



# Scenario planning for livelihoods, food security and migration in Tigray, Ethiopia

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# Summary

This scenario paper explores the potential of the triple nexus, that is, the humanitarian–development–peace nexus approach – a policy concept that encourages stronger collaboration and coordination across the three sectors – as a framework for addressing the multifaceted challenges in Ethiopia, including in the context of forced displacement caused by the civil war between the federal government and the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) from November 2020 to November 2022. The civil war has had devastating consequences, including loss of life, large-scale displacement and severe socioeconomic impacts. While significant progress has been made through the signing of the Permanent Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA) on 2 November 2022 in Pretoria, and the establishment of an interim administration in Tigray, the humanitarian situation remains extremely challenging. The lingering effects of the war continue to harm populations in the Tigray, Amhara and Afar regions, resulting in the loss of livelihoods, acute malnutrition and hunger.

The response to the crisis has predominantly focused on humanitarian efforts, which is understandable considering the urgent and immense humanitarian needs resulting from the armed conflict. However, it is important to recognise that the crisis is not merely an isolated emergency but rather a complex situation stemming from and resulting in a multidimensional social, economic and security crisis. While addressing immediate humanitarian needs is crucial, it is equally important to adopt a comprehensive and long-term approach that goes beyond palliative measures.

This report argues that shifting from an emergency-centred approach to a more holistic and comprehensive one requires a paradigm shift in understanding and responding to the crisis. It proposes that adopting the triple nexus would provide a strategic, collaborative and coordinated response to effectively address the complex challenges faced by war-affected populations and internally displaced persons (IDPs). The triple nexus involves integrating humanitarian, developmental and peacebuilding efforts, and placing emphasis on long-term solutions and sustainable development.

The report draws primarily on desk research, with additional input from a limited number of interviews conducted in Addis Ababa in March 2023 with stakeholders such as humanitarian and development representatives, donors, government officials, civil society actors, academics and individuals affected by the conflict. The aim of these interviews was to gather insights into stakeholder perspectives and attitudes regarding the situation in northern Ethiopia, as well as into current practices in the implementation of aid and recovery efforts in the region. However, it is important to acknowledge that the scope and number of interviews were not extensive enough to provide a comprehensive and representative understanding of the situation.

The paper is divided into five sections. The first provides a comprehensive overview of the context and impact of the crisis in northern Ethiopia, focusing on the nature and extent of the human, economic and social losses caused by the armed conflict. It also discusses the current state of the crisis, addressing the ongoing challenges in economic recovery, meeting humanitarian needs and establishing long-term stability. The report underscores the importance of strategic thinking and planning to tackle the complex challenges and implement sustainable solutions that foster peace, resilience and the overall wellbeing of the affected communities.

In the second section, based on an understanding of the existing circumstances, three scenarios are

presented for consideration in long-term planning.

1. The first scenario represents the best-case and ideal situation, where peace is achieved and there is a rapid recovery. In this scenario, humanitarian and development actors can operate in an improved security environment and collaborate effectively with local authorities. This scenario presents an opportunity for enhanced recovery of livelihoods and increased access to resources for IDPs. However, challenges remain, such as the need for protection measures for individuals and communities to prevent reprisals, and the lingering lack of trust among stakeholders.
2. On the other hand, the worst-case scenario involves a resumption of conflict, which would have devastating consequences for the region. Trust issues, unresolved disputes and the mobilisation of ethnic identities could lead to a prolonged and violent conflict. The recurrence of war would undo any progress made during peace talks and result in mass displacement and civilian casualties. The report suggests that, while this scenario is unlikely, it is crucial for donors, policy makers and practitioners to analyse the factors that could contribute to a resurgence of conflict, and to develop coordinated strategies to address these.
3. The third scenario, which the report considers the most likely case, involves a fragmented recovery with a 'violent peace'. Although the war officially ends, violence persists in various forms, including organised violence, inter-ethnic rivalries and criminal activities. The proliferation of small arms and the weakness of the governing system contribute to the continuation of sporadic and localised violence. This scenario poses difficulties for humanitarian and development work, as the dynamics on the ground are ever-changing, and aid delivery becomes politicised. In this context, establishing trust and engaging meaningfully with local communities become crucial to enabling effective collaboration and targeted interventions.

Section three provides a general analysis of the concept of the triple nexus, examines its previous use in Ethiopia and highlights its potential to address challenges in northern Ethiopia. Traditional approaches focusing on technical solutions may not effectively address the complex interplay of livelihood and peace challenges. The triple nexus approach allows for comprehensive analysis involving national and local actors, considering context-specific variances and involving multiple stakeholders. Adopting this framework can help navigate conflict complexities and promote sustainable peace and livelihood recovery. It also facilitates simultaneous programming and the overcoming of institutional incoherence through whole-of-organisation coordination systems and external collaborations.

Section four discusses the livelihoods and food security situation in the Tigray, Amhara and Afar regions before and after the outbreak of war. These regions rely heavily on agriculture and pastoralism but face challenges such as low productivity and limited resources. Communities have traditionally employed adaptive strategies like diversifying crops, seeking seasonal labour opportunities, and engaging in informal social and economic mechanisms to cope with shocks and build resilience. Significant progress had been achieved in food security through the collaboration of donors and government pro-poor programmes before the conflict. However, the war had detrimental effects, reversing the gains achieved. It led to the destruction of assets, social capital and infrastructure, as well as to the displacement of populations and disruption of livelihood activities. In light of these challenges, the paper highlights the potential of the triple nexus framework, which could support livelihood and asset recovery, infrastructure development and transitional interventions. The framework addresses immediate needs while promoting sustainable

development, taking into account conflict sensitivity and peacebuilding efforts.

The fifth section of the report highlights the importance of social cohesion in facilitating the safe return of IDPs in the borderlands, particularly in the Afar, Amhara and Tigray regions. These borderlands have experienced significant impacts from the conflict, resulting in a large number of IDPs originating from these areas. In such a context, the borderlands play a critical role in the official peace agreement and the broader aspect of social cohesion when assessing the feasibility of IDP return.

The report argues that social reconstruction goes beyond physical repatriation and necessitates a comprehensive approach to addressing societal issues and rebuilding trust among communities. In the borderlands, the crisis has transformed the social and cultural landscape, leaving many residents torn between their own province and the neighbouring province.

Efforts to build peace and implement repatriation strategies in these regions require tailored approaches and collaboration among various actors. Donors must consider political factors, explore all available options for displaced populations, and address the specific needs and risks faced by different border populations. Repatriation should be accompanied by initiatives that foster peace, reconciliation and sustainable reintegration.

Challenges related to livelihoods, governance and potential resource competition need to be addressed during the return process. Additionally, prioritising the wellbeing of children and vulnerable groups is crucial within the nexus approach. To achieve lasting peace and development in northern Ethiopia, a comprehensive and collaborative strategy is essential.

# 1 Introduction: Crisis context and impact

The outbreak of a civil war between the federal government of Ethiopia and the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) on 4 November 2020 plunged northern Ethiopia into a deep and intricate crisis. Initially starting in the Tigray region, the conflict extended its reach to the adjacent areas of the neighbouring Amhara and Afar regions, exacerbating the complexity and scope of the situation.

The war has taken a tremendous human toll on the country, resulting in an estimated 600,000 deaths,<sup>1</sup> although the precise proportion of casualties resulting from direct conflict, disease and malnutrition remains uncertain. The conflict has led to unprecedented levels of mass displacement. People were forced out of their homes because of violent attacks or threats against their villages or members of their community. International Organization for Migration (IOM) data show that, as of September 2021, some 2.11 million individuals were displaced, with 1.8 million internally displaced

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<sup>1</sup> This figure is an estimate provided by Olusegun Obasanjo, the former Nigerian president and African Union envoy, in an interview conducted by the *Financial Times* on 15 January 2023. See <https://www.ft.com/content/2f385e95-0899-403a-9e3b-ed8c24adf4e7>. Accessed: 1 March 2025.

persons (IDPs) in Tigray, 151,040 in Amhara and 149,329 in Afar.<sup>2</sup> The IOM survey at 2 June 2023 showed some insignificant changes in these numbers, with Tigray's IDPs reduced to 1.021 million,<sup>3</sup> Afar's reduced to 90,034 and the Amhara region having seen an increase to 388,715 from January 2023.<sup>4</sup> As of March 2022, nearly 60,000 refugees and asylum seekers had sought safety in eastern Sudan, concentrated around Gedaref and southern Kassala states. A significant portion of the displaced individuals came from borderland regions that have long been contested areas of Amhara and Tigray.<sup>5</sup>

The conflict inflicted severe damage on livelihoods, since the outbreak of war coincided with the harvest season. As part of the scorched-earth tactics, seedstock and farming tools were destroyed and stolen, and many draft animals and plough cattle were slaughtered or taken away.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, access to markets and banking services was disrupted. In both urban and rural areas, homes were stripped of furniture and fixtures, while commercial buildings were looted. Food insecurity reached unprecedented levels. According to the World Food Programme (WFP), by May 2022, an alarming nine million people in Tigray, Afar and Amhara were in urgent need of food aid. Particularly in the Tigray region, nearly 40% of the population was suffering from severe food shortages, highlighting the grave extent of the crisis.<sup>7</sup> Restrictions on humanitarian relief workers and supplies, and the extensive shutdown of banking, fuel, transportation and telecommunications systems by the Ethiopian government was significantly limiting access to essential services such as food, medicine and other vital resources, leading to deepening crises in Tigray.

In addition to the devastating human toll and the impact on livelihoods, the conflict inflicted significant damage on the infrastructure of the three regions. Roads, bridges, schools and public buildings were extensively damaged or completely destroyed. Essential rural and urban health facilities were ravaged or rendered inoperable. Statistics from the Ethiopian Ombudsman Institute reveal the extent of the destruction of the educational infrastructure in Tigray. Around 96% of student desks, 95% of blackboards, 88% of student classrooms (both fully and partially), 63% of textbooks and 31% of administrative buildings were destroyed.<sup>8</sup>

The conflict has caused immense harm and suffering to the most vulnerable members of society, particularly women and children. Women and girls have become victims of gender-based violence in Tigray and Amhara,<sup>9</sup> including sexual violence and forced prostitution,<sup>10</sup> and have been disproportionately affected by forced displacement, facing specific challenges in the process. Reports indicate a significant increase in female- or child-headed households and family separations

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<sup>2</sup> International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2021). 'DTM Ethiopia mobility overview 2021' [available at <https://dtm.iom.int/fr/node/13422?close=true>. Accessed: 1 March 2025.]

<sup>3</sup> IOM (2023). *Ethiopia — National Displacement Report 16 (November 2022–June 2023)* [available at [https://dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1461/files/reports/DTM%20Ethiopia\\_National%20Displacement%20Report%2016%20%28Nov%2022-Jun%2023%29-1.pdf](https://dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1461/files/reports/DTM%20Ethiopia_National%20Displacement%20Report%2016%20%28Nov%2022-Jun%2023%29-1.pdf). Accessed: 1 March 2025.]

<sup>4</sup> IOM (2022). *Ethiopia — National Displacement Report 15 (November 2022 - January 2023)* [available at <https://dtm.iom.int/es/node/25571>. Accessed: 1 March 2025.]

<sup>5</sup> IOM (2021). 'DTM Ethiopia mobility overview 2021'

<sup>6</sup> UNHCR (2022). 'Ethiopia humanitarian crisis' [available at <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/ethiopia/#:~:text=Millions%20of%20Ethiopians%20are%20still,an%20extreme%20lack%20of%20food>]. Accessed: 1 March 2025.]

