’.<sup>47</sup>

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43 Interview with donor representative-1, Addis Ababa, 14 August 2025.

44 Interview with donor representative-2, Addis Ababa, 7 August 2025.

45 Interview with donor representative-3, Addis Ababa, 12 August 2025.

46 Mary B Anderson, ‘Looking back to look ahead’, *Development in Practice* 33/5 (2023): 528–533.

47 Anita Ernstorfer, Anne-Sophie Stockman and Frauke de Weijer, ‘Peace responsiveness: a paradigm shift to deliver on conflict sensitivity and sustaining peace’, *Development in Practice* 33/5 (2023): 584–598.

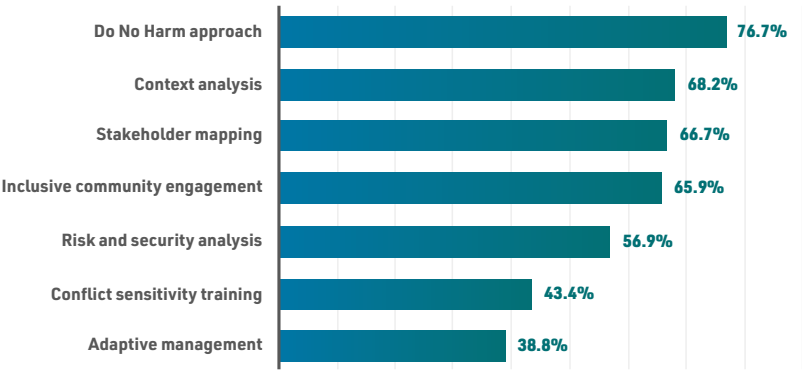
**Table 1. Conflict analysis vs other analyses and frameworks**

ANALYSIS	DESCRIPTION/DIFFERENCE WITH CONFLICT SENSITIVITY
<b>Context assessment</b>	Broad analysis of social, political, economic, cultural and environmental issues. Peace and conflict analysis may be standalone or part of a larger context assessment.
<b>‘Do No Harm’</b>	A pillar of conflict sensitivity but focused on unintended impacts of a programme, neglecting contribution to peace.
<b>Safety and risk analysis</b>	Focuses on staff safety and programme risks, using operations as its reference—not the actual conflict dynamics.
<b>Stakeholder analysis</b>	Often confused with conflict actor mapping; focuses on stakeholders relevant to programme implementation.

*Source: Researchers’ synthesis*

The imperative for conceptual clarity and precision in the HDP sector remains high. Any claims of conflict sensitivity practice without an adequate understanding of the concept would be preposterous. HDP actors need to understand the conceptual and practical linkages between all forms of analysis that they do and how these both relate to and differ from what conflict sensitivity analysis requires.

**Figure 3. Familiarity with the concept of conflict sensitivity**



*Source: Survey analysis, 2025*

## THE POLICY LANDSCAPE

For an organization to be conflict sensitive, it must first commit to doing so at a strategic level. That is, it needs to be a guiding idea.<sup>48</sup> Often, these intentions are elaborated as a policy framework, typically embodied in strategies, recruitment, procurement, security and communications policies, programme guides, staff codes of conduct, and job descriptions (see Table 2).<sup>49</sup> A written policy, whether integrated into existing frameworks or set out as a stand-alone document, moves conflict sensitivity from an ad hoc ethic to an enforceable mandate, aligning strategy, human resources, operations, and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) with the DNH principle.

**Table 2. Policy level applications of conflict sensitivity**

LEVEL	APPLICATIONS
Strategic	Conflict sensitivity included in higher strategies (e.g. country development cooperation strategy). All strategies describe their potential to contribute to peace and minimize negative effects.
Operational	Recruitment, procurement, security and communication guides and frameworks.
Programme	All programmes informed by gendered conflict analysis.
Individual	Staff codes of conduct and relevant job descriptions include conflict sensitivity responsibilities.

*Source: Adapted from Oxfam Conflict Sensitivity Framework (2025)*

The HDP sector is almost evenly split on policy adoption. According to study findings, 50.4 per cent of organizations report having a formal conflict sensitivity policy while 49.6 per cent do not. Adoption is stratified by type, with the highest reported rates among UN agencies (86 per cent), followed by international civil society organizations (CSOs) (64 per cent) and local CSOs (42 per cent). Where policies exist, they are typically integrated into broader organizational frameworks. Among policy adopters, for example, 72.3 per cent report integrated policies, 12.3 per cent report that they rely on stand-alone policies and 15.4 per cent acknowledge not having stand-alone conflict sensitivity policies.

48 Ernstorfer, Stockman and de Weijer, ‘Peace responsiveness’.

49 ‘Guidelines and Toolkits: Conflict Sensitivity Framework’, Oxfam Policy & Practice, 17 July 2025. Accessed 6 November 2025, <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/conflict-sensitivity-framework-621726/>.

Policy framework presence alone, however, does not guarantee impact. Organizations report mixed implementation: 47.7 per cent are ‘very effective’; 49.2 per cent are ‘somewhat effective’; and 3.1 per cent are ‘not very effective’ (see Table 3). This distribution highlights the need to translate policy into practice through governance anchors such as job descriptions that name conflict sensitivity responsibilities, induction and refresher training, supervisory reinforcement, and M&E systems that track whether programmes identify and manage conflict risks and unintended effects.

**Table 3. Effectiveness of policy implementation**

POLICY TYPE/ EFFECTIVENESS	NOT VERY EFFECTIVE	SOMEWHAT EFFECTIVE	VERY EFFECTIVE	ROW TOTAL
<b>Both</b>	0.0%	6.2%	9.2%	15.4%
<b>Integrated</b>	3.1%	38.7%	30.8%	72.3%
<b>Stand-alone</b>	0.0%	4.6%	7.7%	12.3%
<b>GRAND TOTAL</b>	3.1%	49.2%	47.7%	100.0%

*Source: Survey analysis, 2025*

## KNOWLEDGE, EVIDENCE AND LEARNING

Research and analysis are essential for enhancing the understanding of HDP actors, and fostering learning and adaptive management (see Figure 4). The conflict sensitivity knowledge ecosystem in Ethiopia is, however, underdeveloped and fragmented. Although many organizations often carry out conflict sensitivity related research, this is often project-based. Moreover, this research is not shared beyond the implementing organization and is constrained by limited methodological capacity.