<sup>7</sup> WFP (2022). 'Severe hunger tightens grip on Northern Ethiopia'. Press release [available at <https://www.wfp.org/news/severe-hunger-tightens-grip-northern-ethiopia>. Accessed 1 March 2025.]

<sup>8</sup> 'Tigray schools in ruins, 3,846 students, teachers killed in conflict'. *The Reporter* (Ethiopia), 27 May 2023. [available at <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/34244/>. Accessed 1 March 2025.]]

<sup>9</sup> Amnesty International (2021). 'Investigation reveals evidence that scores of civilians were killed in massacre in Tigray state' [available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/11/ethiopia-investigation-reveals-evidence-that-scores-of-civilians-were-killed-in-massacre-in-tigray-state/>]. Accessed: 10 May 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with civil society representative.

as a result of the conflict. Further, the conflict has had a profound impact on children and their overall development. In the Tigray region specifically, the war, coupled with the preceding year's Covid-19 pandemic, resulted in the closure of schools for an extended period of three years, affecting an estimated 1.4 million children.<sup>11</sup> Many children in Tigray were forced to flee their homes, and some were separated from their families. Children also had to endure food shortages. Some were involved in the fighting as soldiers during the conflict.<sup>12</sup> Findings from the Ethiopian Ombudsman Institute indicate that 2,146 students and 1,700 teachers lost their lives over the course of these two years.<sup>13</sup> Unicef expressed concern in August 2021 over an attack on displaced families in the Afar region, where over 200 people, including more than 100 children, lost their lives at a health facility and a school where they had sought refuge.<sup>14</sup> Children in conflict-affected areas have been exposed to constant threats, including the sounds of drones and explosions, which has resulted in psychological trauma, anxiety and fear.<sup>15</sup> The war has also left many children orphaned or without siblings.<sup>16</sup>

The aftermath of the war has seen a distressing increase in children falling victim to landmines, further exacerbating the physical and emotional toll of the conflict. The UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has reported the presence of unexploded ordnance (UXO) and explosive remnants of war. In April 2023 alone there were four incidents in Afar and 15 in Amhara, resulting in casualties. The Tigray region's clinics had already treated 41 victims of UXO in the first half of 2023.<sup>17</sup> Ongoing risks and challenges may continue to arise when attempting to resume farming activities and reopen schools in these areas.

The war has had a transformative impact on socio-political structures and relationships. The consequences of war-induced suffering, displacement and trauma have eroded kinship and community bonds, undermining social support systems and cooperation within communities. This has also had a detrimental impact on key cultural institutions, as demonstrated by the split within the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church in May 2021. The archbishops in Tigray formed the new Tigray Orthodox Church in response to what they perceived as the Synod's silence and inaction during the war, which resulted in the loss of priests' lives, the destruction of religious sites, and the looting of religious artefacts. Despite efforts at reconciliation, no positive outcomes have been achieved and, as of May 2023, the independent Tigray Orthodox Church has appointed archbishops to serve the Tigrayan diaspora.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Unicef (2021). 'Statement by UNICEF executive director Henrietta Fore on reported killing of hundreds of civilians, including children, in Afar, Northern Ethiopia'. Press release [available at <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/statement-unicef-executive-director-henrietta-fore-reported-killing-hundreds>]. Accessed: 3 May 2023.

<sup>12</sup> The Organization for World Peace (2021). 'The recruitment of child soldiers by the Tigray People's Liberation Front In Ethiopia' [available: <https://theowp.org/the-recruitment-of-child-soldiers-by-the-tigray-peoples-liberation-front-in-ethiopia/>]. Accessed: 10 May 2023.

<sup>13</sup> *The Reporter*, 27 May 2023. (see Footnote 8)

<sup>14</sup> Unicef (2021). 'Crisis in Tigray enters sixth month with no clear end in sight amid "severe and ongoing child rights violations"' [available at <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/crisis-tigray-enters-sixth-month-no-clear-end-sight-amid-severe-and-ongoing-child>]. Accessed: 1 March 2025.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with a Mekelle resident, 25 March 2023.

<sup>16</sup> Voice of America (VOA) (2023). 'Children in Ethiopia's Tigray return to school but face extended trauma' [available at <https://www.voanews.com/a/children-in-ethiopia-s-tigray-return-to-school-but-face-extended-trauma-6994553.html>]. Accessed: 1 March 2025.

<sup>17</sup> OCHA (2023). *Ethiopia - Situation Report*, 18 May 2023 [available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-situation-report-18-may-2023>]. Accessed: 1 March 2025.

<sup>18</sup> *Addis Standard*. 'Tigray Orthodox church leaders announce plans to ordain 10 episcopate'. 23 May 2023. <https://addisstandard.com/news-tigray-orthodox-church-leaders-announce-plans-to-ordain-10->

The consequences of the conflict have been devastating for human life, livelihoods and the social fabric of the affected communities. Human rights abuses, including sexual violence and violations, have been widespread throughout the conflict. Its long-term effects are still not fully understood, but it is evident that they will have lasting impacts on the region.

## 1.1 The peace agreement and current situation

In November 2022, a significant milestone in resolving the civil war was achieved with the signing of the Permanent Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA) between the Ethiopian government and TPLF in Pretoria.<sup>19</sup> This was followed by the signing of the Implementation Declaration in Nairobi, Kenya. The agreements served as a decisive step towards ending the conflict and establishing a comprehensive framework for restoring a level of normality and stability in northern Ethiopia.

In March 2023, progress continued after the signing of the CoHA with the establishment of an interim administration in Tigray Regional State, which has been pivotal in advancing the implementation of the agreement and building stability in the region. Eritrean soldiers, who fought in support of Ethiopian government forces against the TPLF, have withdrawn, with only small units remaining near the border; Tigrayan forces have withdrawn from the Amhara region. Additionally, the Ethiopian federal parliament has removed the terrorist designation of TPLF and dropped criminal charges against Tigrayan leaders.

The Ethiopian government has re-established the National Rehabilitation Commission to oversee the intricate process of rehabilitation and reintegration. The commission's primary focus is on spearheading Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) efforts, with the aim of demobilising and reintegrating around 250,000 former combatants. The DDR process significantly contributes to broader peacebuilding efforts in the region, promoting the re-establishment of peaceful civilian life.<sup>20</sup>

Basic services have gradually resumed in many parts of Tigray; however, electricity and banking services remain intermittent. While the majority of displaced individuals have not yet been able to return to their homes, there has been an increase in both spontaneous and assisted returns since the signing of the agreement. As of April 2023, The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) had successfully assisted in the repatriation of 22,162 IDPs, comprising 5,346 households, from Aksum, Abi Adi, Adigrat and Mekelle.<sup>21</sup> The withdrawal of Tigrayan forces from the Amhara region has created a favourable atmosphere for the safe return of IDPs in Sekota and nearby

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[episcopate/#:~:text=In%20today's%20announcement%20the%20leaders,Canada%20and%20the%20Middle%20East. 1 March 2025.](#)

<sup>19</sup> 'Key points in Ethiopia's ceasefire agreement'. Reuters, 4 November 2022.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/key-points-ethiopia-ceasefire-agreement-2022-11-04/>. Accessed 1 March 2025.

<sup>20</sup> UNDP (2023). 'National consultations on Ethiopia's demobilization and reintegration programme held with development partners'. Press release [available at <https://www.undp.org/ethiopia/press-releases/national-consultations-ethiopia-demobilization-and-reintegration-programme-held-development-partners>]. Accessed 1 March 2025.

<sup>21</sup> UNHCR (2023). *Northern Ethiopia Situation: Regional Update 41* [available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/unhcr-regional-update-41-northern-ethiopia-emergency-situation-report-march-2023>]. Accessed 1 March 2025.

woredas (districts) to their respective homes.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the significant progress in implementing the peace agreement, the broader consequences of the war present a more sobering reality, underscoring the complex challenges that lie ahead. The war has had a ripple effect throughout the economy, leading to job losses, reduced incomes and increased poverty. Reports show that the magnitude of the damage inflicted by the war on Ethiopia's national productivity, as well as its implications for the country's future production capacity, is immense.<sup>23</sup> The Minister of Finance, Ahmed Shide, told the federal parliament that the total damage caused by the war was estimated at \$22 billion, accounting for 20.4% of GDP, with economic losses totalling \$6 billion; this amounts to 5.5% of GDP. Furthermore, Minister Shide mentioned to US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken that a conservative estimate would suggest a need for nearly \$20 billion over the next five years for the reconstruction of the northern part of Ethiopia.<sup>24</sup>

Notwithstanding the signing of the CoHA in November 2022, the humanitarian situation in Tigray region remains dire, with no significant improvement. In June 2023, the Tigray regional health bureau reported a distressing 28% increase in deaths among children under five as a result of acute malnutrition.<sup>25</sup> In the three months to May 2023, the northwestern Tigray zone experienced over 270 deaths from hunger, with a particular impact on IDP centres and local villages.<sup>26</sup> In Samir *woreda* camp, 25 people had died from hunger in four months by June 2023, while 670 malnourished children were reported to be on the verge of death without access to life-saving care. Similarly, during the same period, in Tembien camp, 29 people had perished from starvation and many more were struggling to survive.<sup>27</sup> This concerning trend coincides with the suspension of food distributions by the World Food Programme (WFP) and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) following the discovery of a large-scale and systemic scheme to steal donated food by regional and federal government officials. USAID has identified this scheme as a coordinated effort that deprives the most vulnerable populations of life-saving food assistance.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, in April 2023, in the Afar region, IDPs in the Abala zone staged protests against government officials involved in aid fund corruption.<sup>29</sup>

Given this situation, the international community, government and aid agencies are currently primarily focused on immediate humanitarian needs and implementation of the CoHA. However,

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> 'Boom to bust: fallout of war and drought leaves Ethiopians mired in poverty'. *The New Humanitarian*, 1 August 2023. <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2023/08/01/boom-bust-fallout-war-and-drought-leaves-ethiopians-mired-poverty>. Accessed 1 March 2025.

<sup>24</sup> 'Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Ethiopian Minister of Finance Ahmed Shide following tour of UN logistics center warehouse' [available at <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-and-ethiopian-minister-of-finance-ahmed-shide-following-tour-of-un-logistics-center-warehouse/>]. Accessed: 30 May 2023. [Note that this page is no longer available on USSD website.]

<sup>25</sup> 'Under five children dying of acute malnutrition in Tigray sharply increasing amid dire humanitarian crisis'. *Addis Standard*, 5 June 2023. <https://addisstandard.com/news-under-five-children-dying-of-acute-malnutrition-in-tigray-sharply-increasing-amid-dire-humanitarian-crisis/>. Accessed 1 March 2025.

<sup>26</sup> 'Hunger related death rises in Tigray amidst ongoing investigation into food aid diversion, persistent aid suspension'. *Addis Standard*, 29 May 2023. <https://addisstandard.com/news-hunger-related-death-rises-in-tigray-amidst-ongoing-investigation-into-food-aid-theft-persisted-suspension/>. Accessed 1 March 2025.

<sup>27</sup> 'Famine at the door'. *The Reporter*, 17 June 2023. <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/34819/>.

<sup>28</sup> 'USAID cuts food aid supporting millions of Ethiopians amid charges of massive government theft'. *Washington Post*, 8 June 2023. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/06/08/ethiopia-usaid-scandal-cutoff-food/>. Accessed 1 March 2025.

<sup>29</sup> "'Aid corruption' angers beneficiaries in Afar'. *The Reporter*, 22 April 2023. <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/33401/>. Accessed 1 March 2025.

civil society actors emphasise the need for the peace process to go beyond political matters and address the wide-ranging consequences of the conflict, including at the local level, and involve other stakeholders such as civil society and churches.<sup>30</sup> It is important to note that the CoHA has not been universally accepted, with some parties involved in the conflict viewing it as an unsatisfactory outcome. Civil society groups both within the country and in the diaspora have expressed concerns about the peace agreement's failure to address local grievances and the daily insecurities faced by many, including IDPs and refugees.

Strategic thinking and planning are crucial in addressing the complex challenges at hand. There is currently a lack of emphasis and time dedicated to long-term strategies that focus on preventing future conflicts, promoting livelihood recovery and addressing community concerns. It is important to shift the focus beyond immediate needs and to invest in sustainable solutions that address the root causes of conflict and support long-term stability and development. By adopting a strategic approach, it becomes possible to develop comprehensive and proactive measures that promote peace, resilience and the wellbeing of affected communities.

The path towards long-term recovery, peace and stability in northern Ethiopia appears challenging and requires sustained efforts from all stakeholders. The challenge of communication and coordination among stakeholders, the persistent vulnerability of IDPs and war-affected populations, and the escalating humanitarian and livelihood situation have the potential to prolong the crisis. In the following section, we explore various scenarios that may either facilitate or hinder the fulfilment of humanitarian, development and peace needs for IDPs and war-affected populations. These scenarios provide insights into the factors that may influence the effectiveness of interventions and help identify strategies to address the diverse challenges faced in the region.

## 2 Potential scenarios

The three scenarios presented below depict potential future situations in northern Ethiopia several years from now. It is important to note that these scenarios are not meant to be definitive predictions, but rather serve as tools to generate insights into the possible impacts and implications for humanitarian, development and peacebuilding efforts in each specific situation. By examining these scenarios, stakeholders can enhance their preparedness and strategise effectively for the challenges that lie ahead.

### 2.1 Best-case scenario

A best case is the achievement of agreed official peace translating into rapid recovery. In this scenario, which is not considered very likely, the frequency and intensity of political fissures and clashes are significantly diminishing, although they may not completely cease. Conflicts related to borderlands, land access and identity in contested and strategic areas are largely resolved. The economy experiences a resurgence as international financial institutions provide funding, debt relief is granted, non-humanitarian bilateral aid increases and foreign direct investment begins to flow in. Teachers, civil servants, business owners and community members are able to resume their normal

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<sup>30</sup> Interview with national civil society leader #3, Addis Ababa, 24 March 2023; interview with Tigrayan civil society leader #4, Addis Ababa, 22 March 2023.

activities, and government salaries are paid on time.

Despite the significant remaining needs, under this scenario improvements in the country contribute to a deceleration of the deterioration of the humanitarian situation, as the positive shift in the security landscape creates a more favourable operating environment, enabling better conditions for humanitarian operations. This includes the ability of humanitarian and development actors to collaborate with local, regional and national authorities and to gain full access to the affected populations in need. Such progress will also facilitate enhanced recovery of livelihoods. In rural areas, the reduction in insecurity allows for access to lost means of production such as agricultural land for IDPs, leading to increased livelihoods recovery. However, this is not to be romanticised as an utopian scenario but rather is considered the best case possible under current circumstances. Indeed, individuals, particularly IDPs, would still require protection from possible reprisals at the individual and community levels thanks to lingering resentments.

While striving for an ideal outcome is desirable, it is essential to recognise the challenges and complexities involved in achieving such a scenario. Various factors contribute to the unlikelihood of a swift and seamless peace process: deep-rooted grievances, animosities and complex power dynamics among conflicting parties and victims often hinder the realisation of peace, even under favourable circumstances. Testimonies from individuals directly affected by the conflict reveal a range of emotions and deep-seated feelings of insecurity, resentment, anger and fear which cannot be fully addressed through the official peace agreement alone.

Interviews conducted in March 2023 with officials from the Ethiopian government, opposition politicians, members of affected communities and humanitarian agency staff revealed a prevailing lack of trust and a cautious approach towards the peace process, characterised by a 'wait and see' mentality. The presence of unresolved issues further adds to the climate of uncertainty, raising doubts about the trajectory of the situation.

It is therefore crucial to view the best-case scenario as an aspiration rather than a rigid plan of action, acknowledging the significance of each step taken along the way. Achieving this scenario requires more than the successful execution of crucial processes such as DDR, transitional justice and the resolution of territorial disputes. The possibility of refugee and IDP repatriation, and of local and regional community trust-building and asset-recovery projects may instil a sense of hope among the population in northern Ethiopia and across the country, acting as a deterrent to further escalation of conflict and sporadic attacks on civilians, and significantly reducing, if not eliminating, new displacements

## 2.2 Worst-case scenario: Resumption of conflict

The second potential scenario entails a relapse into war by the parties involved in the conflict. While the likelihood of this scenario materialising is relatively low, it is essential to acknowledge the potential for such an eventuality. The recurrence of war may arise from the profound lack of trust between warring groups or the failure to address unresolved disputes, particularly those related to contested territories. Interviews with key actors involved in the conflict revealed a significant lack of faith and trust in the commitment of the warring parties to a political settlement. Some party figures and actors sympathetic to the government we spoke to accused the TPLF of hiding weapons in large quantities, while actors sympathetic to the TPLF expressed a lack of trust in a credible political settlement and security for Tigrayans. This situation reflects a classic case of what civil war experts refer to as the security dilemma, where each party fears being exposed and having their security threatened by the other. The mistrust between the parties may lead to delays in the process of

demobilisation and disarmament, which could potentially last for a considerable period of time. This uncertainty would threaten to undermine the progress made under the Pretoria Agreement and would raise the risk of a resurgence of the conflict.

The initial armed conflict was not a simple, single-issue affair but rather a complex interplay of struggles at the local, national and regional levels, resulting in conflicts within conflicts. This complexity creates the possibility of a return to armed conflict and mass displacement, undoing any progress made during peace talks. Moreover, the potential for this scenario arises from the mobilisation of various actors based on ethnic or identity-based affiliations during the conflict period (2020–22), intertwined with territorial disputes and the involvement of external actors. Extensive research on civil wars reveals that conflicts rooted in the mobilisation of ethnic identities and territorial claims often persist even after the cessation of hostilities.<sup>31</sup> The devastating consequences of the war, including a high number of civilian casualties, have the potential to profoundly affect trust and further deepen ethnic divisions, which are critical factors for establishing sustainable peace and coexistence. In addition, the presence of an exiled or diaspora community adds another layer of complexity to the situation, as it may perpetuate tensions and grievances.

Another reason for caution in the case of Ethiopia is the country's history of enduring long periods of political violence and episodic armed conflict. This is not an isolated phenomenon as, globally, high recidivism rates have been observed in civil wars. Research indicates that 57% of countries which had experienced a civil war between 1945 and 2009 subsequently faced at least one more conflict.<sup>32</sup> Further, Ethiopia is situated in a troubled region with multiple secessionist movements, which further adds to the complexities and challenges of achieving lasting peace.

Examples from other African countries, such as the peace agreements in Darfur, Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), which failed to address root causes and led to negative outcomes, also highlight the risk of regional–state conflicts emerging when underlying conflict causes are not properly addressed in peace agreements. Therefore, it is not implausible that Ethiopia might continue to find itself caught in what Collier and Sambanis referred to as the ‘conflict trap’, where nations with a history of civil war are significantly more vulnerable to future episodes of violence.<sup>33</sup>

While this scenario is unlikely, it is of paramount importance for all to prepare and proactively work towards ensuring that this possibility remains remote. Policy makers and practitioners must critically examine the factors that could potentially contribute to the emergence of such a scenario and devise strategies to prevent its occurrence.

## 2.3 Fragmented recovery scenario - violent peace

A third potential future trajectory for northern Ethiopia is that the agreed ‘peace’ holds, but fighting persists at a low level or sporadically, or it escalates into widespread violence, resulting in a fragmented recovery. In this scenario, although the war may have officially ended, the path to recovery is fraught with challenges thanks to the complex and transformative nature of the conflict.

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<sup>31</sup> Kreutz, J. (2010). ‘How and when armed conflicts end: introducing the UCDP conflict termination dataset’. *Journal of Peace Research* 47, 243–250.

<sup>32</sup> Walter, B. (2011). ‘Conflict relapse and the sustainability of post-conflict peace’. Background Paper for the *World Development Report 2011*.

<sup>33</sup> Collier, P. and Sambanis, N. (2002). ‘Understanding civil war’. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46, 3–12.

It is important to note that the end of armed conflict between warring parties does not necessarily mark the end of the violence itself. Instead, the conflict metastasises, taking on various forms, including localised organised violence, interpersonal violence and small-scale inter-ethnic rivalries. It is possible that the entire country could continue to become embroiled in a cycle of violence, fuelled by historical feuds based on ethnicity and politics, intertwined with social and criminal violence.

Academics characterise such a situation as a 'violent peace', where high levels of violence persist even in peacetime.<sup>34</sup> It is important to note that the levels of violence, death and displacement in such situations may not differ significantly from those experienced during protracted conflict.

In such a scenario, where the rule of law is weak and weapons are abundant, it is likely that extortion, theft, including of food, and looting would continue to become prevalent as people seek ways to sustain their livelihoods. The proliferation of small arms in particular plays a significant role in escalating the violence, as these weapons can easily fall into the wrong hands and exacerbate conflicts. The absence of a strong governing system and competing interests over natural resources and land may intensify the likelihood of violence spreading further.

The aftermath of the war has also witnessed the empowerment of youth through their involvement in militarisation, which has further weakened civil authority and resulted in widespread insecurity. This phenomenon has also contributed to the perpetuation of a culture of militarism, where the figure of the male freedom fighter has gained prominence. The implications of militarisation of the young reach far beyond immediate security concerns. It has profound effects on everyday peace. The emergence of the male soldier figure reinforces traditional gender norms and conservative attitudes, posing a significant threat to gender equality in public life. Women's rights are particularly at risk, as there is an elevated probability of sexual violence and violations.

The consequences of the violent peace scenario have particularly detrimental effects on IDPs, leaving them in a state of uncertainty and limbo after being forcibly displaced by the initial conflict. Moreover, displacement may persist at low intensity. Initially, displacement would primarily have been driven by direct attacks, threats and insecurity during the war. However, as the situation evolves, future displacement may also arise from the loss of livelihoods as a result of insecurity, limited access to one's local area and the potential attraction of relief provided in camps.

In addition to local fractures and unresolved grievances continuing to affect communities, rapidly changing events in other parts of the country have the potential to exacerbate regional tensions and trigger further displacement of borderland populations. In addition, the ongoing political stand-off and conflict in Sudan further increase the risk of widespread conflict or the proliferation of small firearms in the region.

These dynamics add to the complexity and fragility of the situation, making it crucial to address the root causes and engage in proactive measures to prevent further displacement and instability.

### Implications for programming and response

The above factors will doubtless complicate the recovery process, posing challenges for development and humanitarian work to keep up with the ever-changing dynamics on the ground. They will pose challenges especially for development actors to identify a clear and opportune moment for effective intervention. In this scenario, discussions regarding IDPs and humanitarian assistance become highly politicised, with aid delivery being subject to various conditions imposed

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<sup>34</sup> Duffield, M. (2001). *Global Governance and New Wars: The Merging of Development and Security*. London: Zed Books.

by authorities.