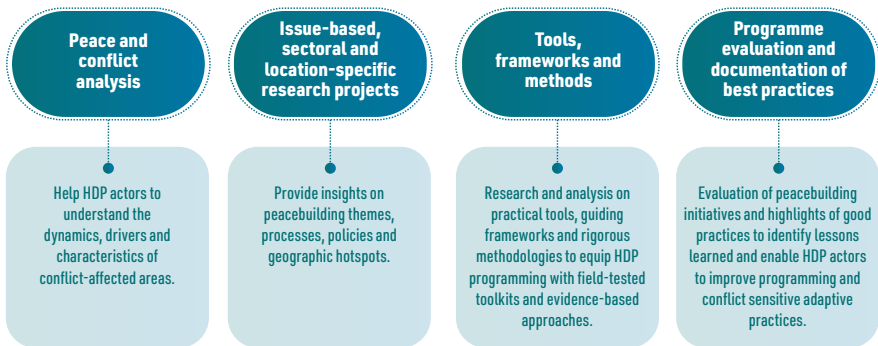
Knowledge gap impediments are further compounded by the lack of a dedicated platform for knowledge sharing and exchange. Participants in the study identify the absence of platforms for knowledge sharing and peer learning (45 per cent) as well as limited access to context-specific conflict analysis (40.3 per cent) as factors that further constrain organizational abilities to stay informed, learn from one another and optimize their conflict sensitivity practices.

Relatedly, evidence generation is a crucial component to assess the positive and negative effects of aid interventions. When HDP organizations are asked how they assess the long-term impact of their interventions on social cohesion, reconciliation or sustainable peace outcomes, the majority (57.4 per cent) report that they mainly rely on post-project community feedback mechanisms. While post-project evaluations are relevant on their own to understand whether the intended objectives of the project have been achieved, and facilitate learning, organizations operating in conflict-affected settings also need to regularly assess and monitor the effects of



their intervention. Such assessment needs to be informed by an M&E system that is complexity aware. This is distinct from traditional M&E approaches, which are linear and structured along a research–plan–implement–report mode. For programmes working in unstable environments, developing strong ongoing analysis and the ability to use that to develop flexible and responsive ways of working is highly imperative.

**Figure 4. Conflict sensitivity outputs**



*Source: Researchers' compilation*

A number of representatives from various organizations indicate that learning forms a pillar of their conflict sensitivity adaptations. The Save the Children peacebuilding initiative in Gambella is an example. Initially, the NGO organized sports competitions between refugee and host communities, which occasionally heightened tensions, particularly following competitive losses. In response, Save the Children adapted its strategy by forming mixed teams comprised of both groups. This adjustment both significantly reduced conflict and transformed the events into effective platforms for fostering social cohesion and mutual understanding.

This demonstrates the importance of regular monitoring, evidence generation, learning and adaptive programming. Key lessons include the value of continuous impact monitoring, timely communication with headquarters, programmatic flexibility and, critically, the integration of conflict-sensitive adaptations. Such practices constitute a core component of conflict sensitivity learning and adaptation. At the same time, however, learning should extend beyond technical adjustments and be promoted as a valued part of organizational culture.

## THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE CAPACITY LANDSCAPE

Institutionalizing conflict sensitivity in the Ethiopian aid ecosystem depends on what staff know, value and do. The practice of conflict sensitivity cannot be materialized without the skills, knowledge and leadership at all levels, which some scholars term ‘interpreters’.<sup>50</sup> Despite the importance of these skills, knowledge and leadership, there is a widespread lack of technical capacity in the HDP landscape in Ethiopia.

According to study results, the reasons for this are found to be in the minimal exposure of staff to conflict sensitivity trainings. Existing capacity building is limited to a few circles and organizations. Among respondents, 25.6 per cent say that fewer than a quarter of their programme staff had been trained in conflict sensitivity over the last two years and only 7.8 per cent report organization-wide coverage above 75 per cent.

This gap also extends to government stakeholders, who report little or no exposure to conflict sensitivity training. The qualitative accounts from KIIs substantiate the study statistics, whereby government counterparts in Afar, Amhara, Gambella, Oromia and Tigray report limited or no formal training. According to these respondents, decisions appear to be made without systematic context analysis and coordination bodies (task forces, cluster meetings) lack the mandate, tools or know-how to monitor and enforce conflict sensitivity standards. According to them, when training exists, it is often siloed within consortia. As one study participant states, ‘HDP actors only provide such training ... for the staff and those among their consortia’, leaving government duty-bearers and many local partners under-represented.<sup>51</sup> This exclusion reduces the quality of joint planning, fragments situational awareness and heightens the risk of contradictory or duplicate interventions that communities experience as unfair, politicized or destabilizing.

In connection with this, external support is also found to be insufficient and poorly distributed. According to survey results, 63.6 per cent of organizations received no conflict sensitivity-related support (training, funding or technical assistance). As Table 4 indicates, the need for such support is highest among local CSOs (78 of 86, or 91 per cent), followed by international CSOs (30 of 36, or 83 per cent). In contrast, UN agencies report lower need (3 of 7, or 43 per cent). Overall, 86 per cent (111 of 129) signal the need for conflict sensitivity support. The data thus highlights a widespread demand—especially among local and international CSOs—for increased support in integrating conflict-sensitive approaches into their work in Ethiopia. Despite this, the asymmetry and lack of support for highly sought technical capacity building remains a strong hindrance for efforts to strengthen conflict sensitivity. Local CSOs and government offices often operate in the most fluid conflict dynamics but have the least access to structured support, while international actors may rely on global protocols that are not always adapted to Ethiopian sub-national realities. This combination can produce analysis gaps precisely where the operational stakes are highest.

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50 Ernstorfer, Stockman and de Weijer, ‘Peace responsiveness’.

51 Interview with key informant from the Oromia zonal women and children affairs office, Nekemte, 31 July 2025.

Table 4. Need for conflict sensitivity support

ORGANIZATIONAL TYPE	NO	YES	TOTAL
International CSOs	6	30	36
Local CSOs	8	78	86
UN agencies	4	3	7
TOTAL	18	111	128

Source: Survey analysis, 2025

The disaggregated data in Table 5 illustrates the differentiated demands for conflict sensitivity support and the specific areas where organizations feel most constrained. Local CSOs consistently report the highest levels of need across all categories—ranging from training (87 per cent) and toolkits (79 per cent) to networking and coordination (78 per cent)—underscoring their frontline exposure to conflict dynamics and limited access to structured resources. International CSOs also show substantial demand, particularly for training (72 per cent) and conflict analysis (69 per cent), reflecting the challenge of adapting global protocols to Ethiopia’s diverse sub-national contexts. In contrast, UN agencies report markedly lower levels of need, especially in conflict analysis (14 per cent) and toolkits (14 per cent), which may indicate stronger internal systems but also points to a gap in sharing knowledge and tools with local partners. Taken together, the data reveals a widespread appetite for practical, context-specific support, with the most acute needs concentrated among local organizations. Addressing these asymmetries will require targeted investment in training, analysis, and coordination mechanisms that strengthen local capacities and work towards greater system-wide coherence.

Table 5. Preferred areas of support

SUPPORT AREA	LOCAL CSOs	INTERNATIONAL CSOs	UN AGENCIES
Conflict sensitivity training	87%	72%	43%
Conflict analysis	76%	69%	14%
Toolkits and guidelines	79%	53%	14%
Networking and coordination	78%	50%	29%
Context updates	69%	47%	28%
Research and knowledge products	67%	58%	14%

Source: Survey analysis, 2025

## CONVENING, COLLABORATION AND COORDINATION

Collaboration and coordination in the aid landscape in Ethiopia is not new. Civil society organizations and other stakeholders in the country widely collaborate for a variety of purposes and reasons. Numerous thematic and sectoral working groups, clusters and forums currently exist to facilitate efforts of coordination. Study participants indicate that these platforms sometimes serve as spaces for discussing the increasingly fragile context of Ethiopia and mechanisms for response.

Notwithstanding these existing positive strengths, the study findings reveal a complex and uneven landscape of convening and collaboration. Collaboration nominally appears strong from the survey: 65.1 per cent of organizations say they collaborate, compared with 34.9 per cent who do not (see Table 6). Alongside this, however, it is clear from the interview data that collaboration is often procedural rather than substantive, focused on approvals, beneficiary endorsements and ceremonial launches rather than joint conflict analysis, shared risk registers and harmonized mitigation strategies. Civil society interlocutors characterize coordination as compliance-oriented paperwork rather than evidence-based co-governance of conflict risks.<sup>52</sup> Likewise, an expert from the Amhara regional government emphasizes that despite cluster meetings and joint planning mechanisms to coordinate aid distribution and help prevent grievances, coordination efforts remain insufficient in scope and substance to ensure alignment with peace and stability goals.<sup>53</sup>

**Table 6. Collaboration on conflict sensitivity**

VALUE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Yes	84	65.1%
No	45	34.9%
TOTAL	129	100%

*Source: Survey analysis, 2025*

The study findings also indicate that some organizations have more established convening, collaboration and coordination practices than others. Still others who recognize the importance of collaboration have started taking measures towards its advancement. In Mekelle in Tigray, a study participant from Mums for Mums says that their organization engages with several coordination mechanisms and platforms to discuss conflict sensitivity, most notably with the

52 Interview with COND-Amhara, Bahir Dar, 29 July 2025; interview with Afar Disaster Risk Management Commission, Semera, 29 July 2025.

53 Interview with Amhara Regional State Disaster Risk Management Commission member, Bahir Dar, 30 July 2025.

Tigray Peacebuilding Network, which brings together local CSOs and NGOs.<sup>54</sup> In addition, respondents emphasize the role of the Alliance of Civil Society Organizations of Tigray in coordination and promoting collaboration.<sup>55</sup> Organizations such as SOS Sahel, Siiqqee Women Development Organization, CARE Ethiopia, World Vision and a few others also point to their experiences of coordination and collaboration that support and advances conflict sensitivity.<sup>56</sup>

Likewise, there seem to be positive experiences of collaboration and coordination efforts from the government side. An interlocutor from Tigray Disaster Risk Management Commission explains that they operate an Emergency Coordination Center (ECC) that serves as a platform to discuss and coordinate the efforts of all aid actors in the region.<sup>57</sup> According to this study participant, the ECC includes all clusters and aid actors, along with aid distributors, to address emerging issues on a collective basis. To further facilitate this process, the ECC conducts assessment studies on potential risks, possible intervention areas, suitable response methods, along with appropriate M&E mechanisms. There are, however, significant challenges in effectively managing conflict sensitivity coordination due to resource constraints, including shortages of skilled human resources. Lack of experience and deep understanding of the complex and sensitive local context necessary to guide aid actors appropriately also remains high.

Strengthening current efforts in convening and collaboration is essential to address challenges and advance conflict sensitivity. Such efforts should evolve into a collective impact approach. This should be anchored in a shared vision, common outcomes, pooled resources and the strategic use of organizational expertise. In Ethiopia, such collective programming remains underdeveloped and HDP programming must be restructured to reflect this shared need.

## COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES

Conflict sensitivity requires deep engagement with local knowledge systems, perspectives and leadership structures. This is essential both from a programmatic perspective—ensuring responsive design and implementation that avoids harm—and from a peace-responsive perspective that supports local capacities for peace. A conflict-sensitive approach necessitates consultation with and the involvement of local actors in the provision and administration of aid.

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54 Interview with Mums for Mums project manager, Mekelle, 28 July 2025.

55 Interview with Mums for Mums project manager, Mekelle, 28 July 2025.

56 Interviews with officials from SOS Sahel, Siiqqee Women Development Organization, CARE Ethiopia and World Vision, Nekemte, 27 and 28 July 2025.

57 Interview with Tigray Disaster Risk Management Commission member, 26, July 2025. The remaining insights in this paragraph are derived from this source.

Awareness of the specific needs of beneficiaries is crucial.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, addressing perceptions of favouritism and partiality among the local population—and incorporating local perspectives and knowledge—are vital for sustaining contributions to peace.

Aid should not be delivered without sufficient awareness of the local needs of project beneficiaries, as a lack of such awareness can lead to unintended consequences. One illustrative example is the provision of resources without adequate understanding of their usability by refugees in Kafeta Humera. A study participant from the Norwegian Refugee Council in Tigray highlights a case involving internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Humera. Due to a lack of localized knowledge regarding the dietary preferences of these IDPs—who prefer *Mashila* (sorghum) to wheat—some NGOs provide only wheat. The displaced individuals from Humera did not know how to prepare *Injera* (a type of flat bread) using wheat. As a result, they resorted to selling the wheat to purchase *Mashila*, which led to significant grievances.