The reality of a violent peace situation may strongly contribute to a lack of trust among local communities towards humanitarian and development actors involved in post-conflict recovery, hindering effective collaboration and coordination, and making it challenging to implement timely and targeted interventions.

It may also lead to an escalation of protection needs for IDPs, as well as for humanitarian and development workers. Therefore, it is crucial to prioritise trust building through sustained dialogue, an inclusive and transparent national reconciliation initiative, and active engagement with local communities to ensure their meaningful participation and ownership in the recovery process.

Given the complexities and uncertainties surrounding the recovery process in Ethiopia, it is essential for various stakeholders, including donors, civil society actors, the government and the international community, to collaborate and establish a coordinated mechanism.

Despite its limitations, as will be discussed below, the principles of the triple nexus offer a valuable framework for establishing a coordinated mechanism that addresses the interlinkages between humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actions. This approach recognises the inherent connections between these sectors and provides a comprehensive approach to supporting the recovery process in Ethiopia.

## 3 The triple nexus

The triple nexus refers to the close coordination and integration of development, peacebuilding and humanitarian efforts in crisis-affected areas. The idea gained prominence within the humanitarian community as a response to the long-standing recognition of the 'gap' between relief, development and peacebuilding efforts. The triple nexus is based on two policy initiatives: the New Way of Working (NWW), which was initiated by the UN and the World Bank, and the Grand Bargain, a collection of commitments to reform the humanitarian system that emerged from the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016.<sup>35</sup>

Its significance was particularly highlighted in a speech delivered by the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres during his inaugural address in 2016. He emphasised that 'the humanitarian response, sustainable development and sustaining peace are three sides of the same triangle' that need to be brought together to support communities affected by crisis, address structural and economic impacts and help prevent a new spiral of fragility and instability".<sup>36</sup> He emphasised structural and economic impacts and preventing the potential escalation of fragility and instability. The endorsement of the triple nexus by the EU in 2007 and by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2019 further propelled its adoption in global humanitarian

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<sup>35</sup> OCHA (2017). *New Way of Working* [available at [https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/NWOW%20Booklet%20low%20res.002\\_0.pdf](https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/NWOW%20Booklet%20low%20res.002_0.pdf)]. Accessed 1 March 2025.

<sup>36</sup> International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) (2017). 'The "New Way of Working" examined' [available at [https://www.hi.org/sn\\_uploads/icva\\_nwow\\_briefing\\_paper.pdf](https://www.hi.org/sn_uploads/icva_nwow_briefing_paper.pdf)]. Accessed 1 March 2025.

and developmental initiatives.<sup>37</sup>

The triple nexus promotes a comprehensive and multidimensional approach guided by development principles, aiming to integrate and build upon humanitarian programmes while catalysing sustainable peace building. Its objective is to establish synchronised, long-term and resilient processes for post-crisis recovery that encompass various dimensions, including livelihoods, shelter, governance, environment, social aspects and the reintegration of displaced populations. Although the concept is not novel, it has emerged as a framework for advocating a more coherent approach to humanitarian, developmental and peacebuilding activities.

The triple nexus emphasises the need for institutional coordination among humanitarian, development and peace actors, going beyond programmatic or conceptual approaches. It calls for closer collaboration on various aspects, including crisis analysis, planning, programming, information sharing and multi-year funding. The objective is to achieve collective outcomes by recognising the interdependence of these three domains and improving the efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability of crisis response efforts.

Critics argue that the nexus runs the risk of politicising humanitarian action. They argue that such an approach may jeopardise fundamental humanitarian principles such as neutrality.<sup>38</sup> They caution against the integration of missions, asserting that it could restrict the humanitarian space by subordinating humanitarian work to political and peacekeeping objectives.

While it is important to acknowledge the validity of such criticisms, it is clear that humanitarian efforts alone are insufficient to achieve lasting solutions, particularly for IDPs. In a scenario of fragmented recovery, it is crucial to ensure that humanitarian interventions are aligned with broader development and peacebuilding goals. Achieving lasting peace is closely intertwined with resolving internal displacement, particularly when displacement affects a significant percentage of the population and occurs on a large scale.

In the complex situation of the northern Ethiopian context, the triple nexus approach offers a comprehensive and cohesive framework for addressing the needs of IDPs and facilitating post-war reconstruction. It helps foster constructive and holistic relationships among the multitude of actors and agencies involved in the post-conflict space, addressing the root causes of vulnerability and investing in long-term strategies.

### 3.1 Triple nexus in Ethiopia

In 2017, the UN established the Joint Steering Committee (JSC) to spearhead the implementation of its NWW. Ethiopia is one of the seven pilot countries – alongside Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, Nigeria and Somalia – identified by JSC to advance the nexus approach. The goal was to enhance collaboration, fostering joint action in crucial areas such as data collection, assessments, planning processes and the reform of financing methods.

The Ethiopian government, in collaboration with the Development Assistance Group (DAG) and

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<sup>37</sup> Council of the European Union (2017). 'Conclusions on operationalising the humanitarian development nexus' [available at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/24010/nexus-st09383en17.pdf>]; OECD (2019). *DAC Recommendation on the Humanitarian–Development–Peace Nexus*. Paris: OECD. Accessed 1 March 2025.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, M. Dubois, 'Searching for the nexus: why we're looking in the wrong place'. *The New Humanitarian*, 7 January 2020. <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2020/1/7/triple-nexus-international-aid-Marc-DuBois>. Accessed 1 March 2025.

Ethiopia Humanitarian Country Team (EHCT), took the lead in implementing a reform process for the NWW in the country. This initiative involved the establishment of a multi-stakeholder nexus group,<sup>39</sup> and the development of a 'bundle+approach' that integrates humanitarian and development interventions in specific areas.<sup>40</sup>

According to OCHA, the triple nexus approach has led to the achievement of 'collective outcomes' in various initiatives that aim to converge humanitarian and development efforts. One such example is the response to the 2016 El Niño drought, where a coordinated approach was taken to leverage government systems and frameworks with international support and funding. The approach aimed to address the immediate humanitarian needs caused by the drought while also promoting long-term development and resilience-building measures.

Another example is the 'Ethiopian Jobs Compact', which demonstrates inclusive practices by integrating refugees into society. This initiative focused on creating industrial parks that generate employment opportunities for both Ethiopian citizens and refugees, with a designated percentage of jobs reserved for the latter. It also extended support for training, housing and environmentally friendly practices within the industrial parks. The programme appeared to have been implemented only intermittently and, in April 2021, following a portfolio review, the UK's Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) made the decision to terminate funding for it.<sup>41</sup> This decision wasn't surprising, since the programme showed little promise from the outset. According to a 2018 World Bank survey examining the skills and job interests of Eritrean, Somali, Sudanese and South Sudanese refugees in Ethiopia, the refugees displayed minimal interest in manufacturing opportunities.<sup>42</sup> This is partly because the Ethiopian flagship Hawassa Industrial Park offers very low daily wages ranging from \$1.25 to \$1.60. While the NWW strategy, alongside the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), has been innovative in terms of finding ways of integrating refugees into society, it is also notable that a direct focus on peace as an objective has been lacking in these initiatives.

OCHA also reported several barriers that hindered the achievement of collective outcomes in humanitarian and development efforts. They include ineffective response mechanisms that need replacing with a more effective shock management model, with priorities around "prevention, livelihoods, recovery and resilience alongside life-saving interventions", a lack of coordination and integration among various policy frameworks and initiatives, fragmentation of data sharing and inflexible financing mechanisms.<sup>43</sup>

In the broader landscape of existing humanitarian- and development-donor-funded programmes in Ethiopia – including the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP), Humanitarian Response Plan (HRD), Disaster Risk Management Strategic Programme Investment Framework and Climate Resilience Green Economy Strategy – there is a notable issue of independent implementation. These programmes operate separately from each other, lacking coordination and integration. As a result, efforts become disjointed, and different ministries oversee the delivery of food and cash assistance

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<sup>39</sup> According to OCHA, the group included DFID, EU/ECHO, Irish Aid, OCHA, RCO, Save the Children, Tufts University, UNAIDS, UNDP, UNHCR, Unicef, the World Bank and WFP.

<sup>40</sup> OCHA (2017). 'IASC Snapshot: Ethiopia's New Way of Working' [available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/iasc-snapshot-ethiopia-s-new-way-working>]. Accessed 1 March 2025.

<sup>41</sup> FCDO. (n.d.) 'Jobs Compact Ethiopia: project completion review' [available at <https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/projects/GB-GOV-1-300393/documents>]. Accessed: 1 March 2025.

<sup>42</sup> World Bank (2018). 'Ethiopia Economic Opportunities Program appraisal document' [available at <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/226021530243071432/pdf/NEW-ETHIOPIA-PAD-06072018.pdf>]. Accessed: 1 March 2025.

<sup>43</sup> OCHA (2017). 'IASC Snapshot: Ethiopia's New Way of Working' [available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/iasc-snapshot-ethiopia-s-new-way-working>]. Accessed: 1 March 2025.

through separate channels.

The implementation of the nexus approach in the aid sector exhibits variations across different cases, with donors and NGOs adopting diverse approaches, scopes, and levels of ambition. One such case involves the activities of Save the Children in the Shinile Pastoral zone within the Somali region.<sup>44</sup> Data collected from reports between December 2018 and March 2019 analysed the implementation of the triple nexus in connection with a longer-term development project. The findings indicated that the nexus approach facilitated Save the Children's ability to recognise a deteriorating situation, leading to timely actions that protected the food consumption and livelihoods of local households. However, this specific scenario primarily demonstrates typical cross-sector coordination, and the extent to which the peacebuilding element is integrated within the nexus framework remains unclear. The transformative changes in the ways of working, which are essential for a comprehensive nexus approach, appeared to be unclear or inadequately elaborated upon in the study. It is also important to note that large, multi-sectoral NGOs such as Save the Children are probably in a stronger position to implement triple nexus approaches than many other kinds of organisations.

There are other experiments established as coordinating mechanisms to address emerging crises in Ethiopia and to serve as potential avenues for implementing the triple nexus approach within organisations and among partnerships. One notable example has been USAID's Strategic Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE). SAGE operates internally within USAID and consists of a group of advisors representing different parts of the USAID mission. The advisors' role is to provide guidance on designing new development programmes that respond effectively to shocks, while also maintaining a comprehensive database to monitor the context and activities. SAGE's involvement during the El Niño/La Niña droughts of 2016–17, as well as its response to subsequent national emergencies like the Covid-19 pandemic and the conflict in Tigray, serves as an encouraging example to build upon when implementing the nexus approach.<sup>45</sup>

In another example, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation's 2022–25 programme in the Horn of Africa uses a triple nexus approach "linking humanitarian, development and natural resources based-conflicts interventions through multilateral partnerships and programme in-built emergency components, [and] push[ing] for resilience building and improved governance".<sup>46</sup>

Although the triple nexus is not explicitly mentioned, the UK government implements its Building Resilience in Ethiopia (BRE) programme in alignment with the Grand Bargain commitments made at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016. This comprehensive aid programme aims to prevent and respond to humanitarian crises while significantly increasing the use of cash-based approaches. It focuses on meeting immediate needs and establishing shock-responsive systems, following a 'whole-of-aid' approach. Its objective is to strengthen the systems of the government in the context of drought hazards through food security and nutrition systems. However, its current scope falls short

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<sup>44</sup> VOICE Report: *NGO's Perspectives on the EU's Humanitarian–Development–Peace Nexus*, 2020 [available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/voice-report-ngos-perspectives-eus-humanitarian-development-peace-nexus>]. Accessed: 1 March 2025.

<sup>45</sup> M. Fitzpatrick, J. Ryan, G. Gottlieb, D. Maxwell. (2021). *Making the Nexus Real: Moving from Theory to Practice*. Boston: Feinstein International Center, Tufts University. [available at: <https://fic.tufts.edu/publication-item/making-the-nexus-real-moving-from-theory-to-practice/>.] Accessed 1 March 2025.

<sup>46</sup> Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (2021). *Programme Horn of Africa 2022–2025*. Bern, p 20. [available at: [https://www.eda.admin.ch/content/dam/deza/en/documents/laender/swiss-cooperation-programme-horn-of-africa-2022-2025\\_EN.pdf](https://www.eda.admin.ch/content/dam/deza/en/documents/laender/swiss-cooperation-programme-horn-of-africa-2022-2025_EN.pdf)]. Accessed 1 March 2025.

of encompassing broader issues such as conflict-sensitivity in responses.<sup>47</sup>

## Implications

Overall, in the context of Ethiopia, the application of the triple nexus framework has been characterised by a fragmented approach, and its outcomes have been mixed. While the above and other notable initiatives demonstrate convergence between humanitarian and development efforts, these interventions are often localised and small-scale in nature. Furthermore, the peacebuilding element is not always adequately integrated into the framework.

A cursory evaluation also reveals that the framework has not been fully leveraged to tackle the root causes of vulnerability and establish long-term comprehensive strategies for sustainable development and peace. Instead, it has often been employed as a traditional coordination mechanism without sufficient emphasis on long-term planning and transformative change. Moreover, the potential of the framework in conflict-affected areas has not been maximised to address peacebuilding efforts.

However, there is an opportunity to advance and support the triple nexus approach in the context of northern Ethiopia. As a conceptual and operational framework, it has the potential to facilitate analysis, planning and addressing recovery needs in the region. The Ethiopian government has shown evident interest in the framework for recovery of the Tigray region.<sup>48</sup> In this regard, donors can play a crucial role in enabling and incentivising the operationalisation of the humanitarian–development–peace nexus. In the following section, before delving into specific cases of livelihoods and reintegration, we shall explore some broad ways in which the triple nexus framework may contribute to both conflict-affected and conflict-prone areas of Ethiopia.

## 3.2 Potential contribution of a triple nexus framework for Ethiopia

In the specific context of northern Ethiopia, traditional approaches that focus solely on technical solutions in humanitarian and development work may not effectively address the complex interplay of livelihood and peace challenges.

The triple nexus offers a more comprehensive and nuanced approach for joint analysis of situations and priorities, based on the vast amount of data that each partner collects.

1. *Joint multi-level and multi-dimensional situation and problem analysis.* The triple nexus approach allows for combining micro-level analysis, an understanding of the impact of the crisis on livelihood assets, strategies and the goals of different groups with a macro-level analysis of the conflict and its broader national, transnational and international factors affecting livelihoods. A multi-level and multidimensional analysis is essential for comprehensively understanding stakeholders' roles and their contributions to livelihood recovery and sustainable peace. This serves as a valuable framework that advances the totality of achieving collective outcomes for people in crises.

At one level, to successfully address the problem of insecurity and the complex livelihood

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<sup>47</sup> FCDO (2022). *Building Resilience in Ethiopia (BRE)*. London: FCDO [available at <https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/projects/GB-GOV-1-300363/summary>]. Accessed :1 March 2025.

<sup>48</sup> 'Ethiopia uses "triple nexus" approach towards recovery efforts in Tigray: Ministry'. Fana Broadcasting Corporate, 30 March 2021. <https://www.fanabc.com/english/ethiopia-uses-triple-nexus-approach-towards-recovery-efforts-in-tigray-ministry/>. Accessed: 1 March 2025.

problems of the displaced, it is crucial to understand the broader structures that shape their experiences. Displacement and peace are often linked to wider political and economic systems, and power relations play a significant role in determining access to resources and opportunities. Therefore, working with national actors is essential to address these systemic issues and create sustainable solutions.

The triple nexus approach also recognises the importance of context-specific variances. Local actors, on the other hand, are instrumental in local peace processes, intervention prioritisation and the implementation of effective recovery programmes. Understanding the place-based factors that cause insecurity or prevent the safe return of IDPs is crucial.

Furthermore, the triple nexus approach emphasises the need to consider the linkages between different scales of analysis. It is not about analysing local and national situations in isolation, but rather understanding how regional and national political interests affect the experiences and opportunities of displaced individuals. This includes examining how regional, national political and transnational interests affect displaced people's experiences and opportunities, as well as understanding the flows and chains of resources and power that operate across different scales.

An illustrative example that holds significant relevance in this context is the transnational aspect of peace, where the local setting should no longer be viewed as a self-contained space. The Ethiopian conflict unfolded in two dimensions: armed conflicts involving foreign actors (Eritrea) and an information dimension that included the diaspora and foreign actors with diplomatic influence. The conflict has extended beyond the country's borders, involving the influential Ethiopian diaspora, which has significant political networks and the power to shape public opinion. Unfortunately, this unprecedented level of influence may marginalise local agency, disregarding the voices and contributions of local actors.

As a result, conventional peacebuilding principles, such as 'local ownership', and traditional justice mechanisms facilitated by local elder figures, may not be as effective in this context. To achieve long-term reconstruction, it is necessary to adopt approaches that go beyond purely local or national solutions.

The complexity of the crisis in northern Ethiopia calls for a comprehensive perspective that acknowledges the involvement of multiple stakeholders, including local actors, the diaspora and international partners. By recognising the interconnectedness of local, national and international dynamics, a more inclusive approach can be developed to address the conflict's complexities and promote sustainable peace and reconstruction.

In this process, mapping and analysing stakeholders becomes a crucial part of peacebuilding and livelihoods analysis. Engaging all relevant groups in the processes of assessment and recovery ensures their appropriate involvement and helps foster a more inclusive and effective approach. By adopting the triple nexus framework, Ethiopia can better navigate the complexities of the conflict and work towards sustainable peace and livelihood recovery.

2. *Simultaneous and collaborative programming.* The triple nexus offers a promising approach to overcoming the limitations of linear approaches in post-conflict reconstruction and IDP repatriations. In particular it provides an opportunity to move beyond the tendency of donors and government actors to adopt separate and uncoordinated strategies for different stages of the reconstruction process. The linear approach carries inherent dangers, as it often leads to the deferral or delay of development programmes until specific 'stability'

stages have been reached and thus may result in the premature withdrawal of humanitarian efforts when a particular stage is deemed to have ended.

When the conflict broke out in northern Ethiopia, there was a shift in external support towards humanitarian assistance, resulting in a reduced focus on engaging with the government in development programmes or in service delivery.<sup>49</sup> However, humanitarian access limitations prevented the delivery of much of the humanitarian assistance that had been programmed for the northern conflict-affected areas. In addition, development actors postponed programme implementation until the situation was deemed safe and the conflict was fully resolved. This cautious approach is understandable in times of armed conflict but it also has the effect of slowing down assistance to the affected area; long-term plans take time to be developed, creating a gap between the completion of humanitarian work and the implementation of large-scale programmes by development actors.

Once humanitarian needs are alleviated, through improvement in crisis indicators and/or the return of displaced persons to areas of stability, humanitarian organisations may withdraw from many of their activities. At this stage, they may no longer consider it their primary obligation to continue delivering vital services to the affected communities and populations enduring the repercussions of conflict.

While aid officials we spoke to remained cautious about the medium- to long-term prospect of sustainable peace, there is a noteworthy risk associated with the fact that some government officials seem to have assumed that the signing of formal peace accords signifies the resolution of the conflict. Government authorities we spoke to were keen to emphasise a return to normality and a shift towards long-term development assistance, while downplaying the ongoing crisis conditions. This suggested a potential lack of sufficient attention being paid to effectively implementing the CoHA.

In the particular context of the fragmented recovery scenario in northern Ethiopia, a sequential and compartmentalised approach simply won't suffice. Rather, all three pillars of the humanitarian–development–peace nexus must be implemented simultaneously in order to effectively address the deep-rooted challenges that entrap individuals in perpetual crisis. Thus, the triple nexus would help avoid the pitfalls of delayed or deferred development programmes and premature withdrawal of humanitarian efforts. It recognises that the end of conventional conflict does not necessarily signal the end of a humanitarian crisis and that conflicts can evolve, with ongoing violence and threats to peace.

3. *Coordination and partnership.* The triple nexus approach serves as a framework for addressing the challenge of reconciling complex and divergent priorities among different departments and sectors. The successful application of the triple nexus approach relies on the ability of donors and governments to foster synergies and establish coordination mechanisms and robust partnerships.

To operationalise the triple nexus approach effectively, two key coordination systems are essential: whole-of-organisation coordination systems and robust partnerships, and mechanisms for information sharing and collaboration.

Whole-of-organisation coordination systems involve establishing coordination mechanisms

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<sup>49</sup> Interview with donor representative #1, Addis Ababa, 28 March 2023.

within organisations themselves and ensuring that all relevant departments and units work together in a cohesive manner. They require breaking down silos and promoting cross-departmental collaboration.

Interviews with staff in donor organisations revealed a significant gap between different divisions within these organisations, including diplomatic divisions focused on peace processes, development workers working on livelihood recovery and humanitarian workers addressing immediate needs.<sup>50</sup> Peace-focused departments often work in isolation, organising localised conferences in collaboration with local authorities and schools. Collaboration and consultation among these departments are limited until specific issues directly affect their domains. Such divergence in priorities may result in an uneven distribution of attention and resources across sectors. Some departments may receive more emphasis and resources, while others may receive less, hindering the development of comprehensive long-term transformation plans and compromising the overall effectiveness of the triple nexus approach.

This lack of coordination not only hampers lateral collaboration but also affects vertical coordination between head office diplomats and field staff, leading to implications for the day-to-day running of programmes. This fragmented approach fails to recognise the inherent interconnectedness and interdependence of the three areas.

Indeed, the issue of coordination and coherence within institutions is a common challenge faced by organisations worldwide. Anthropologists have long recognised and studied the intricate nature of organisations, including the state, revealing that they often appear monolithic but lack internal coherence. Overcoming the problem of coordination is a significant challenge that institutions grapple with in various contexts.

While achieving perfect coordination may be difficult, it is important to acknowledge that a minimum level of coordination can still be achieved. By fostering coordination within the organisation, different teams can align their efforts, share information and coordinate their actions to achieve a unified approach. This coordination system enables a comprehensive and integrated response, where humanitarian, development and peacebuilding efforts are closely coordinated and mutually reinforcing.

Collaboration with external stakeholders is essential to the success of the triple nexus approach and should include work with government agencies, civil society organisations, international partners and local communities. Establishing coordination systems and robust partnerships is crucial to achieving long-term and sustainable solutions in reconstruction efforts and addressing forced displacement crises. This is especially important in contexts where security concerns overshadow development and humanitarian agendas.