In Tigray, local communities perceive that the vulnerabilities created by the war are not sufficiently understood. Local perceptions reveal a significant disconnect between aid actors and the lived experiences of the population. A study participant from the Tigray Women’s Bureau explains:

Perhaps the greatest challenge we face with aid actors is that most donors and NGOs fail to grasp the depth of the pain we have endured, as well as our priorities for peace and stability. This disconnect is evident even in the language they use to describe the recent events. Many refer to it as a conflict, whereas we view it as a full-scale war—and even more than that.<sup>59</sup>

Table 7. Target population perceptions on fairness in aid distribution (national level)

RESPONSE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Yes, it is fair	178	43.6%
Not sure	117	28.7%
No, it favours some groups	113	27.7%
TOTAL	408	100%

Source: Survey analysis, 2025

58 Iris Wielders, ‘Adaptive approach and conflict sensitivity in fragile, conflict and violence-affected (FCVAS) Settings – a comparison of approaches’, Itad, 14 August 2019. Accessed 6 November 2025, <https://www.itad.com/article/adaptive-approaches-and-conflict-sensitivity-in-fcvas-a-comparison-of-approaches/>.

59 Interview with key informant from Tigray Women’s Bureau, 25 July 2025.

The other key issue is dealing with perceptions of favouritism relating to contention about the distribution of resources; that is, the distribution effect. Although almost half of the respondents describe the distribution of aid as fair, widespread perceptions of favouritism persist (see Table 7). In Kiramu *woreda* and Diga *woreda* in Oromia, for instance, displaced populations report unfair distribution practices, where aid is allocated to individuals with political connections or affiliations rather than to those most in need. Such perceptions are also often reflected in Gambella between refugee and host communities, as well as in Amhara related to projects focused on providing vocational training.

Perceptions of aid fairness vary significantly by region (see Table 8). Afar and Amhara have the highest percentage of respondents who believe aid is fair, at 57.4 per cent and 60.5 per cent, respectively. In contrast, Oromia shows the strongest perception of unfairness or uncertainty, with only 9.9 per cent seeing aid as fair, and a majority either unsure (53.1 per cent) or believing it favours some groups over others (37 per cent). Tigray stands out with a high percentage (45.7 per cent) saying aid favours some groups, although an equal share (45.7 per cent) consider it fair, thus indicating a polarized view. Gambella likewise shows a high level of uncertainty (42.3 per cent). Those who reported their belief in fairness (42.3 per cent) are equal to those who expressed uncertainty. These reflect disparities in aid delivery, trust in institutions or broader political and conflict dynamics that influence perceptions.

**Table 8. Target population perceptions on fairness in aid distribution (by region)**

RESPONSE/ REGION	AFAR	AMHARA	GAMBELLA	OROMIA	TIGRAY
<b>Favours some groups</b>	26 (27.7%)	9 (11.1%)	11 (15.5%)	30 (37.0%)	37 (45.7%)
<b>Not sure</b>	14 (14.9%)	23 (28.4%)	30 (42.3%)	43 (53.1%)	7 (8.6%)
<b>Fair</b>	54 (57.4%)	49 (60.5%)	30 (42.3%)	8 (9.9%)	37 (45.7%)
<b>GRAND TOTAL</b>	94	81	71	81	81

Source: Survey analysis, 2025

**Figure 5 . Key aid and conflict sensitivity challenges in the regions**

### **TIGRAY**

Fragile peace. Perception of manipulation of aid and favouritism. Need to strengthen peace dividends. GBV and trauma healing and recovery. Durable solutions for IDPs. Conflict-sensitive DDR. Fairness and trust in aid delivery.

### **AMHARA**

Operational. Safety and access amidst the deepening humanitarian and social crisis. Advocacy of for the full safety of humanitarian workers, access and humanitarian corridors. Accelerated education. Strengthening local capacities of peace.

### **AFAR**

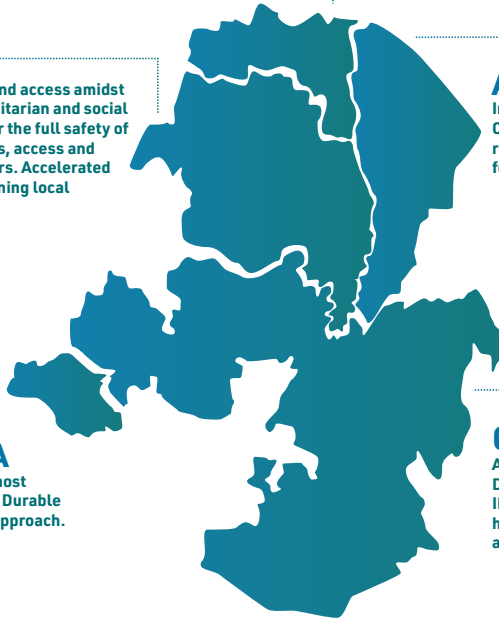
Interlocking crises. Climate shocks and resource conflict. Need for a nexus approach.

### **GAMBELLA**

Tensions in refugee-host community relations. Durable solutions and nexus approach.

### **OROMIA**

Access and safety. Durable solutions for IDPs. Cessation of hostilities. Nexus approach.



*Source: Researchers' synthesis*

## **THE REGIONAL AID AND CONFLICT SENSITIVITY LANDSCAPE**

In the five regional contexts where this study was conducted, the aid and conflict sensitivity landscape is marked by several key challenges (see Figure 5). Across all these regions, the demand for aid is increasing. At the same time, efforts to provide assistance face numerous strategic, programmatic and operational challenges. Tigray continues to experience a severe humanitarian crisis amid a fragile cessation of hostilities agreement. The region also hosts the highest number of IDPs, representing approximately 37.5 per cent of the national caseload.<sup>60</sup> GBV remains a major concern: nearly 90 per cent of women affected by sexual violence have

60 International Organization for Migration, 'Ethiopia—National Displacement Report 19'.



not received medical or psychological support due to funding cuts.<sup>61</sup> Local perceptions highlight a significant disconnect between aid actors and the lived experiences of the population. Since the war, aid has shifted predominantly toward emergency humanitarian support, which has been crucial in saving lives. While this is important, there is also a need to promote sustainable development efforts to enhance the peace dividend, consolidate post-conflict recovery and facilitate a transition toward sustainable peace.