However, as we have seen in the previous section, coordinating the cross-sectoral aspects of the triple nexus can be challenging, particularly when there is a lack of effective coordination mechanisms between government and non-governmental organisations. Interviews with government and aid workers revealed that crisis responses were influenced by the specific mandates of different organisations and the expertise of the various actors involved. This may lead to divergent priorities, as reflected in the language, frameworks and approaches used by different stakeholders. Security actors often focus on stabilisation and security-related missions, while development and humanitarian actors prioritise saving lives and

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<sup>50</sup> Interview with donor representative #1, Addis Ababa, 28 March 2023; interview with donor representative #2, Addis Ababa, 30 March 2023.

livelihood concerns.

To address these challenges, it is essential to enhance information sharing among partners and adopt joint sectoral and geographic approaches. By promoting the exchange of valuable insights and expertise, collaborative efforts can be strengthened, leading to improved outcomes in addressing complex challenges. Donors should prioritise the development of strong coordination mechanisms and partnerships to foster greater coherence, efficiency and effectiveness in reconstruction and response initiatives. This collaborative approach will contribute to the achievement of sustainable solutions in situations characterised by forced displacement and security complexities.

## 4 Livelihoods and food security in Tigray, Amhara and Afar

In this section, we explore the potential application of the triple nexus framework to livelihood planning, specifically examining how households traditionally adopt *ex ante* and *ex post* strategies in response to shocks. We also delve into how individuals manage to sustain their livelihoods in contexts characterised by insecurity. We then explore potential scenarios for recovery using the triple nexus approach in the aftermath of conflicts.

Agriculture and pastoralism are the two main livelihood activities in Northern Ethiopia. Before the conflict, crop production played a significant role in Tigray and Amhara, with many people involved in farming activities. The predominant practice was smallholder subsistence farming, heavily reliant on rainfall. For both peasants and pastoralists the rural livelihood was extremely precarious. The agricultural sector faced challenges of low and declining productivity, stemming from a complex interplay of agroclimatic, demographic, economic and institutional constraints and shocks.<sup>51</sup> Some parts of the Tigray and Amhara regions only experience one rainy season annually. As a result, food production has exhibited high variability and unpredictability, primarily influenced by erratic weather patterns.

The region of northern Ethiopia has a long history of food insecurity, linked to recurring conflicts, droughts, environmental degradation and pest invasions. Notably, Wollo province in Amhara, and Tigray were severely affected by the famines in 1972–75 and 1984–85. Subsequent years witnessed persistent droughts, including in 1987–88, 1990–92, and 1993–94.<sup>52</sup> During periods of severe livelihood distress, crises often led to sudden and devastating asset losses, exacerbating food insecurity in the region.

The conflict in Tigray occurred against the backdrop of long-standing livelihood vulnerability, which

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<sup>51</sup> Devereux, S. (2000). *Food Insecurity in Ethiopia: A Discussion Paper for DFID*. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies (IDS). [available at: <http://www.ids.ac.uk/files/FoodSecEthiopia4.pdf>]. Accessed 1 March 2025.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

was compounded by food insecurity resulting from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and an infestation of desert locusts in 2020. These factors considerably exacerbated the situation and posed additional challenges for the affected populations in Tigray, Amhara and Afar.

Farmers in the Tigray and Amhara regions, as well as pastoralists in Afar, have traditionally employed diverse adaptive strategies to cope with famine, navigate challenging climatic conditions, and manage economic fluctuations. These strategies involve seeking local or long-distance labour opportunities based on seasonal availability. Impoverished households with limited land and livestock often rely on seasonal migratory labour for additional non-farm income, engaging in activities such as working in sesame-producing areas or construction projects in towns.<sup>53</sup> They also rely on savings, adjust their consumption patterns by skipping meals or borrowing, and engage in the sale of local products such as beer, firewood and charcoal; in the case of pastoralists they may employ tracking strategies.<sup>54</sup> Wealthier households, on the other hand, may depend more on selling livestock to supplement their income.

Moreover, farmers often adapt their agricultural practices by diversifying their crops and planting varieties that are suitable for different seasons and conditions. Urban areas use similar adaptive livelihood diversification approaches that include wage employment and small-scale entrepreneurship. These practices help them mitigate risks and ensure a more resilient livelihood.<sup>55</sup>

In the context of coping with shocks and economic hardships, communities in these regions often rely on a range of informal social and economic mechanisms deeply embedded in social relations and cultural practices. Such mechanisms involve sharing resources, caring for each other's children and looking after elderly people, and loaning. Religious organisations, such as churches and mosques, play a crucial role in supporting communities in times of shocks and challenges by providing spiritual guidance, fostering social networks and offering material assistance. Informal insurance and mutual aid systems, such as *iqub* (rotating savings) and credit associations or community-based health insurance schemes, also contribute significantly to coping with shocks and building resilience.<sup>56</sup>

In response to the vulnerability to large-scale crises such as famine, particularly when traditional security systems are no longer effective, the Ethiopian government has traditionally relied on annual appeals to international donors for emergency assistance.<sup>57</sup> However, since 2005, there has been a shift towards implementing livelihood programmes to address the ongoing needs of food-insecure rural households. These programmes include the provision of credit and microfinance services, as well as social protection programmes like the PSNP. The aim is to enhance the resilience of

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<sup>53</sup> F. Bachewe, G. Berhane, B. Minten, A. S. Taffesse (2016). *Non-farm Income and Labor Markets in Rural Ethiopia*. ESSP Working Paper 90. Washington DC: International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI). [available at: <https://cgspace.cgiar.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/15170b92-13fc-4b72-8585-9cd7a7386cb6/content#:~:text=Off%2Dfarm%20income%20in%20Ethiopia,of%20total%20house%2D%20hold%20income>]. Accessed 1 March 2025.

<sup>54</sup> Rahmato, D. (1991). *Famine and Survival Strategies: A Case Study of Northeast Ethiopia*. Uppsala: SIAS; Belete, B. and Bayu, T. (2023). 'Does social protection improve female-headed households' food security in Ebinat district, Ethiopia'. *Cogent Economics & Finance* 11.

<sup>55</sup> Rahmato, D., Pankhurst, A. and van Uffelen, J.-G. (eds) (2013). *Food Security, Safety Nets and Social Protection in Ethiopia*. Addis Ababa: Forum for Social Studies.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Devereux, S. and Teshome, A. (2013). 'From safety nets to social protection: options for direct support beneficiaries of the productive safety net programme'. In Rahmato, D., Pankhurst, A. and Van Uffelen, J.-G. (eds), *Food Security, Safety Nets and Social Protection in Ethiopia* (pp. 69–112). Addis Ababa: Forum for Social Studies.

individuals and households by implementing interventions that support their livelihoods.<sup>58</sup>

Before the conflict, there were positive signs of progress in achieving improved food security in the three northern regions, although complete food security had not yet been attained. In the specific case of Tigray, some one million people received support in the form of financial assistance, food aid or food vouchers from the PSNP.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, in the Humanitarian Response Plan of 2020, a total of 855,000 people were included, while 96,000 Eritrean refugees hosted in four camps in Tigray received regular support.<sup>60</sup> Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) analysis indicates that between October and December 2020 the majority of the population experienced minimal or no food insecurity, with over 1.9 million people categorised as food secure under Phase 1.<sup>61</sup> However, certain areas faced moderate levels of food insecurity, with around one million people considered 'stressed' (IPC Phase 2). Around 10% of the analysed population, equivalent to 346,946 people, were in a state of 'crisis' (Phase 3), while 2%, or 82,624 people, were in an 'emergency' situation (Phase 4).<sup>62</sup>

The food security situation in Afar was already worrying before the conflict spread to the region, as the number of food-insecure people had increased significantly from 349,254 to 753,770 between August and December 2020.<sup>63</sup> Around 37% of the population was in crisis (IPC Phase 3) and 12% in emergency (IPC Phase 4), with all administrative zones in Afar facing high levels of acute food insecurity. Between October and December 2020, the conflict-affected areas of North Wollo and South Wollo experienced a notable rise in the population facing severe food insecurity, with an increase from about 5% during the Belg (short rainy season) analysis to around 13% classified under IPC Phase 3 or higher.<sup>64</sup> This situation was the result of a combination of factors, including below-average rainfall with a prolonged dry season leading to shortages of pasture and water for pastoralists, destruction of crops and pasture by desert locusts in both the Belg and Meher (crop season)-dependent areas of Amhara, Tigray and Afar and macroeconomic challenges, including the depreciation of the currency, high inflation rates and increases in the prices of staple foods and essential commodities.<sup>65</sup>

As highlighted in section 1, the prolonged two-year conflict in Tigray, as well as its impact on the adjustment areas of Amhara and Afar, has led to a dire situation for the population. Starvation has

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<sup>58</sup> See Rahmato, D., Pankhurst, A. and van Uffelen, J.-G. (eds) (2013). *Food Security, Safety Nets and Social Protection in Ethiopia*. Addis Ababa: Forum for Social Studies.

<sup>59</sup> ACAPS (2021). *Ethiopia: Pre-crisis Situation in Tigray* pp. 8–9 [available at [https://www.acaps.org/fileadmin/Data\\_Product/Main\\_media/20210223\\_acaps\\_secondary\\_data\\_review\\_ethiopia\\_pre-crisis\\_situation\\_in\\_tigray.pdf](https://www.acaps.org/fileadmin/Data_Product/Main_media/20210223_acaps_secondary_data_review_ethiopia_pre-crisis_situation_in_tigray.pdf)]. Accessed: 1 March 2025.

<sup>60</sup> Unicef (2020). *Updated Humanitarian Response Plan for Northern Ethiopia: November 2020 to January 2021* [available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/updated-humanitarian-response-plan-northern-ethiopia-november-2020-january-2021>]. Accessed 1 March 2025.

<sup>61</sup> The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) is a standardised system that integrates data on food security, nutrition and livelihoods to formulate assessments for determining the food security status of geographic areas. It was established in 2004 and introduced in Ethiopia in 2019. The system employs a five-phase scale of severity, classifying units of analysis into five distinct phases: '(1) minimal/none; (2) stressed; (3) crisis; (4) emergency; and (5) catastrophe/famine'. See [https://www.ipcinfo.org/ipcinfo-website/ipc-overview-and-classification-system/ipc-acute-food-insecurity-classification/en/#:~:text=In%20particular%2C%20the%20IPC%20Acute,\(5\)%20Catastrophe%2FFamine](https://www.ipcinfo.org/ipcinfo-website/ipc-overview-and-classification-system/ipc-acute-food-insecurity-classification/en/#:~:text=In%20particular%2C%20the%20IPC%20Acute,(5)%20Catastrophe%2FFamine). Accessed 1 March 2025.

<sup>62</sup> 'Ethiopia: Acute Food Insecurity Update December 2020'. IFSP Classification, 2023 [available at [https://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC\\_Ethiopia\\_Acute\\_Food\\_Insecurity\\_2020Oct2021Sept\\_Report.pdf](https://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC_Ethiopia_Acute_Food_Insecurity_2020Oct2021Sept_Report.pdf)]. Accessed: 20 May 2023.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

become a widespread problem, affecting almost the entire population of Tigray and a significant portion of the neighbouring regions. The conflict has resulted in substantial asset depletion, severely limiting the available options for households in these affected areas. Farmers, as previously mentioned, have borne the brunt of the crisis, experiencing significant losses in their homes, land, labour, tools, livestock and other vital resources crucial for their livelihoods.