In Amhara, the most significant challenge is operational access and safety. A rise in insecurity and the breakdown of law and order, associated with the ongoing conflict, have undermined the ability of humanitarian workers to operate freely. This has led to the deaths of several aid workers. According to UNOCHA, eight humanitarian workers were killed in Ethiopia during 2024, six of them in the Amhara region.<sup>62</sup> The conflict has also severely disrupted education, with approximately 3,600 schools closed, leaving more than 4.5 million children out of school.<sup>63</sup> These children continue to endure significant trauma. There are reports that young boys are increasingly drawn into armed groups, while young girls are highly exposed to the risk of early marriage.<sup>64</sup> Amid these access challenges, those in need are often left without support, paving the way for a deeper crisis and increased suffering among local populations. If not addressed immediately, the conflict in Amhara threatens to unravel the region.<sup>65</sup>

In Afar, the intersection of conflict, economic insecurity and environmental challenges presents a major obstacle to effective aid delivery. Deep fragility across the region, compounded by conflict, resource scarcity and climate change, creates a highly volatile environment. Conflict sensitivity is particularly critical in Afar due to the regional history of conflict and the challenges that exacerbate this.

In Oromia, as in Amhara, the primary challenges are related to access and operational constraints. Aid delivery is frequently disrupted due to movement restrictions, harassment and

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61 Tess McClure, 'Mass rape, forced pregnancy and sexual torture in Tigray amount to crimes against humanity – report', *The Guardian*, 31 July 2025. Accessed 6 November 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/jul/31/mass-rape-forced-pregnancy-sexual-torture-in-tigray-ethiopian-eritrean-forces-crimes-against-humanity-report>.

62 'Statement on the Killing of a Humanitarian Worker in the Amhara Region', UNOCHA, 14 August 2024. Accessed 10 June 2025, <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/ethiopia/statement-killing-humanitarian-worker-amhara-region>.

63 Alemitu Homa, 'WFP Deputy Executive Director asserts large-scale systematic food aid diversion occurs after distribution; signals shift to cash-based aid modality', *Addis Standard*, 10 January 2024. Accessed 6 November 2025, <https://addisstandard.com/wfp-deputy-executive-director-asserts-large-scale-systematic-food-aid-diversion-occurs-after-distribution-signals-shift-to-cash-based-aid-modality/>.

64 Biset Gebeyaw et al., 'The effect of conflict on child and adolescent health in Amhara Region, Ethiopia: cross-sectional study', *BMC Pediatrics* 23/463 (2023): 1–7.

65 Kalewongel Minale, 'There is no way to peace, peace is the way in Amhara, Ethiopia', *African Security Review* (12 October 2025): 1–17.

operational halts, particularly in areas such as East and West Wollega.<sup>66</sup> In addition, FGDs in Nekemte reveal that humanitarian assistance is perceived as both insufficient and unevenly distributed, increasing the risk of deepening grievances if aid does not reach all affected populations in a timely and equitable manner.

In Gambella, while internal tensions and inter-clan conflicts persist, the most pressing issue is the tension between refugee and host communities. The region hosts a substantial refugee population alongside highly vulnerable host communities, creating a complex socio-political environment. Ethnic tensions and competition over limited resources exacerbate the vulnerabilities of both groups. In recent years, this relationship has assumed a new dynamic with the introduction of the revised Ethiopian refugee law. The new law grants refugees the right to obtain work permits, access primary education, register vital life events, acquire driving licenses and utilize national financial services. Its implementation is expected to further shape and strengthen this evolving dynamic. In Gambella, study participants in the FGDs and KIIs express concerns about the potential impacts of this law. Full implementation therefore should be preceded by sufficient consultation and awareness raising efforts.

## CHALLENGES AND BEST PRACTICES

Organizations working in Ethiopia face a range of operational, political and structural challenges in applying conflict-sensitive approaches. Operationally, limited financial resources, capacity problems and funding inflexibility are persistent barriers. Several local CSOs emphasize that they lack a dedicated budget to conduct in-depth conflict analysis, hold inclusive consultations or provide specialized training for their teams.<sup>67</sup> Even when organizations are technically capable, lack of resources prevent them from implementing conflict-sensitive measures in a systematic way. In addition to these challenges, the data in Figure 6 highlights a range of significant challenges faced by organizations in implementing conflict-sensitive humanitarian, development and peace programmes in Ethiopia. These include lack of appropriate tools and guidelines, absence of dedicated platforms for conflict sensitivity, weak knowledge-sharing and coordination mechanisms, donor pressure for quick results, government interference and community-level resistance. Seen together, these challenges illustrate the internal and external constraints that could undermine systematic conflict-sensitive practice.

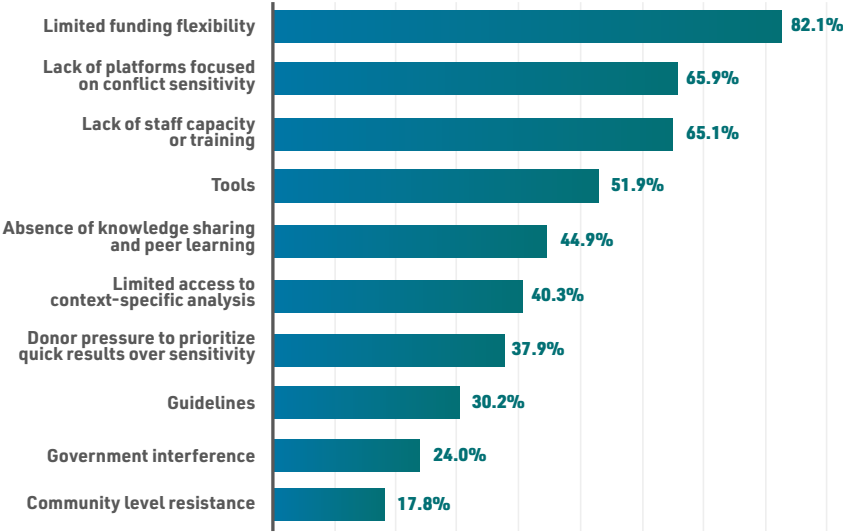
Despite all the challenges and gaps, there is a significant reason to be hopeful. Some organizations have managed to effectively navigate these challenges and achieve noteworthy progress in conflict sensitivity.

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66 'News: UN says humanitarian situation worsening for over 850,000 people displaced in Western Oromia, urges multi-sectoral support', *Addis Standard*, 26 May 2023. Accessed 6 November 2025, <https://addisstandard.com/news-un-says-humanitarian-situation-worsening-for-over-850000-people-displaced-in-western-oromia-urges-multi-sectoral-support/>.

67 Interview with STEM Plus Charity and Community Development Organization and Jeret Peace and Reconciliation Organization, 25 July 2025.

**Figure 6. Key challenges in implementing conflict-sensitive HDP programmes**



Source: Survey analysis, 2025

One area of good practice is the use of a participatory approach through the involvement of local actors in programme design and implementation. CARE Ethiopia, World Vision and Save the Children have practices in place to involve and work with local community actors. A study participant from CARE Ethiopia notes that the organization routinely engages clan leaders, influential elders, religious figures and local government officials in peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts.<sup>68</sup> Another study participant from World Vision in Afar said that they integrate conflict sensitivity throughout programme cycles, conducting needs assessments and conflict analyses to inform interventions.<sup>69</sup> This same respondent also adds that effective peacebuilding often relies on a combination of formal institutions and informal community-based mechanisms, so the organization collaborates closely with clan leaders, organized women’s peace groups, youth peace ambassadors and other influential community figures. Other organizations, namely Save the Children, SOS Sahel and FH Ethiopia, also have well-

68 Interview with CARE Ethiopia project officer, Afar, 28 July 2025.

69 Interview with World Vision Ethiopia staff person, Afar, 28 July 2025.

established local participatory processes for project management.<sup>70</sup> These include community-based beneficiary selection processes, the integration of conflict sensitivity throughout project cycles and the establishment of mechanisms for addressing grievances and complaints.

Government actors demonstrate experiences of good conflict-sensitive practices. The Afar Disaster Risk Management Commission has established mechanisms such as task forces to coordinate aid distribution, prevent grievances and ensure transparency in beneficiary selection.<sup>71</sup> The commission also actively monitors interventions, reflecting a proactive stance in conflict prevention.

In the Amhara region, the Disaster Prevention and Food Security Bureau requires aid actors to submit contextual assessments before project approval, indirectly promoting conflict sensitivity. An official explains:

We have a formal agreement document that we sign with every aid actor or project involved. We carefully evaluate their proposals and consider the details in relation to the context of the operational area. If we believe the project will yield positive outcomes, we sign the agreement and allow them to proceed. If not, we may request modifications. Before operations begin, we distribute the necessary information about the agreement to zones and *woredas*. This enables us to monitor deviations and address issues. For the region, this process is mandatory for every project. No project can commence without this assessment and signed agreement. This ensures that all initiatives align with our standards and contribute positively to the community.<sup>72</sup>

The Amhara region is currently one of the primary conflict areas in the country. Consequently, the reported mandatory requirement for all projects to undergo a comprehensive context assessment—including an evaluation of both the positive and negative impacts of the projects on local conflict dynamics—represents a promising practice. This approach enables the proactive identification and mitigation of potential project-related effects on conflict dynamics within the region.

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70 Interviews with project officers from Save the Children, SOS Sahel and FH Ethiopia, Semera, 28 July 2025.

71 Interview with Afar Disaster Risk Management Commission member, Semera, 28 July 2025.

72 Interview with Disaster Prevention and Food Security Bureau official, Bahir Dar, 26 July, 2025.

## AID, PEACE AND CONFLICT IN ETHIOPIA

In discussions on aid, peace and conflict, what aid does and does not do should be borne in mind. As one observer notes, ‘Aid neither causes nor ends wars.’<sup>73</sup> Moreover, ‘To arrogate too much power to aid to operate as if aid can make war or bring peace, would be to disrespect recipient societies’ rights and responsibilities to choose.’<sup>74</sup> Rather, societies themselves are responsible for their warring and non-warring decisions.<sup>75</sup> Hence, when discussing aid in the context of peace and conflict, the focus should be on the effects of aid and its contributions toward relieving humanitarian suffering, improving and promoting social cohesion, and strengthening local capacities for peace.

In the Ethiopian context, empirical evidence highlights the significant role of aid in delivering humanitarian relief, life-saving support and improving livelihoods. Evidence from KIIs, FGDs and survey responses across Afar, Amhara, Gambella, Oromia and Tigray show that assistance has saved lives, eased tensions and rebuilt trust, and has significantly improved the livelihoods of people, particularly women and girls. The positive contributions of aid are further underscored by the adverse effects observed following its suspension. The 2023–2024 USAID and World Food Programme aid freeze, for instance, triggered by large-scale diversion and corruption, disrupted food and health assistance for millions, including life-saving HIV and maternal services in Afar, Oromia and Tigray.<sup>76</sup> Recent reports show that the suspension of USAID funding has had a significant detrimental impact on the Ethiopian health sector.<sup>77</sup> Aid does some good things and it shall continue to do so.

Notwithstanding these positive contributions, aid has also influenced the dynamics of conflict in contemporary Ethiopia. Specifically, its effects are demonstrated in terms of theft, distributional disparities, market distortions and legitimacy concerns (see Figure 7).

In Tigray, the theft and diversion of aid supplies by armed groups led the World Food Programme and USAID to suspend all food assistance.<sup>78</sup> In the wake of the war, perceptions of favouritism are also widespread in Tigray, reflecting distributional challenges. Study participants report instances of manipulation and diversion of aid to unintended recipients.<sup>79</sup> In Gambella, tensions often occur between refugees and the people who host them over distribution-related issues.

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73 Anderson, *Do No Harm*, 67.