The problem of starvation has persisted even after the conflict subsided; its end has not ended the risks to livelihoods. As described in scenario 3 in section 2, the armed conflict has the potential to transform into conflicts over economic resources, which could be perpetuated because of the economic benefits derived from the war economy. This might manifest in various forms of violence, including food theft and exploitation of vulnerable individuals through asset-stripping and extortion for protection. Paramilitary actors and opportunistic individuals exploit weak regulatory environments to engage in these activities.

## 4.1 Implications for IDP livelihoods programming

Like the rest of the population in the country, the majority of displaced individuals used to rely on agriculture and pastoralism as their primary source of income, activities which they can hardly continue after their displacement as they will have left their land or cattle behind. In particular, forced displacement has wide-ranging effects, including significant asset losses, reduced income-generating opportunities and disrupted risk-sharing mechanisms. The conflict has not only disrupted production patterns but also uprooted individuals from their established labour arrangements and social networks, leading to changes in norms, practices, structures and social dynamics. Consequently, vulnerable groups are unable to rely on their usual survival strategies.

Assessing the complete extent of damage to livelihoods caused by the war, including the loss of assets and human capital, is a complex task. Existing data collection, largely from humanitarian agencies, has predominantly focused on capturing event-based information, such as the number of IDPs at a given time. There is a notable gap in understanding the broader consequences of the conflict on IDP livelihoods. To develop a more comprehensive understanding, it is imperative to conduct detailed studies that explore the livelihood strategies and assets of different livelihood groups, paying particular attention to gender dimensions and household dynamics within the broader socioeconomic context. This requires further research and data collection efforts to unravel the multifaceted impacts of violent conflict on displaced populations and provide a more holistic assessment of the situation.

Some key questions to consider in this regard include:

1. How do households adopt *ex-ante* and *ex-post* strategies in response to shocks?
2. How do individuals manage to sustain their livelihoods in contexts characterised by fragility and insecurity?
3. What are the livelihood strategies employed by different livelihood groups affected by violent conflict?
4. How do gender dimensions influence the livelihood strategies and assets of displaced populations?
5. What are the household dynamics within displaced populations and how do they affect livelihood strategies and assets?
6. What strategies can be identified to promote sustainable development and enhance wellbeing in these challenging environments?

7. What are the challenges individuals and communities face in regaining ownership of their assets after periods of fragility and insecurity?
8. What strategies and mechanisms can be employed to facilitate the recovery and restoration of lost or displaced assets?

While a thorough examination of these questions falls outside the scope of this rapid review, it is crucial to underscore that they hold immense significance and require careful consideration in the context of planning for livelihood programming.

## 4.2 Implications for triple nexus planning for IDPs

Livelihoods programming should adopt a long-term perspective and be flexible enough to address both immediate needs and longer-term efforts to support livelihoods. This flexibility allows programming to adapt to changing circumstances and to simultaneously address short-term emergencies while working towards sustainable livelihoods at the local, national and international levels.

There are three complementary ways in which the triple nexus can be utilised to intentionally contribute to enabling livelihood recovery, embedding conflict sensitivity and ultimately enhancing the prospects for peace. In particular it can be leveraged for the following purposes.

1. Transitional interventions play a crucial role in preparing households and communities in IDP states for the shift from displacement to return. Livelihoods programming should prioritise the core humanitarian principles and the basic needs of IDPs. By providing them with better targeted assistance, it is possible to reduce their reliance on harmful coping strategies that further expose individuals, including children, to violence. Extensive research has identified various coping mechanisms employed by IDPs, such as women engaging in forced sex work and instances of child marriage. In places like Darfur, firewood collection and travelling to farms and markets have also been associated with heightened personal security risks. To tackle these challenges, the idea of the triple nexus could be leveraged to establish partnerships between humanitarian actors working with vulnerable groups and peacebuilding actors, which prioritise violence sensitivity. Such partnerships could help reduce the vulnerability of IDPs and create a safer environment, shielding them from exploitation and violence. Transitional interventions should also prioritise accountability and protection measures to safeguard the wellbeing and rights of IDPs. These would include establishing mechanisms to prevent diversion and theft of aid, ensuring transparent and accountable aid distribution systems, and providing effective protective measures to mitigate the security risks faced by IDPs.
2. The triple nexus approach can be effectively employed in long-term interventions for asset recovery, aiming to promote employment and agricultural productivity. This approach encompasses both humanitarian and development objectives, with critical implications for peacebuilding efforts. One key strategy is the provision of in-kind donations, such as seeds, farming tools and cattle, which can assist households in regaining their productive capacity and resuming income-generating activities. By focusing on restoring productive assets at the household level, this approach ensures sustainable recovery and resilience, while also preventing the adoption of negative coping strategies. To effectively implement this approach, it is crucial to develop partnerships with organisations experienced in livelihood

recovery and peacebuilding, recognising the interconnected needs of communities through a nexus approach. For communities whose livelihoods have been destroyed, recovery becomes an essential requirement. Not only does it allow for a return to normality and ensure economic security but it also serves as a critical precondition for fostering sustainable peace within the community. By addressing their economic needs and promoting livelihood recovery, it contributes to the overall wellbeing and stability of the affected populations.

3. Community projects focused on infrastructure development, such as cooperatives, play a crucial role in revitalising local economies, generating employment opportunities, and restoring essential social services and infrastructure, such as schools, health centres and markets. These interventions align with sectors that intersect with humanitarian efforts, including food security, health, education and protection. To ensure effective implementation, it is important to establish a clear division of labour between humanitarian assistance and stabilisation efforts. Humanitarian aid should address immediate needs, while stabilisation initiatives tackle the underlying structural causes of conflict. This coordinated approach ensures that immediate relief is provided while simultaneously addressing the root causes of the conflict, fostering long-term stability and sustainable development in affected communities.

## 5 Safe return and social cohesion

Post-conflict reconstruction is a complex process that goes beyond physical infrastructure rebuilding. It involves rebuilding the social fabric of society affected by conflict. While the safe return of IDPs and refugees is important, social reconstruction encompasses more than physical repatriation. It requires a comprehensive approach to address various societal issues and restore trust among communities. Rebuilding trust is crucial for fostering unity and social cohesion. This involves creating an inclusive environment that values diversity and respects the rights and dignity of all individuals.

This section specifically focuses on the borderland populations of Tigray, Afar and Amhara, where a large number of people have been displaced and have experienced significant violence, highlighting the need for tailored approaches to repatriation and peace building. It is essential to engage with marginalised borderland groups that are often overlooked in official peace agreements and processes. Inclusion of these groups is crucial for the success of reconstruction efforts.

### 5.1 Convivial culture and social capital

In the borderlands of conflict-affected regions like Afar, Amhara and Tigray, the social dynamics and cultural landscape have been fundamentally altered by the crisis. These borderlands are characterised by a melting pot of cultures, kinship ties and languages, with a rich history of migration and well established networks of trade, communication and familial connections. Virtually every community along the borders shares some form of linkage with those on the opposing side. The people in these regions commonly speak multiple languages and regional dialects, including Tigrigna, Amharic, Agawigna, Afarigna and Afaan Oromoo.<sup>66</sup> The migratory patterns of men from distant places like Gojjam and Mekelle, who travel to neighbouring areas like Humera for wage labour, have further contributed to the forging and maintenance of friendships, marriages and cultural bonds.<sup>67</sup>

These strong social connections and deep social, cultural and economic bonds have fostered the development of a robust convivial culture and social capital in these borderlands. However, as a result of their geographical location, borderlands are vulnerable to becoming battlegrounds for conflicting political groups. Disputes over land or politics originating from regional or federal political centres put local populations at risk and force them to take sides. Loyalty to one group often results in retaliation from the other, leading to a breakdown of convivial culture and ties.<sup>68</sup> Many residents of borderlands have found themselves torn between two opposing forces, as they have ties to both their own geographic province and the neighbouring province with which they share economic, social and familial connections. In some cases, people living in borderlands may have a stronger sense of identification with their cross-border ethnic and cultural counterparts than with their own people from the same geographic province. Economic, ethnic and emotional ties often lie with cross-border entities, further complicating the social fabric of the region.

Caught in the struggle between conflicting parties, individuals, particularly Tigrigna speakers in the

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<sup>66</sup> See, for example, Weldemariam, A. (2019). 'Raya: a category error, and a catalog of errors' [available at <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2019/03/24/raya-a-category-error-and-a-catalog-of-errors/>]. Accessed 1 March 2025.

<sup>67</sup> Interview with former resident of Humera town #5, Addis Ababa, 20 March 2023.

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Tigray civil society leader #4, Addis Ababa, 22 March 2023.

case of the Tigray and Amhara borderlands, were often forced to choose loyalty, which resulted in violent reprisals from the other side, leading to land dispossession and widespread displacement.<sup>69</sup> These regions witnessed massive displacements during the fighting. Post-conflict transitions in these borderland regions have already introduced new dynamics of conflict, particularly when disputes arise around traditional rights over land.

Given the highly contentious nature of the regions and the diverse composition of IDPs, along with the unique circumstances of borderland populations, developing a repatriation strategy becomes a complex task. Building peace in these regions therefore requires tailored approaches.

## 5.2 Key considerations for conflict-sensitive programming

As humanitarian, development and peace actors engage in long-term planning across various scenarios, it is important to pay attention to the following key issues, questions and recommendations.

1. The repatriation of IDPs from borderlands is heavily influenced by political factors that go beyond the CoHA. Resolving the complex constitutional issues stemming from the root causes of the conflict is crucial to establishing durable solutions for displaced populations. In such a situation where the security and political situation is not conducive to sustainable returns, supporting the repatriation of people to contested areas may be seen as meddling with internal affairs. For development and humanitarian agencies, there is little room to work on return of displaced populations on the basis of humanitarian emergency without being seen to be framing the situation politically and potentially taking sides. Acknowledging the intricate nature of displacement, donors must recognise that achieving stability requires coordination and collaboration among various actors, including federal and regional governments, as well as diplomatic stakeholders. It is essential to engage with these actors and push for political commitments, which should include the adoption of a national action plan to facilitate the return and resettlement of displaced individuals.
2. More broadly, aid agencies must prepare for two scenarios: situations where adequate conditions for the return of displaced populations are present and situations where such conditions do not exist.
  - (i) In situations where adequate conditions for the return of IDPs do not exist, what alternative options should donors, development and aid agencies consider? How can aid agencies ensure that IDPs are not left in a state of limbo and that appropriate measures are taken to address their needs? What steps can be taken to create the necessary socioeconomic conditions that enable IDPs to integrate locally, even if it is a temporary arrangement? How can the option of return be preserved for IDPs while simultaneously facilitating their local integration? What strategies can aid agencies employ to balance the immediate needs of IDPs with the long-term goal of finding durable solutions to displacement situations? How can collaboration between aid agencies, local authorities and relevant stakeholders be enhanced to effectively address the challenges and complexities associated with IDP integration in local communities? What lessons can be learned from previous experiences and best practice in facilitating the temporary

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<sup>69</sup> Interview with political party leader from a borderland region #6, Addis Ababa, 20 March 2023; interview with former resident of Humera town #5, Addis Ababa, 20 March 2023.

integration of IDPs without compromising their eventual option of return?

(ii) In situations where adequate conditions for the return IDPs *do* exist, what strategies and approaches can be employed to facilitate their safe and sustainable return? If a constitutional and/or practical consensus is reached, the main obstacle to the return of displaced people lies in ensuring security, both among different ethnic groups in the area and between the returnees and local populations. This necessitates solutions involving state actors at all levels, as well as collaboration from development and humanitarian organisations. It is important to recognise that the act of return alone is not sufficient for the achievement of lasting peace. It must be accompanied by initiatives that promote peace and address the challenges of sustainability and reintegration faced by refugees and displaced populations. Failure to address these issues adequately can lead to new or resumed conflicts between communities in the places of origin. Reconciliation efforts should focus on building relationships and fostering understanding between returnees and other ethnic communities.

To ensure effective triple nexus planning, it is crucial for aid and development agencies to carefully consider the risks and needs of all populations they will be working with in borderlands. Within the regions of focus, specific attention should be given to three main types of border populations:

- The first type consists of individuals who not only share ethnic ties across the border but also have strong connections to their own state's geographical core. Their identity is closely linked to both sides of the border, and they may face unique challenges related to livelihoods, including access to land, security and social integration.
- The second type comprises individuals who have cross-border ethnic bonds, which set them apart from other residents within their own state. These individuals may face distinct risks of violence and potential displacement thanks to their unique identity and connections, requiring targeted support and tailored solutions. For example, there might be cases where displacement resulting from conflict in specific areas has led to the establishment of ethnically homogeneous communities. It is essential to acknowledge that the return of individuals to places where they would constitute a minority could potentially provoke violent reactions. Similarly, in places such as Mai Kadra (in the northwest corner of Ethiopia along the border with Sudan), where significant rights abuses, intercommunal strife or violence have occurred, the process of repatriation may be complex and sensitive.
- The third type of border population includes individuals who belong to the national majority within their state and do not have ethnic ties across the state's borders. Despite their majority status, they may still encounter specific vulnerabilities from state actors, and livelihood challenges that need to be addressed in the planning process

Each group faces different risks, livelihood challenges, and security confidence levels. It is crucial to address the underlying issues that led to these conflicts, promote reconciliation and create an environment conducive to peaceful coexistence. This may involve implementing transitional justice mechanisms, fostering dialogue among different groups and ensuring the protection of human rights. Below are some specific

recommendations.

- Partners involved in addressing displacement must carefully consider whether conditions in the displaced individuals' areas of origin are likely to be more favourable than the locations where they have sought refuge. By recognising and addressing these dynamics, repatriation efforts can be tailored to meet the specific needs and aspirations of the affected populations, facilitating an inclusive and sustainable process of return and rebuilding.
  - In such contexts, leveraging the local knowledge and networks of organisations through partnerships to improve programme design and response is crucial. This approach can help develop conflict-sensitive responses that take into account the specific context, enhance accountability to affected populations and contribute to programme sustainability.
  - Donors can adapt existing approaches, such as community-based participatory planning and durable solutions, to ensure that activities align with local understandings of conflict and peace and development. By promoting locally anchored understandings and incorporating peace messaging and solutions, programmes can effectively address the challenges faced by communities.
  - Meanwhile, understanding the interlinkages between national, sub-national and community conflicts is indeed crucial in designing effective interventions and promoting peacebuilding efforts. As discussed in section 3, the dynamics of conflicts are no longer confined to local spaces alone, but are increasingly interconnected globally. Diaspora communities, for example, may play a significant role in shaping or influencing local agendas, sometimes at the expense of marginalising local voices. To ensure the effectiveness of interventions, it is important to recognise and navigate these complex dynamics.
3. If repatriation is possible, then in preparation, it is important to determine what is required for returnees to be able to rebuild livelihoods, what degree of governance, and what essential tasks must be completed before the returnees arrive. It is also important to consider the potential challenges that may arise following the demobilisation of troops and the return of refugees and displaced populations to their original or new locations. This may lead to competition for limited resources such as jobs, land, assets and available services like healthcare, potentially resulting in new forms of exclusion and further instability. It is important to recognise that IDPs may not be able to reclaim their previous livelihoods in their places of origin, even under favourable conditions. In the context of borderlands, returning IDPs may encounter the distressing situation of finding their abandoned properties and land occupied by others, leading to heightened tensions and more frequent outbreaks of violence. The changes in social relations and the scramble for land among IDPs, wealthy individuals, ex-combatants and non-displaced communities with insecure land rights can exacerbate these challenges. It is important to ask: 'What changes have taken place during and after the conflict in terms of violence, land occupation and economic conditions?' How has the massive internal displacement affected land occupation and land-use patterns? In what ways do gender roles influence men's access to land? How do social patterns, such as population growth, affect gender-sensitive access to land and other natural resources? It is important to study in detail and prepare for the changes that have occurred during and after the displacement, including instances of violence, land occupation and shifts in economic conditions.
4. Finally, but most importantly, the nexus approach should be leveraged to improve the wellbeing

of children and vulnerable groups. This would include prioritising psychological support to help children cope with the traumatic experiences they have endured and promoting their overall mental health. Additionally, efforts should be made to reunite children who have been separated from their families during the displacement, ensuring their safe return and providing the necessary support for family reunification.

## 6 Conclusion

The conflict in Northern Ethiopia has had devastating consequences, including loss of lives, destruction of livelihoods and erosion of the social capital which forms the foundation of community cohesion and wellbeing. The violence has left behind a legacy of displacement and deep-seated divisions within communities.

This report has presented three scenarios: a best-case scenario of achieving peace, a worst-case scenario of resuming conflict and a probable scenario of fragmented recovery. While these scenarios are not a comprehensive overview, they serve as thought-provoking considerations for strategic planning. It is important to prepare for all possible scenarios in order to effectively respond to the evolving situation. In practice, however, and as current trends show, it is highly likely that violence and uncertainty will persist in conflict-affected regions. As the crisis continues, both the general population and IDPs will face increased vulnerability. Within the complex dynamics of conflict, political grievances and insecurity, IDPs in particular are likely to be the primary victims of the ongoing instability. They might continue to find themselves in a marginalised position within the war-affected communities, encountering significant challenges in accessing essential protection and assistance.

The path towards stability is fraught with tremendous challenges, necessitating a paradigm shift in the approach taken by international actors. To achieve lasting peace and development in northern Ethiopia, a reconciliation strategy beyond traditional methods is essential. Relying solely on conventional approaches like regional and international diplomacy, security-sector reform, referendums and elections, power-sharing agreements and justice system reform is likely to be insufficient.

Given the intricate factors contributing to the heightened vulnerabilities of populations in northern Ethiopia, a comprehensive and collaborative approach is imperative. To achieve this, immediate humanitarian needs must be met, while simultaneously implementing comprehensive policy initiatives. Responses that focus solely on security, humanitarian or developmental aspects will be insufficient in achieving sustainable transformation. Instead, a long-term perspective should be adopted, with a focus on close collaboration between donors and local, regional and federal governments.

Programming based on the triple nexus should encompass the political, social, cultural and economic dimensions of the conflict, aiming to formulate a comprehensive solution. It is not just about the sequence of activities, but also about active collaboration, utilising flexible funding streams that combine humanitarian, development and peace efforts. This collaboration should involve new partnerships that bring together international, national and local actors, including *woreda* officials and civil society organisations, fostering an environment conducive to achieving durable solutions. At the national level, donors should leverage the recently restructured disaster rehabilitation authority as a platform to implement a meaningful triple nexus approach, engaging stakeholders at multiple levels.

# Appendix: Post-September 2023 update

This scenario paper was written in September 2023. Since then, the fundamental realities outlined in this report have remained largely unchanged, with persistent humanitarian economic and political challenges. The need for a triple nexus approach – integrating humanitarian, development and peacebuilding efforts – remains critical.

The Pretoria Agreement of November 2022 formally ended the war between the Ethiopian government and the TPLF. However, recovery and reconstruction have been slow and inconsistent. Many IDPs remain unable to return home as a result of ongoing insecurity and unresolved territorial disputes.<sup>70</sup> Critical infrastructure, including healthcare, education and banking systems, remains under severe strain in Tigray, Amhara and Afar. Ongoing insecurity, bureaucratic hurdles and access restrictions continue to hinder aid efforts, leaving vulnerable populations in a protracted crisis.<sup>71</sup>

The economic outlook remains bleak. The World Bank estimates that Ethiopia will require at least \$20 billion to rebuild war-affected regions. Agricultural recovery has stagnated, as farmers struggle to access land, tools and the financial support needed to restart production.<sup>72</sup> In conflict-affected regions, food shortages have driven inflation, destabilising local economies and increasing demand for external aid. However, humanitarian aid remains inconsistent because of security concerns, funding constraints and logistical barriers. The slow pace of economic recovery threatens the livelihoods of millions and hampers long-term stability.

Political instability continues to obstruct peacebuilding efforts. Internal divisions within the TPLF have resulted in power struggles, weakening the Tigray interim administration.<sup>73</sup> In addition, the rise of Fano, an armed insurgency movement in Amhara, has intensified violence and instability across the region.<sup>74</sup> Conflict has also escalated in the Oromia, further exacerbating the country's broader security challenges. Despite official withdrawals, Eritrean forces maintain a presence in border areas, undermining the fragile peace process. Intercommunal violence and localised insurgencies continue

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<sup>70</sup> IOM (2024). *Ethiopia National Displacement Report 19: Site Assessment Round 36 and Village Assessment Survey Round 19 (November 2023–May 2024)*. Grand-Sanno, Switzerland: IOM. [available at: [https://dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1461/files/reports/DTM%20Ethiopia\\_National%20Displacement%20Report%2019%20%28Nov23-%20May24%29%20%281%29.pdf](https://dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1461/files/reports/DTM%20Ethiopia_National%20Displacement%20Report%2019%20%28Nov23-%20May24%29%20%281%29.pdf)] Accessed 1 March 2025.

<sup>71</sup> OCHA (Dec 2024). *Ethiopia - Situation Report 13*. New York: OCHA. [available at: [https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-situation-report-13-december-2024#:~:text=Highlights%20\(13%20Dec%202024\),concern%20in%20conflict%2D%20affected%20areas](https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-situation-report-13-december-2024#:~:text=Highlights%20(13%20Dec%202024),concern%20in%20conflict%2D%20affected%20areas)]. Accessed: 1 March 2025.

<sup>72</sup> World Bank (2024). *Ethiopia Economic Update* [available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/ethiopia/overview>]. Accessed: 4 February 2024.

<sup>73</sup> Ethiopia Peace Observatory (ACLEED) (2024). 'Two years after the Pretoria Agreement, unrest still looms in Tigray' [available at <https://epo.acleeddata.com/2024/11/08/two-years-after-the-pretoria-agreement-unrest-still-looms-in-tigray-october-2024/>]. Accessed: 1 March 2025.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

to destabilise the country.<sup>75</sup>

The three scenarios outlined in this paper remain valid. The best-case scenario, in which official peace translates into rapid recovery, appears increasingly unlikely given the slow pace of rebuilding, and governance challenges. The worst-case scenario – a resumption of conflict – remains a significant threat because of unresolved political grievances, weak institutional structures, and ongoing localised violence. The most probable scenario, as observed now, is fragmented recovery and a state of ‘violent peace’, where sporadic violence persists despite formal peace agreements. The spread of conflict to other regions and continued insecurity reinforce the likelihood that recovery in northern Ethiopia will remain uneven, requiring sustained humanitarian and development interventions.

The ongoing crisis underscores the necessity of a comprehensive triple nexus approach that integrates humanitarian relief, long-term development and peacebuilding efforts. Without an integrated response, Ethiopia risks prolonged instability and recurrent cycles of conflict.

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<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*