74 Anderson, *Do No Harm*, 68.

75 Anderson, *Do No Harm*, 68.

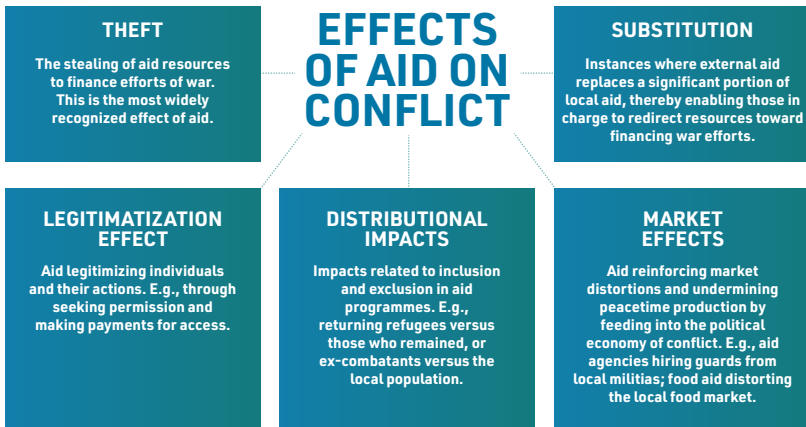
76 McClure, ‘Mass rape’.

77 UNAIDS, ‘Impact of Pause.’

78 Obi Anyadike, ‘USAID suspends all food aid to Ethiopia over massive diversion scheme: reports’, *The New Humanitarian*, 8 June 2023. Accessed 28 July 2025, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2023/06/08/usaaid-suspends-all-food-aid-ethiopia-over-massive-diversion-scheme-reports>.

79 FGD with IDPs in Tigray, 28 July 2025.

**Figure 7. The interplay between aid and context**



*Source: Researchers' compilation*

A programme manager from one of the organizations operating in the region confirms the presence of these effects. Speaking of the underlying tensions, he says:

Initially, 100 per cent of the aid was allocated to refugees, prompting complaints from the host community. In response, the distribution was adjusted to a 20 per cent share for host communities and 80 per cent for refugees. However, the host communities continue to express dissatisfaction, advocating for a more equal 50–50 distribution.<sup>80</sup>

At times, tensions escalate between the hosts and refugees when aid is not delivered in a timely manner, with refugees encroaching on and raiding the amenities of the local population, triggering conflict. Illustrating this, one community leader recalls:

When aid provision to refugee camps was delayed for several months, refugees began raiding local farms for ripened maize. While community members initially viewed this as an act of desperation, repeated incidents quickly led to violent clashes, resulting in multiple deaths on both sides.<sup>81</sup>

In the Amhara region, participants differentiate between equitable access to basic food rations and exclusion from non-food assistance opportunities that again reveal distributional impacts.

<sup>80</sup> Interview with key informant from Save the Children, Gambella, 30 July 2025.

<sup>81</sup> FGD with community leaders and representatives from the Women and Social Affairs Bureau, Gambella, 28 July 2025.

One participant notes:

In terms of receiving monthly food rations, we do not complain about unfair distribution. The issue arises when it comes to support for business start-ups and vocational training. Some individuals feel excluded because they did not attend school. Male participants also expressed concerns about being left out of such initiatives.<sup>82</sup>

Furthermore, several studies highlight the impact of aid on local markets. For instance, one study finds that food aid in rural Ethiopia contributed to a decline in wheat production by distorting local market dynamics.<sup>83</sup>

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82 FGD with aid beneficiaries in Amhara, Gondar, 29 July 2025.

83 Nathalie Ferrière and Akiko Suwa-Eisenmann, 'Does Food Aid Disrupt Local Food Market?', *World Development*, Volume 76, December 2015, 114–131.

# STRENGTHENING CONFLICT SENSITIVITY PRACTICES IN ETHIOPIA

Conflict-sensitive aid delivery in Ethiopia requires a concerted effort, coordination and a multi-stakeholder approach. Actors engaged in humanitarian support, development programmes and peacebuilding efforts, donors, the government, local communities and the Ethiopia Conflict Sensitivity Hub (ECSH) each have their own unique but interdependent contributions to the overarching goal of ensuring a swift aid delivery that positively contributes to peace.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations outline what should be done, who should take action, why it matters and how conflict sensitivity practices can be strengthened.

### For donors

Integrating conflict sensitivity into donor requirements and project design processes helps ensure that interventions contribute to peacebuilding, social cohesion and sustainable development rather than reinforcing divisions. Moreover, flexible and adaptive funding models enable organizations to respond effectively to changing conflict contexts, while dedicated financial and technical resources strengthen the capacity of local actors to apply conflict-sensitive principles.

### Specific considerations for donors:

- Integrate conflict sensitivity frameworks or policies into funding requirements, project design tools and organizational strategies to incentivise grantee organizations to design conflict-sensitive interventions that contribute to long-term sustainable peacebuilding objectives.
- Promote flexible funding models that allow for adaptive and context-responsive programming.
- Allocate dedicated financial and human resources to conflict-sensitive programming, including those targeting capacity building for local organizations to develop their knowledge and skills on conflict sensitivity (concepts, practices, implementation, etc.).



- Support the mainstreaming of conflict sensitivity into donor funding strategies and sectoral frameworks so that aid contributes to conflict resolution or reconciliation and enhances peacebuilding efforts.
- Provide support to local civil society organizations (CSOs) through capacity-building grants (conflict sensitivity windows), mentoring and co-design of tools to help them implement conflict-sensitive interventions or programmes.
- Push for the nexus approach and collective impact programming in regions that are experiencing compound crises and emergencies.

### **For HDP actors**

Humanitarian, development and peacebuilding (HDP) actors play a crucial role in mitigating conflict risks and promoting stability in fragile and conflict-affected contexts such as Ethiopia. Their operations and interventions influence community relations, resource distribution and perceptions of fairness—factors that can either strengthen social cohesion or deepen divisions. Therefore, mainstreaming conflict sensitivity across institutional policies, programme design and implementation processes is essential to ensure that HDP actions contribute to peacebuilding rather than inadvertently fuel tensions. Building institutional frameworks, promoting adaptive management, and strengthening coordination and learning platforms enhance collective effectiveness and accountability. Furthermore, sustained engagement with local actors, sensitivity to cultural norms and the use of evidence-based conflict analysis tools enable HDP organizations to operate responsibly and sustainably in volatile contexts.

### **Specific considerations for HDP actors:**

- Establish institutional conflict sensitivity frameworks with clear policies, tools and standard operating procedures.
- Institutionalize feedback mechanisms and communication systems between the field and headquarters to ensure adaptive management.
- Conduct regular conflict sensitivity impact assessments and go beyond operational concerns to analyse broader conflict dynamics.
- Design programmes through a conflict-sensitive lens in a manner that also actively promotes dialogue, reconciliation and inclusion to leverage opportunities for contributing to peacebuilding.
- Engage in joint conflict analysis, information sharing and dissemination to promote collective understanding on conflict sensitivity programming.
- Participate in and help to sustain learning platforms, regional networks and communities of practice on conflict-sensitive programming.
- Mainstream conflict sensitivity into monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks, including the use of conflict impact indicators in intervention programming and implementation.
- Ensure that interventions are implemented in a culturally sensitive and appropriate while remaining consistent with international humanitarian and human rights law

- Contribute actively to peer learning and coordination platforms to exchange shared experiences and best practices among HDP actors and donors.
- Strengthen internal capacity through advanced training on conflict analysis and adaptive management.

### **For government**

Government actors at both federal and local levels play a critical role in shaping the operational environment for HDP actors. Government actors can reduce the risk of interventions exacerbating local tensions and enhance their contribution to peacebuilding and social cohesion by ensuring that aid and development programmes are designed and implemented in a conflict-sensitive manner. Integrating conflict sensitivity into national and sectoral policies, coordination mechanisms and oversight frameworks enables government actors to work with HDP actors to align their interventions with local realities, cultural norms and broader peace objectives.

#### **Specific considerations federal and local government actors:**

- Support the integration of conflict sensitivity into national aid and sectoral policies to maximize aid sector contributions to conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts.
- Encourage policy alignment and operational coherence with the principles of conflict sensitivity at all government levels, from federal to local levels.
- Collaborate with the ECSH and HDP actors to institutionalize conflict sensitivity into coordination mechanisms so that the impact of aid in conflict exacerbation is reduced and its contribution to peacebuilding enhanced.
- Contribute to the joint conflict analysis efforts of HDP actors to inform government planning and service delivery in conflict-sensitive ways.
- Participate in and contribute to basic training and monitoring tools from the ECSH to strengthen internal understanding and application of conflict sensitivity programming and to establish robust M&E mechanisms for conflict sensitivity.

### **For local communities**

Local communities are central to effective conflict-sensitive programming, as they possess unique knowledge of social dynamics, local grievances and potential sources of tension. Their active participation ensures that interventions are grounded in local realities, culturally appropriate and responsive to community needs. Engaging communities in conflict analysis, decision-making and accountability mechanisms helps prevent the unintended exacerbation of conflicts and strengthens social cohesion. Furthermore, empowering marginalized groups and promoting inclusive participation enhances equity and legitimacy in peacebuilding processes. By participating in capacity-building initiatives and early warning systems, communities contribute to timely, context-informed responses that reduce risks and promote sustainable conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

### Specific considerations for local communities:

- Participate actively in multi-stakeholder platforms aimed at developing a shared conflict sensitivity framework to ensure local perspectives, needs and knowledge are reflected.
- Participate actively in joint conflict analysis processes to contribute local insights that enrich the accuracy, relevance and contextualization of findings.
- Serve as key partners in identifying conflict drivers at the grassroots level, including identity-based tensions, resource competition and social grievances.
- Advocate for fair and transparent aid distribution to reduce perceptions of favouritism or exclusion that may exacerbate local tensions.
- Hold organizations accountable and ensure transparency by participating in feedback and accountability mechanisms related to aid delivery and project implementation.
- Help facilitate inclusive dialogue and community-based reconciliation initiatives that leverage traditional conflict resolution practices.
- Promote equitable and inclusive participation of marginalized groups (for example, women, youth, minority ethnic groups) in local development and peacebuilding processes.
- Participate in training and capacity-building opportunities offered by the ECSH or partners to strengthen local conflict sensitivity knowledge and leadership.
- Support early warning and response mechanisms by sharing local information on rising tensions or risks with relevant actors.

### For the ECSH

The ECSH serves as a central knowledge and coordination hub to support conflict-sensitive programming across HDP interventions. Through the development of practical context-specific tools and operational guidance, the ECSH enables field staff, managers and organizations to design and implement programmes that minimize conflict risks and maximize peacebuilding outcomes. Embedding conflict sensitivity into national systems, donor frameworks and institutional planning ensures sustainability and strengthens institutional capacities. Providing technical assistance tailored to the needs of CSOs, international NGOs and government agencies enhances local ownership and the effective application of conflict-sensitive approaches. Furthermore, empowering Ethiopian academic institutions, researchers and civil society actors to lead knowledge production reinforces evidence-based programming and builds long-term national expertise in conflict sensitivity.

### Specific considerations for the ECSH:

- Develop practical Ethiopia-specific tools and checklists for field staff and managers on conflict sensitivity.
- Conduct contextualized conflict analysis and develop operational guidance for high-risk regions.
- Advocate for long-term sustainability by embedding conflict sensitivity into national systems and educational institutions.

- Work on mainstreaming conflict sensitivity into national aid policy, donor frameworks and institutional planning by HDP actors.
- Provide hands-on technical assistance on conflict sensitivity programming to CSOs, NGOs, government agencies and donors based on their capacity and needs.
- Promote local ownership by empowering Ethiopian academic institutions, researchers and civil society actors to lead knowledge production on conflict sensitivity.
- Facilitate broad dissemination of conflict sensitivity knowledge by creating accessible platforms, knowledge hubs and regular forums for exchange, ensuring that insights, tools, and lessons are shared widely across local, national, and international actors.

# GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS, WORDS AND PHRASES

<b>CSO</b>	civil society organization
<b>DNH</b>	Do No Harm
<b>DMG</b>	Do More Good
<b>ECC</b>	Emergency Coordination Center
<b>ECSH</b>	Ethiopia Conflict Sensitivity Hub
<b>FGD</b>	focus group discussion
<b>FH</b>	Food for the Hungry
<b>GBV</b>	gender-based violence
<b>HDP</b>	humanitarian, development and peacebuilding
<b>HIV</b>	human immunodeficiency virus
<b>IDP</b>	internally displaced person
<b><i>Injera</i></b>	<i>(Amharic)</i> a type of flat bread
<b>IOM</b>	International Organization for Migration
<b>KII</b>	key informant interview
<b><i>Mashila</i></b>	<i>(Tigrigna)</i> sorghum
<b>M&amp;E</b>	monitoring and evaluation
<b>ODA</b>	Official Development Assistance
<b>PCIA</b>	Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment
<b>USAID</b>	US Agency for International Development
<b><i>woreda</i></b>	<i>(Amharic)</i> third-level administrative division

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